

Eye of the Tigress

**MUAY THAI CHAMPION CIARA IRVINE
AND THE RISE OF THE FEMALE FIGHTER**

BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

Fighter Ciara “La Tigressa” Irvine has been here before — into the fifth round where willpower is tantamount to survival. She’s seen determination in the face of an opponent trying to best her, and she’s broken it. She’s done this a few times, but never before as a champion.

Nov. 19, at the Tacoma Soccer Center in Tacoma, Wash., Irvine will find out if she has what it takes to defend her belt and remain the United Southeast Asian Cultural Association (USEACA) 130-pound women’s muay thai champion.

“I’m looking forward to defending my title because I want to make it clear that I’m the champ and there’s a reason I am the champ,” says Irvine. “I want to prove my dedication to the art form.”

Muay thai is a martial art and combat sport that uses stand-up striking and various clinching techniques (see adjacent sidebar).

Traditionally, the world of combat sports has been a forum dominated by men. This is changing at a rapid pace. Fighters like Irvine are surfing the first wave of its kind — the rise of the female competitive martial artist. And Irvine, a raven-haired Latina who is an intelligent and attractive spokeswoman for martial arts in the Pacific Northwest, is well aware of what she represents.

“I’m really passionate about getting more women involved in muay thai,” she says. “It’s starting to happen now, but I’d like to see even more women competing and training in general.”

Born, raised and fighting out of Eugene, Irvine originally took the USEACA 130-pound championship belt Nov. 6, 2010, in Tacoma, at the end of a five-round war with Jessica “Bam Bam” Bartness. Though Irvine’s form and technique throughout the fight outclassed Bartness, it was not until the fifth and final round that she solidified her win.

In that match, Bartness wielded an effective yet lopsided offense consisting mostly of loopy left and right hooks, some of which landed flush, doing a fair share of damage. But Irvine, a well-rounded student (and instructor) of muay thai, threw the proverbial kitchen sink at her opponent — breaking Bartness’s momentum for good in round five, with well-placed knees to the midsection and superior clinch-work. The fight went to the judge’s scorecards and Irvine won by split-decision.

The champ has no less of a battle waiting for her this time around. The contender, Washington’s Hadley Griffith, will enjoy advantages of both height and reach. Irvine, at 5’7,” will have to find her way around the 5’11” wiry frame of Hadley. Hadley possesses a formidable jab that she will likely look to employ throughout the fight to control the pace of what are sure to be fierce exchanges. In fact, she’d be foolish not to.

Irvine’s fight camp at Big Foot Gym in Eugene has hazed the champ with series after series of sparring rounds against taller adversaries — fierce young women who are high-ranking instructors. Irvine is also known on occasion to spar with martial artists (both male and female) out of Eugene’s Northwest Training Center and Pacific Northwest Martial Arts Academy, as well as the venerated Burke Camp in Oregon City and Portland’s Source Academy.

Though Hadley’s prowess and height advantage don’t appear to faze the champ, Irvine respects her opponent and knows better than to take anything for granted.

“I’ve seen her (Hadley) lose fights and win fights, and she improves considerably between fights,” Irvine says.

That said, after another year of training under Ajarn Mike Walrath, an instructor considered nationally by many to be Oregon’s “grandfather” of muay thai, Irvine is not the same fighter she was when she first took the belt. The improvement of her technique is a personal obsession for her. She has since tested for and earned her instructor’s certificate via the Thai Boxing Association of the USA — a traditionally strenuous and brutal test typically overseen by Grand Master Chai Sirisute, the man often credited as being the first to bring muay thai to the United States.

Walrath is one of Sirisute’s first-generation students, whose training took place in the grand master’s backyard. (Full disclosure, the writer is also a TBA certified instructor, who tested under Sirisute’s overseeing and competed under tutelage of Walrath.)

“Ciara is a multifaceted fighter,” Walrath explains. “She’s very smart, and when she gets tired she doesn’t slow down. She actually turns it up. It’s going to be a great match.”

Irvine adds, “I’m two weeks out now and my switch just flipped. I feel very prepared.”

Eating the same thing over and over again every day, running and swimming your ass off, trading punches, kicks, knees and elbows with people, then eventually testing your honed skills against another of your ilk, in the ring, in front of hundreds, is not everyone’s cup of java.

In order to be effective in the types of muay thai matches Irvine competes in, seven hours each day for a period of seven weeks must be devoted to training. That also includes the carefully measured diet a fighter adheres to each time she sits down to eat. This monk-like regimen is required to mentally and physically prepare the body.

“When I’m training for a fight I’m in a kind of hibernation,” Irvine says. “I’m cut off from the world and my routine of training takes over.”

To further her cause, Irvine (who also supports herself as a coffeehouse barista) has begun teaching a Saturday morning women’s class at Big Foot Gym, the very place she hopes to return her belt to safely. She is also enthusiastic about teaching kids (ages 10 and up) classes.

“In a perfect world, I’d score a sponsorship from local fitness centers or supplement stores or places like that, so I can devote even more time to training,” says Irvine. “But that’s after I do what I’ve got to do in Washington.”

For now, Irvine’s mind remains focused on the task at hand — beating Hadley.

“I dream about her (Hadley). I wake up in the middle of the night with my muscles twitching, thinking about fighting her. It’s how I know my mind and body are preparing themselves for that night,” says Irvine. “She’s (Hadley) primarily done American kick boxing. She’s never fought muay thai before. And I’m not about to let a kick boxer take my muay thai belt. That’s just not happening.”

Go to <http://blogs.eugeneweekly.com> to watch EW video interview with Ciara Irvine. For more information on the USEACA’s Fight Night 3, Ladies Showdown, go to www.USEACA.com

PHOTO BY TODD COOPER

Brief History of Muay Thai

Muay thai, also known as “the science of eight limbs,” is a close-combat martial art born on the battlefields of ancient Thailand during the 1500s. The art form continued to evolve in times of war and peace. It is currently the national sport of Thailand.

In the beginning, muay thai boxers fought bare-fisted — there were no weight classes. The length of competitions was measured by the placement of a coconut shell with a hole punched through the bottom of it, the coconut was placed in water and when it was completely submerged, the muay thai round was considered over. Rules similar to Western boxing were instated during the late 1920s and the sport grew in popularity.

Professional muay thai practitioners utilize punches, kicks, knees, elbows and clinch (standing grappling) in five-round bouts. A single round lasts 3 minutes; fighters are given a 2-minute rest between rounds.

All muay thai fighters precede their bouts with a ceremonial dance, known as the wai kru (also called the ram muay). The dance doubles as a warm up and a meditation. Traditional Thai music consisting of woodwinds and percussion instruments is played during the dance and throughout each round.

Fighters wear a traditional headaddress known as a mon kong and pay respect to their gym, their teacher, their family and their God during the ram muay.

Currently, muay thai enjoys international acclaim. Films such as *Ong Bak*, combined with the growing popularity of mixed martial arts contests such as the Ultimate Fighting Competition (UFC), have recently brought muay thai into the forum of pop culture.