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World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

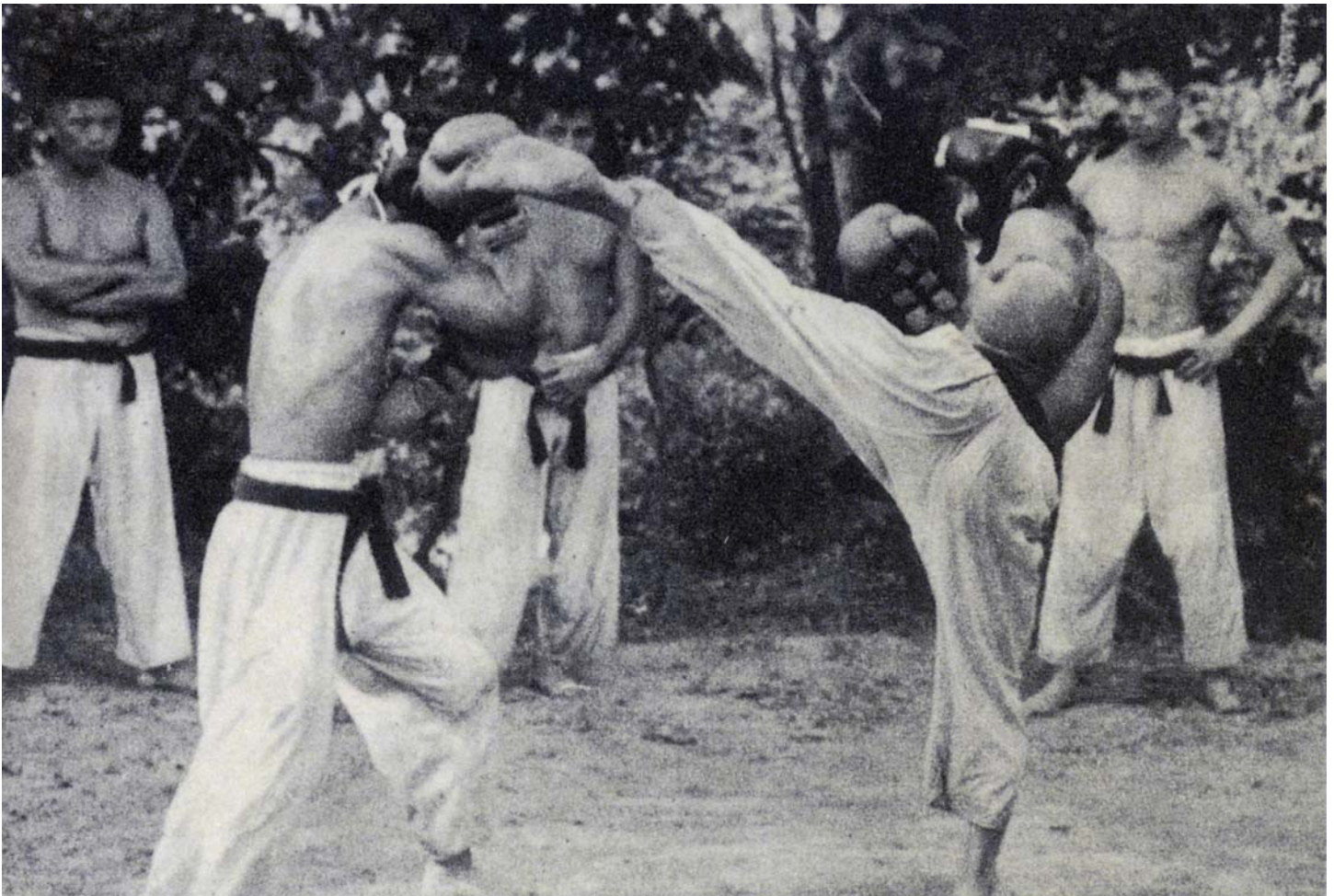
Issue 29 - October, 2011

Muay Thai

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama

• Challenging Muay Thai

The following story is a very important part of my Karate journey. In the early summer, I posted it on the Japanese World Oyama Karate website, and of course I want to share it with students in the United States and other countries. Some parts of my memory of this time are a little hazy. Others are as clear and sharp as if it happened yesterday. This past year, I've consulted with my friends and brother to try and be as accurate in my recollections as possible. Some people may remember things happening differently, but that's their business. To the best of my knowledge, the fol-



Blind Ambition vs. 500 Years of History

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lowing story is accurate and without any exaggerations and of course without any lies.

This was in the middle of spring in 1963. I was 21 years old. We were still training at Mas Oyama's first dojo that I've mentioned before (the converted ballet studio). Haruyama, my lifetime rival, had stopped training, which made me feel like something was missing in the dojo. The atmosphere had an "after-the-party" feeling. I had already figured out all my Senpai's habits and fighting styles. Previously, I had been fired up about Karate and fighting people in the dojo. I thought about Karate all the time—in the morning, at school, before I slept. But by this time, I had already figured out how to beat all the other Black Belts. So, with Haruyama gone, I started having a heavy feeling during training. Like I had finished and there was nothing left to challenge me. So I started skipping class.

The first couple times I skipped training, I felt a little guilty. When I went to bed, I saw Mas Oyama's and Sohsu's faces in my mind. But as time passed, I felt less and less guilty about skipping training. I would tell myself, "I've already done it. I've proved myself and accomplished what I needed to." But Karate was in my heart, so every once in awhile I would have the urge to return and sweat with the other students.

• The History of Muay Thai

One night, Mas Oyama and Sensei T. Kurosaki told us about Thailand's national sport, Muay Thai. It had over 500 years of history and really strong fighters. At this time, there was still no full-contact All-Japan Karate tournament. Karate championships then were most likely done without contact. Competitors would "fight" each other but stop short of actually making contact. Even so, the four corner judges would raise their flags for an *Ip-pon* and declare who was the winner. Competitors would make very dramatic faces as they executed their techniques. But since they didn't actually hit each other, it was more like watching some type of stage performance than a fight. At our dojo, we hit with full contact (even kicked the groin), so I wasn't at all impressed with these matches.

But when Mas Oyama told us how Muay Thai fighters had been knocking each other out for over 500 years, we all got really excited. I started to wake up from the training rut I had been in. During that time, boxing was very popular in Japan. We had some famous flyweight fighters. Matches were a big event on the TV stations. Karate still only drew minor media attention. Mas Oyama explained how Muay Thai fighters punched and kicked each other, used elbow and knee strikes—similar to us. We had never heard anything about them and wondered what their matches were like. Were they in a dojo? How long did they fight? Mas Oyama told us that they fought in a ring and had rounds, just like in boxing.

The funny part was that after he told us about Muay Thai, he brought out these big boxing gloves and told us to put them on. He didn't give us any mouthpieces or headgear, just the gloves. As I've mentioned before, when we fought in the dojo, we would hit each other in the face and so would wrap our hands in towels to keep them from infection if they were cut by someone's tooth. However, we had no experience with using the 14/15 oz. gloves Mas Oyama gave us.

Mas Oyama told me and some other Black Belts to put on gloves and fight. He said not to kick, just punch. The first couple rounds, we fought pretty well. But after that, the gloves started feeling heavier and heavier. The sharp punches we started out with turned into wild swings. We realized that we'd have to work on getting used to these gloves if we planned on fighting with them in the future.

I had actually had one previous experience fighting with boxing gloves before that night in the dojo. When I was in junior high school, my friends and I were real bad boys. There was one guy in our class who was very quiet and easy going. His father owned and ran a boxing gym. I told the boy that I wanted to go and fight with him at the gym. So, one day after school, he took me and a few of my friends to the boxing gym, which was pretty small and run-down. Once inside, he smiled at me and asked, "You sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah, c'mon, let's go!" I answered. He gave me gloves and a mouthpiece. I couldn't breathe with the mouth-

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piece in, so I took it out. “How long do we fight?” I asked him.

“Amateurs do two-minute rounds and pros do three-minute rounds,” he said.

“OK, let’s do three minutes,” I told him. I was really cocky at that time, especially when it came to sports. I still hadn’t started Karate training yet. I just knew a couple things that my oldest brother had taught me and what I had learned from fighting in the street. We started the round, and I seemed to do OK. But after 20 seconds, the gloves felt so heavy. The other boy hit me easily. He controlled his power, but even so, I started getting mad and tried hard to hit him back. But he just moved easily and hit me whenever and wherever he pleased. He could have easily bashed in my face and knocked me out, but he was a nice guy, so he controlled his punches. After that, I had a lot of respect for boxing. We all thought that boy was so quiet and nice, but no one dared touch him.

• Stirring The Pot

Anyway, back to the Muay Thai story. The reason Mas Oyama was telling us about Muay Thai was because of a conversation he had with Mr. O. Noguchi. Mr. O. Noguchi was a Japanese boxing promoter. He wanted to match up Japanese fighters with foreign fighters to make exciting matches. The cost of bringing in boxers from the U.S. or Europe was too high, however bringing in boxers from Thailand was much more economical, so he visited Thailand. Boxing wasn’t very popular in Thailand, but they had Muay Thai. Mr. O. Noguchi told Mas Oyama that Muay Thai fighters were so strong. They thought that Karate was a joke and that if a Karateka tried to fight Muay Thai, he wouldn’t survive even a minute. Mas Oyama told us that Mr. O. Noguchi said he wanted to prove them wrong and show them how strong Japanese Karate was.

At first, I thought that Mr. O. Noguchi must be very proud, since he was so eager to defend the honor of Japan. But the more I listened, the more I realized that he was just an agitator. He was always thinking in terms of business. No one else had heard of Muay Thai fighters

saying that Karate was weak; but Mr. O. Noguchi said that’s what they believed so that we would get riled up and be eager to fight them. I’m pretty sure that Mas Oyama knew this too, because he would always qualify the statements by saying, “this is what Mr. O. Noguchi said.” When Mr. O. Noguchi had gotten back from Bangkok, he visited lots of dojos to try and find one that could compete in Muay Thai. However, at that time, all the other dojos trained without making full contact. But when he heard about Mas Oyama’s dojo, he visited and saw how we fought with full force and decided we would be the only people who could handle fighting Muay Thai.

Even if Mr. O. Noguchi was not being truthful or exaggerated when he talked about Thailand’s view of Karate, we were still very excited at the opportunity to fight. Mas Oyama chose four of us to compete: me, T. Nakamura, A. Fujihira, and H. Okada. We didn’t have all of the technology then that we do now, so none of us had ever seen any video or film of Muay Thai and we knew that we would need to train in a different way to prepare for this type of fight. Haruyama was gone, but I was pumped up to train again and meet this new challenge.

Mas Oyama put Sensei Kurosaki in charge of training us and everything else. A little after we had started our new training, Sensei Kurosaki told us that Mr. O. Noguchi’s story had started to change. Initially, he always talked about us fighting to defend the honor and reputation of Karate and Japan. But he was now talking more in terms of business. He said how this type of match (Japanese Karate vs. Muay Thai) had never been done before and it was a great chance to make a name for ourselves and secure network TV contracts and that type of thing. But we didn’t really think about those points. We just focused on training hard.

• The Birth of Kickboxing

Mr. O. Noguchi wanted to use a catchy phrase that would have more appeal to Japanese people than “Muay Thai”, so the word “Kickboxing” was introduced. Mr. O. Noguchi said that he came up with the word, but Mas Oyama claimed that he did, so I’m not entirely sure who

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used it originally. The national boxing association in Japan, however, said that we could not use the word “boxing”. So Mr. O. Noguchi went to them and explained that this was something completely different. It wasn’t boxing—it was *kick-boxing*. He won the argument, and so “Kickboxing” was used in place of “Muay Thai” in the media.

I think Mr. O. Noguchi had given us about four months’ notice before the fight, so we needed to train hard. Sensei Kurosaki and Mas Oyama thought maybe we needed to go to a special training camp. But that would require money for transportation, food, etc. The dojo didn’t have any extra money, so Sensei Kurosaki was responsible for making it work. He had very little finances as well, but he worked hard to make it happen and never complained. He eventually got in touch with a friend of his that had a small bit of land, kind of like a ranch, outside of Tokyo on the *Kingawa river*.

The four of us and Sensei Kurosaki went out there to train. Like I said, we hardly knew anything about Muay Thai. We didn’t know much about the rules or how points were scored. We just knew that it was the national sport of Thailand and they had a tremendous history of over 500 years. Fighters started training when they were tiny kids. The reason for this was that everyone bet on Muay Thai fights, so if a fighter was successful, they had a chance to make a lot of money.

(On a side note, I visited Bangkok about 20 years ago at the invitation of the chief editor of a martial arts magazine. We visited a gym associated with one of my juniors in Japan. One of the fighters was training on a heavy sandbag. He would roundhouse kick the bag and the bag would swing up. After that, he would continue kicking the bag with enough power and speed to keep it from ever swinging back down. I was impressed with



From Left to Right: Saiko Shihan, Fujihira, Okada, Sensei Kurosaki



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the fighters there. They were very hungry to train. They woke up in the early morning and ran and jumped rope and continued training all throughout the day.)

We trained really hard at that camp on the river. We woke up at sunrise and ran every morning (I like to run, but not every morning at sunrise). We would put on the gloves and fight. Sometimes we just punched. Other times we would punch and kick. We didn't want any injuries, so would try to control the level of contact. Everything about fighting with gloves was new to us. When we fought in the dojo, we would often grab the dogi or hair when fighting, but with gloves, we couldn't really grab. Sometimes we would hit our partner's arm and they would punch themselves in the face with their own glove. Overall, it was a very good experience.

As we did round after round, the gloves would start feeling heavy, so we practiced punching with dumbbells to build up our conditioning. At that time, we never really did *Gedan Mawashi Geri*. The technique existed, but no one really used it. I had played soccer all through junior and senior high school, so my low kick looked just like I was kicking a soccer ball. We trained in the morning, afternoon and evening, resting and eating in between.

We trained out there for about a month. During that time I worked on using elbow strikes. Not many people used knee kicks back then, but one of my favorite techniques was to get to the side of my opponent and use a knee kick, followed by a takedown. When we came back to the dojo in Tokyo, we showed the other students what we had learned. I fought a large Brown Belt. I got in close and delivered a clean elbow strike to his head and he went down. We started gaining confidence. We still hadn't seen any film of an actual Muay Thai fight, but Mr. O. Noguchi kept telling us not to worry and that we would do great.

• The First Red Flag

When it got close to the time we were supposed to fight, Mr. O. Noguchi apologized and said the bout had to be postponed because there was some trouble finalizing an agreement with the Muay Thai people. We were disappointed, but still in good spirits and kept on training.

Two months after that, we had another meeting with Mr. O. Noguchi and he said the fight had been postponed yet again.

By this time, it was close to the end of the year. I was preparing to graduate from college soon. I was living with my mother in a tiny apartment and needed to work in order for us to support ourselves. It wasn't economically feasible to keep training this way indefinitely. But I just hung in there.

Around Christmas time, I think Mr. O. Noguchi started to worry that we might back out because of all the postponing. He invited us all out to dinner so he could explain everything. He told us to meet him at a Chinese restaurant. The only Chinese restaurants I had ever been to were small, cheap places with counters and a couple tables that served ramen noodles and fried dumplings. But at the one he chose, everyone wore a coat and tie. There wasn't any counter, but instead lots of tables and private rooms and chandeliers.

We showed up on time, but Mr. O. Noguchi wasn't there. We waited for ten minutes. Then thirty minutes. Finally, after about an hour, he showed up with a gorgeous woman. She was the manager of the top nightclub in Ginza. (About a decade ago, the Ginza section of Tokyo had the most expensive price of real estate in the world.)

We went inside. The stunningly beautiful and powerful woman that was with Mr. O. Noguchi treated him like he was a king. We were so shocked. Mr. O. Noguchi started talking. Everything he said was exaggerated and on a large scale. I was just a college kid, lucky if I had a little money in my pocket, but Mr. O. Noguchi talked in terms of millions. I didn't give much weight to what he said since he had kept postponing the fight, which made it hard to trust him. The food came, and I just ate and looked at the beautiful lady. At one point, Mr. O. Noguchi said there were a couple Muay Thai fighters at his gym and invited us down to train with them. We were so excited.

On the day we were scheduled to train with the Muay Thai fighters, we met at the dojo and packed into Sensei

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Kurosaki's small, white Toyota Carolla. Mr. O. Noguchi 's gym was a little bigger than our dojo and located in a residential neighborhood. Mr. O. Noguchi 's younger brother, a trainer, met us inside. He was so nice and humble, the complete opposite of Mr. O. Noguchi. He apologized and said Mr. O. Noguchi wasn't there yet and was running a little late (he was always "running late"). We went ahead and put on our dogis in the shower room and started warming up.

When Mr. O. Noguchi came in, his younger brother knelt on one knee, so he was looking up at him, and spoke to him with overly respectful words like he was a king. We were so shocked. How was Mr. O. Noguchi able to get the people around him to treat him like this? I never knelt and talked to my brother or chose each word so carefully when speaking to him. Mr. O. Noguchi was a promoter. He didn't train or sweat, but he was a shrewd businessman who was able to exert his will over everyone he dealt with.

Riding in the car to the gym, I had been really pumped up. Once we were inside and I saw a couple boxers training, I started getting a little nervous, but still excited. When I heard Mr. O. Noguchi and his brother talking, however, I felt ready. We warmed up for about thirty minutes, and finally two guys came in. They had really dark skin and were a little taller than me. They did both boxing and Muay Thai. They were talking and giggling to each other in a language I assumed was Thai. Both of them were picking their teeth with toothpicks. We were shocked. Had they just finished dinner!? Mr. O. Noguchi said that they had. Sensei Kurosaki laughed with a mixture of anger and bewilderment. We had been waiting for them for half an hour while they ate. Now, wouldn't we have to wait longer so that their food could digest before we fought? Mr. O. Noguchi just replied, "Oh, it's OK. Don't worry about it. They can handle it."

• Gold Medal Moments

By the way, there are four points in my Karate training that I consider my "Gold Medal Moments". The first is when I finally caught up to Haruyama and was able to

fight him with confidence and without fear. The second one is when Mas Oyama told me and other people that I was a genius of Karate movement. I didn't believe myself to be a genius, but it made me feel so good to hear him say that. The third moment came out of a discussion Sensei Kurosaki had with two famous writers in a *Kyokushin* magazine. They asked who he thought were the greatest fighters in the history of *Kyokushin Kai*. I was one of the names he mentioned. He said that I was a very strong strategist and could fight anyone for the first time and be able to implement my strategy for winning.

• Lesson in Humility

The fourth "Gold Medal Moment" happened that night in Mr. O. Noguchi 's gym. Sensei Kurosaki selected me to fight first. I felt so proud. We had never fought Muay Thai, but Sensei Kurosaki trusted me to fight first. I put on my gloves and the Muay Thai fighter took out his toothpick and started warming up. We started, and I tried to use my lead-hand jab. Soon after we started, I brought up my right knee as if to do a *mae geri*, but twisted my hips and did a *jodan mawashi geri*, striking him in the temple with the ball of my foot. He fell against the ropes and I followed by grabbing him and driving my knee into his stomach, causing all of his dinner to explode out of his mouth. Our guys started laughing and Mr. O. Noguchi said maybe he had just eaten too much. That was the first fight. I believe it was Nakamura who fought the other guy, who was a straw-weight. (I had never heard of a straw-weight, but it was a really, really light fighter). Nakamura sent him flying across the ring. Mr. O. Noguchi said we did a great job, but I could tell he felt embarrassed.

On the drive back to the dojo, we were so pumped up and excited. We couldn't wait to go to Thailand. However, the fight was postponed yet again. I realized that I couldn't count on Mr. O. Noguchi anymore. I had to get a job and support myself and my mother. My passion started fading away. Eventually, I didn't train so much. It got to about once a week, then once every couple weeks, then once a month. After awhile, I heard that Nakamura and Fujihira were going with Sensei Kurosaki

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From Left to Right: Saiko Shihan, Okada, Fujihira

to Thailand in February.

On the day of their departure, I went to Haneda airport to wish them well. Mas Oyama and many other people were there. Mr. O. Noguchi was not. Before they boarded the plane, Mas Oyama said something to Sensei Kurosaki that I still remember clearly. I remember what he said because his words were such a shock. He said, "Don't believe anything Mr. O. Noguchi tells you. He will try and put you in the ring and make you fight. Do not fight! You haven't been training for it. Do not fight!" I was so impressed that Mas Oyama was able to read Mr. O. Noguchi's true intentions. He already knew that Mr. O. Noguchi wanted to put Sensei Kurosaki in the ring.

At that time, Sensei Kurosaki was about 37 years old. Whenever he had supervised our Muay Thai training, he had told us what to do, but didn't train with us. Whenever Mr. O. Noguchi and Sensei Kurosaki would talk, Mr.

O. Noguchi always tried to rile him by saying how Muay Thai was so strong and better than Karate. Sensei Kurosaki would always counter by saying how great Karate was and that it was very strong. When Mas Oyama told Sensei Kurosaki not to get in the ring, Sensei Kurosaki promised he wouldn't answer, "Osu! Osu!".

At the Muay Thai fights in Thailand, Fujihira and Nakamura both won. Sensei Kurosaki lost.

When he came back to Japan, Sensei Kurosaki wore sunglasses all the time, even at night. The reason for this was that he had a really bad cut above his eye (I think it was the left) that was stitched up. One night at the dojo, we watched either an 8mm or 16mm (I can't recall which it was) film of the fights. The location looked to be pretty local. The opponents for Nakamura and Fujihira were not really impressive. However, Sensei Kurosaki's opponent had a great, powerful body. As they ex-

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changed blows, it was clear that Sensei Kurosaki was outmatched. At one point, his opponent followed a left punch with a right elbow to Sensei Kurosaki's face and knocked him out. The elbow strike was entirely unnecessary. I recalled at that point how Mas Oyama told Sensei Kurosaki not to fight. I was so angry that Sensei Kurosaki had been set up.

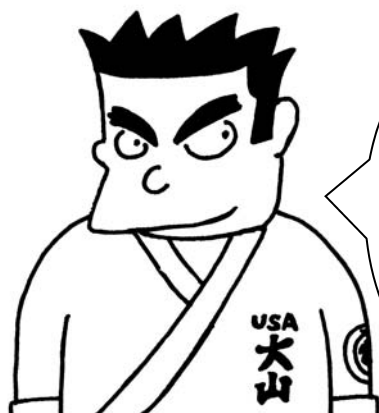
Eventually, the Kickboxing organization that Mas Oyama and Mr. O. Noguchi had started broke apart. Later, in an interview with a martial arts magazine, Mr. O. Noguchi talked about how he was the one who had trained us and told us what to do. That really made me mad. A little while later, Mr. O. Noguchi developed a kickboxing TV show that became really popular and made a star out of "S.T.", who had come from a traditional Japanese Karate style. The reason this show was so popular was because "S.T." had a special technique—*Shinku Tobi Hiza Geri*, which was a jump knee kick to the face. In almost all of his matches, he would be struggling against his opponent, then suddenly do his jump knee kick and knock the guy out. It was so flashy and dramatic—just like a movie. Whenever he did it, the announcer would add to the excitement by shouting, "Yes! He did it! He did it again!"

I was reluctant to watch the show, but eventually I watched it once to see it for myself. During the first three rounds, "S.T.'s" opponent, who looked to be from Thailand, began over-powering him. In the fourth round, it looked like "S.T." was going to lose. Then, in

the fifth round, he did a right foot snap kick. The Thai fighter hit the ropes. As he bounced off the ropes, "S.T." did his flying knee kick and knocked him out. I shook my head in disgust. This show was an insult to everyone who earnestly trained in Martial Arts.

With the rise of kickboxing's popularity, a lot of kickboxing gyms began opening up around Japan. Many had connections to Kyokushin, but some did not. Sensei Kurosaki, who had since left the Kyokushin organization, opened one called "Mejiro Gym." Fujihira and some other top fighters trained with him. Fujihira was only about 5'3", but he became champion and earned the nickname, "Little Giant." Sensei Kurosaki trained many champion fighters. One of Sensei Kurosaki's fighters, Fujiwara, became the Muay Thai national champion in Thailand. During his title match, Fujiwara knocked his opponent out and became the first Japanese fighter, to the best of my knowledge, in Muay Thai's 500 year history to be national champion. Sensei Kurosaki was the one who made it happen. Sensei Kurosaki's reputation grew and grew. Some people from Holland even met with him to ask permission to use the "Mejiro Gym" name.

Remember, this is my memory of how things happened. To the best of my knowledge, everything I am telling you is true and accurate. Some people may remember things differently, but I don't care. This is the story that I know to be true. OSU!



Don't Forget 20th Anniversary of Japan Cup

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