

## ***"Songkran" Festival 2005***

**by Nelson "DOC" Hamilton**

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To most non-Californians, fantasizing about living in Los Angeles conjures up thoughts of beautiful weather, movie stars, great beaches, and beautiful women. To that list, most Angelinos would also add horrendous traffic, smog, earthquakes, and, more beautiful women.

Not denying that all of the above is part of life in L.A., so too is the large Thai population that is woven into the ethnic diversity that comprises the city. In fact, a sign posted at the intersection of Western Ave. and Hollywood Blvd. gives official notice that you are entering, "Thai Town." Never was this more evident than on 04/03/05, when the city closed a portion of the famous Hollywood Blvd. to all traffic, in celebration of Thai New Year's Day 2005, Songkran.

Now, if you're anything like me and you enjoy visiting exotic locations around the world but don't enjoy the hassles associated with the travel to get there, festivals of this type are gifts from heaven. And, since I was asked by an organizing committee member to attend the celebration to accept a certificate of appreciation for my long-time involvement in Muay Thai, I felt doubly blessed.

"Songkran" Hollywood had almost everything to be found in Bangkok, without the humidity, traffic, mosquitoes, and noise pollution. In addition to the offerings of Thai arts and crafts, the festival showcased many performances and activities that comprise Thai arts and culture.

Thai music filled the air as performers in traditional dress performed various native dances. Buddhist monks were available for counseling as well as the traditional water blessing ceremony to bring in the New Year. The exhilarating aroma of Thai cooking was exceeded only by the taste of the food. And for those attendees who couldn't walk one more step, Thai massage could easily be had for a price.

I was really getting into the Thai spirit and began looking for the icing on the cake, Muay Thai. Before very long, I saw a large, loud crowd surrounding a boxing ring set-up in the middle of the boulevard, and I knew that I had found my nirvana.

The large crowd encircling the ring was totally in-to the different exhibitions taking place. Twin brothers, Kru Suriyan and Kru Suriya demonstrated various styles of Wai Khru, including Mother Earth, Bathing and Powdering, The Archer, Sharpening Lance, and Animal Movements. They followed that up with a demonstration of the ancient Thai fighting style, "Bound Fist Muay" (Kaad Chuek). In this style, the fighters wrapped their hands and forearms with unrefined hemp thread that was twisted together into a cord the thickness the size of the little finger. Frequently, in an attempt to spoil their opponents' entire day, glass or other sharp and abrasive objects were imbedded into the hemp. Obviously, Kaad Chuek was definitely not an art form practiced by choirboys or individuals weak of mind, body, or spirit.

A spirited three round exhibition between transplanted Thai and rising California star, Malaipet Sasipapa, and the Muay Thai legend, Samart Payakaroon really got the crowd into the Muay spirit. Samart is a legend because, after capturing the Lumpini Stadium championship on four different occasions, he then decided to try his hand at western style boxing. He was good enough to win the WBC Bantamweight Championship; it doesn't get much better than that folks!

With the demos still fresh in their minds, the crowd was now ready for some spirited Muay Thai, and they got it. After checking all hand wraps for glass, aluminum foil, plaster, and other abrasive materials, the seven amateur fights got underway. Spurred on by the large street crowd and many vociferous spectators viewing from windows in the surrounding apartments buildings, the bouts were fought with all of the spirit and determination worthy of a Lumpini Stadium championship contest. The crowd was into it, the fighters were into it, and I was into it, the atmosphere was electrifying.

As the sun started to set and the day came to a close, I realized how lucky I was to be able to experience the activities and atmosphere of this special day. And the best part, I would home within the hour. So, if you can, mark your calendar for next April and plan to attend the 2006 "Songkran" Festival. It's worth it!