

# Thai fighting unpredictable, 'beautiful'

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Muay Thai is more than just a fighting sport, says Chris Kew.

"It's an art form that's over 3,000 years old. It's the traditional Thai martial art," he says. "It has a strong cultural component."

"We kick, we punch, we knee. Thai boxing is more beautiful because the head is not the target. You can kick to the legs and punch to the body. You never know what's coming next," he says.

"It's quite beautiful."

Kew, 31, of Cambridge, holds the super middleweight belt for the Canadian Amateur Muay Thai Association, for fighters weighing between 165 and 175 pounds.

He won the title Jan. 10, in front of about 600 people at the Duncan Macdonald Arena, in a five-round match with Shawn Dyson, Dyson, of Mississauga, also trains in Cambridge.

"I was the underdog," says Kew. "I was not supposed to win that fight. It was probably the hardest fight I've ever had. He came out and kicked me in the leg harder than I have ever been kicked before, and I knew I was in a fight."

"I was just a little quicker, but I almost got knocked out in the first round."

"But halfway through the fifth, I knew I'd won the fight. He finally quit coming."

Kew says he'll probably defend his title in March.

"It's my goal to be an active champion, I've worked long and hard to get the belt, turning and in the gym."

Muay Thai kick boxing has been practised in Ontario since the 1980s,



PETER LEE/RECORD STAFF  
Muay Thai martial arts contender Chris Kew, with his championship belt, takes a break from the heavy bag. Sparring in the background are Jon LeBouthillier and Jasmína Zelenbaba.

but for four years the sport was banned in the province.

Kew explains that there had been no formal amateur Muay Thai society to set the rules and standards for the sport, and that some unscrupulous promoters were staging unregulated prize fights.

"Obviously, people were getting hurt. They weren't following the rules,

and they were shut down."

The ban was lifted and the sport was officially recognized by the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation two years ago after Muay Thai practitioners organized formally and established formal rules and safety standards for fights.

Now, newcomers and first-time fighters must wear full protective

equipment — shin pads, gloves, headgear.

"It's much like hockey. The kids can put on a show and remain protected," says Kew.

"All the officials have to be very well trained. There's a doctor at every event, and participants must be tested for HIV. The potential for a bloody nose is there, and we have to protect the

sport."

Muay Thai is much more than just kick boxing, he says.

"The land is a very traditional society and the people are superstitious."

## RITUALS

Certain rituals accompany each bout, such as the *Wai Kru*, a ceremonial dance performed by the fighters before each bout. It's intended to show respect for the fighters' teachers, said Kew, but it's also a chance to do some last-minute stretching and to focus mentally.

And it's not scored by punches, like western boxing.

"It's scored on ring generalship. Thai boxing is scored according to the story of the fight."

"One shot can win it all... Anything can happen. One move can change the whole fight. The aggressor doesn't score highly in Muay Thai."

"It's a science, for sure. Kew has been a life-long participant in the martial arts.

"I had a lot of energy as a child, and my parents found that this was the best way to keep me occupied," he says.

"That kick boxing is so much more physical than other martial arts. It's that physical exertion that excites me."

"It takes an incredible amount of training to develop the cardio necessary to compete in this sport."

"To be competitive in this sport requires a lot of dedication."

Kew, a personal physical trainer, won a gold medal at the Open Asian Games in the Philippines in 2002, and plans to go back this year.

"I have a lot more experience now, and I'm just coming into blossom as a fighter."

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