

Oakland Magazine



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Boxing Students pummel a bag during drills at King's Boxing Gym. Fighters rotate punching every 30 seconds.

Fan of the Fighting Arts Or, How to Take a Punch

BY VERA H-C CHAN

Arms outstretched, I wobble on one leg, focusing on the San Pablo street M scene through the plate-glass window. "Change legs," comes the command. Others leap with balletic grace. My crane

perch looks more like a limping pigeon.

Moments later, I crouch, swiping at the air with my paw, then sweep a low kick across a waxy hardwood floor. At the other end I stand, knees popping. Time

for monkey movements-playful until the punch.

Oakland is home to an amazing world of fighting arts. I'm halfway through warm-up in Poekoelan Tjimindie Tulen at Studio Naga, my first workout in a

week-long immersion in three fighting arts.

For head instructor Louise Rafkin, a seven-month writing fellowship in Cape Cod became nine years of training. When she returned, she attracted a following practicing in an Emeryville park. Two years ago, Rafkin and her students renovated a 19th-century former post office, where they've created a family atmosphere with self-defense seminars and kids' classes.

Poekoelan's animal-inspired movements point to a kung fu influence, while its low kicks and capoeira-like flips trace back to Indonesian silat. The art lists 108 defenses. I learn counters to wrist-grabs and chokes. Then my partner sticks a finger in the back of my head.

Gun defense. I turn right, clamping my arm around her wrist. I move behind her, wedging my left foot behind hers, wrapping my left arm around her throat.

Good ... except I've maneuvered the "gun" into my armpit. An indelicate way to get shot ... especially two more times. Martial arts lesson: A three-second reaction can take a lifetime to refine.

"I'M O.K.," I HEAR SUE SAY.

Her partner is apologizing. Turns out she kneed Sue square in the groin.

Like at Studio Naga, I've gone "undercover," this time with two friends, at Cheetah Muay Thai Academy. The space is laid out with compact efficiency—ring, padded workout area, small weightlifting area. We've done an hour of boxing, and now we're

doing partner drills in modern Muay Thai, the competitive boxing style with legs and elbows that inspired the cardio craze.

Throughout, owner Chansadeth "Cheetah" Chanthanao makes the circuit to advise and encourage. Thai fighters may be the nicest people who will pummel you to the ground. The soft-spoken former heavyweight exudes mellow calm. He grew up learning traditional Muay Thai—its animal forms, religious history and warrior roots—in a jungle training camp. He's an emissary for his art's culture and history.

"I want to teach Muay Thai the way I learn," he says later. "Every human being deserves respect."

My arms are sore from holding the rectangular forearm pads and feeling Lisa's punches and kicks jar through the leather. But adrenaline pumps—We touch hands in a sign of respect, and I start the drills: jab, jab, jab, cross, upper cut, hook, right cross, kick, kick, knee-lift, shove, jab, cross. Forget intensity: Memorizing the techniques is the workout.

I stop when I hear Sue. She's standing. I swell with pride. That's the way to take a punch. Jump-ropes thwack. Wood flexes beneath lightly shod feet. Bag chains whip. The bell rings. Speed has a sound-crack here.

"Bring your elbows in, and your knees up:" says Robert, a boxing trainer at King's Gym. My rope makes its sputtering rhythm for the next 30 minutes.

King's Boxing Gym is an institution, with boxing posters plastered all around the

warehouse. International flags and banners touting homegrown hero, 2004 Olympic gold-medalist Andre Ward, drape from the ceiling.

At last, Robert starts wrapping people's hands and lacing gloves. We gather round like children. It's oddly comforting.

The bags are as thick as oak trees. I widen my stance; my left hand's a foot from my face, and the right is anchored near the chin. Jabs. Right cross. Hooks. Combinations. I'm hitting fast and hard. The bag barely moves.

"All kinds come here, from the people in the gutter to kings and queens:" as owner Charles King says. The fighters are impossibly fast, bodies strong with fists lashing. I see a young man, T-shirt bloodied from a few rounds. He looks ecstatic.

The session lasts 90 minutes—I have to duck out sooner, but feel reluctant to leave. This is tradition's last stand, where King sank his life savings after retiring as a Union Pacific engineer. "You walk in here and, wow, it takes you back to another time:" says the former amateur boxer.

"Look at trains," King says. "Everything else is built for speed: Fast planes, fast rockets, but there go the trains. So why does everybody stop to take a look? It's the only thing left they can put their hands on."

"This," he says, "is real."