

Eddy Lee: Fighting to End Violence

We sit chatting in the gym. A steady stream of fighters filters past with deferential nods to its proprietor. They train with surprising stealth - stretching, skipping and sparring, all with dreams of becoming the next Eddy 'The Heat' Lee. Newspaper clippings grace the entry's wall, national flags drape around a solitary ring and punch-bags hang nervously from the rafters. The gym, like its boss, is a humble one and has produced further champions. Eddy Lee can barely suppress his pride as he surveys his flock.

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces



"A lot of them come from broken homes with no role models," he says. "They see me as a father-figure and once they're here, they're part of the family."

The martial art of muay thai enables them to channel their fury into something positive, says Lee, to "harvest their inner-strength", as he learned the hard way. His childhood was one of abuse. He became a "frustrated, angry kid, mixing it up with youth gangs" who found solace in Thailand's national sport. He excelled and from the age of 15 was winning national titles in adult men's divisions.

"I'd beaten everybody and for about a year, no-one would fight me," chuckles Eddy. "My manager advised me to turn pro and my first bout was against a Thai fighter. I knocked him out in 29 seconds."

Further victories followed. He was on a high, he was young and it went to his head, his ego swelling faster than his trophy cabinet. Next stop was Thailand and a much needed reality check.

"The sport had only been introduced to the Western world in 1975 and the Thai's weren't very comfortable with foreigners learning their ancient art," says Eddy, who was 16 at the time. "Two gyms turned me away and I found a camp on a military base in Bangkok. It was very intimidating. There was a three storey residential block. The top floor was the most luxurious, where the champions lived, and to make it to that level you had to fight your way up there."

As an initiation, Eddy was put in the ring with the six-time champion, which was "a real education", but he did manage to go the distance.

"I went to leave the ring and was told to stay," he continues. "I turned around and there was a queue of twenty-nine fighters waiting for me. I had to do three rounds with each of them consecutively and was beaten up so much, it wasn't funny. They broke my nose and the bruises were so bad that it was nearly three weeks before I could move."

Eddy remained in Thailand for three years, honing not just his fighting prowess, but fortifying his mental ability too. Missing training - which lasted from 6am through til 9pm - was simply not an option. If you didn't train, you weren't fed. Outside of the ring curfews were in place and his fellow fighters spoke only broken English at best. The first months were especially testing for Lee. He was lonely, homesick and "ready to throw it all in". A devout Christian, he also suffered a crisis of faith.

"I was living like a Thai and took a turn from my beliefs," he says. "Meditation and Buddhism is a big part of life there and I started practising them, but being so young I didn't understand it fully and badly lost three fights in a row. I wasn't focused. There was a storm inside of me and I was cut open from head to toe."

With a crucifix hanging from his neck, he was soon back to his winning ways. He left Thailand and competed internationally,

adding more championship belts to his name. China in the early 90s was a real thrill, the sport so popular that Eddy found himself entertaining crowds of up to 15,000 strong. Towards the end of his career, he felt an urge to "give something back to the community" and founded the Lee Gar Legacy Gym on the North Shore. He has since been appointed as New Zealand's national muay thai coach and dreams of one day leading the team to Olympic glory (the sport has recently been approved for inclusion in the four-yearly event). Lee is also involved with the kids' charity, Child Matters, and has arranged fundraising fights for the cause.

"Domestic violence is a major issue and something needs to be done about it," he says. "Too many people turn a blind eye. Child abuse must end, the kids are our future."

He laments his father never having been a role model for him. Years later, after he'd learned to turn negative energy into good through the discipline, Lee went back to speak with his dad "and put some stuff to rest". He is a father now and tells me that his son, 8-year-old D'Angelo, is a beautiful, beautiful boy.

"He makes me so proud," says Eddy. "And now I just want to be a good role model for him."