

Tom Crowley's Blog'

Warriors of the Bangkok slums' 1/2'



There exists, in the crowded squalor of slum huts, open sewage drains, under expressway overheads, alongside dirty train tracks, in the poorest areas of this sprawling city of eleven million people, a tribe of warriors whose training for combat starts early in life and never ends. It's a family oriented clan, that passes the warrior tradition down from generation to generation. In all cases these families have no wealth other than this golden tradition.

The members of this group have homes, albeit for the most part these are squatter's slum shacks thrown up on land along side the railroad tracks. Though their family lives are important, they work at a variety of basic labor and security jobs and the children go to school every day, it is the training ground that is very much the center of their existence and identity. The training ground is a bit of open air space along side the railroad tracks and underneath the expressway. It's a small lot no more than 20 meters wide and 30 meters long. It's surrounded by a chain link fence and has some rough concrete toilets built in a corner at one end. At the other end, taking up almost the full width, is the boxing ring, standard size, three feet above ground with a fence of ropes around the sides. Yes this is the war that these warriors practice for, the ancient Thai combat art of Muay Thai. There are 15 children working out today on the 11 large dilapidated kick bags hanging from four iron frames set up around the inside of the gym ground. The ground itself has a rubber covering over the concrete. What they have done, to emulate the composite floor covering of modern gyms, is to cut up old truck tires, available from a cross country truck lot nearby, flatten them out as much as possible and made that the floor for the gym to protect the children, to some extent, when they take falls. The tires are not flattened very well and it is easy to trip on edges and bumps sticking up when just walking around the gym. I have been introduced to this camp, named Penang 96, by the Korean photographer, Yoon-Ki Kim.

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Mr Kim has been following and photographing the lives of this warrior clan for three years and is planning a book chronicling the life of three generations of one of the families. Mr. Kim's classic black and white photos are an important part of my non fiction book, "Bangkok Pool Blues", about the night people inhabiting the emerging pool culture that has grown up in Bangkok over the past ten years.

The camp is open every day, except Sunday, from 4pm to 7pm. The children come after school and train until the camp closes. There are about six older males, most in their fifties, in attendance, former fighters, all now carrying excessive weight and no longer in the boxing form they were once were. One older guy who looks to be in his sixties but wearing Muay Thai trunks and gear is sparring and playing around with the kids. He has a punched out look and manner, both gruff and kindly, that reminds me of the trainer for Rocky Balboa in the famed Rocky motion picture series. It's after 5pm when we arrive and the kids are sweating heavily, having worked for over an hour already, in the dense Bangkok heat and the dead, almost noxious air underneath the express way. However what strikes you almost immediately, after getting through the initial introductions to Krue (teacher) Preaw and the older males in attendance, is both the intensity of the kids in training and the happiness they show at being here, in the holiest of holies, Krue Preaw's Muay Thai training camp at Penang 96.

In discussion with Krue Preaw the family angle becomes evident. He is in his late fifties, over thirty years ago he was a competition fighter taking on the best in Thailand at the famed Lumpinee Muay Thai stadium, the pinnacle of Muay Thai competition in Thailand. After that he trained his son Be, and others, mostly relatives, some starting to learn as young as the age of ten. Now Be is in his thirties, working as a security guard and Krue Preaw is training, along with many others, his grand daughter Ink, who is 14 and has won a national championship in a children's Muay Thai competition, and his grand son Chuan who is 13. There are certainly more off spring and more championships in the offing. All in all, it adds up for me to a very impressive story, combining poverty and the poorest of children, who are possessed of an incredible can do attitude which erupts periodically in smiles and laughter while at the same time they are working with incredible diligence at learning one of the hardest of martial arts. These kids may be poor but they are rich in family and in the self confidence their training brings.

It's enough to make you feel sorry for the richer kids who may never be allowed to experience the inner strength they are capable of.