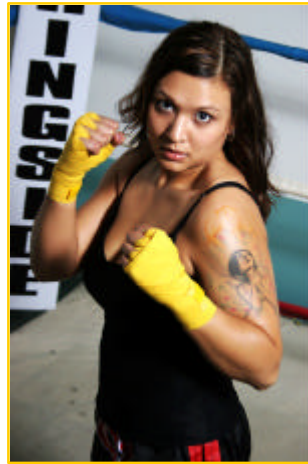


From the Couch to the Gym
My journey to becoming a Muay Thai Fighter



Before



After



I am entering my 5th month of fight training. Months and months of preparation so I can step into the ring for the most physically demanding 6 minutes of my life. There is nothing like Muay Thai – the physical training and dedication that it takes to compete in this sport/art seems torturous and doesn't make much sense to a lot of people. The injury rate is high and when I describe my workout routine to people – they cringe at the intensity. One must really love it, to live through it.

I never imagined reaching this point – preparing for a fight. I've always had a great respect for martial arts and toyed with the idea of one day competing in the sport. As a child, I wasn't really athletic. I lacked coordination and always seemed to be battling the dreaded "baby fat". I never took much interest in sports. After I graduated high school, I enrolled in a kickboxing class. It was taught at a karate school and consisted of about 6 students. The training was tough, but I responded to it well. I really enjoyed it. I had great results – I lost weight, became more confident and self-aware, and improved my coordination. I even gained a new respect for athletes in all sports – it was something I could relate to. For once, I understood how athletes push themselves to achieve their goals and how much training it took to excel in a sport. I started sparring eventually and really grew to love the sport. I had a decent instructor but felt that I really got the encouragement or support I needed to pursue the sport any further. The onset of Tae Bo seemed to affect our curriculum and I wasn't getting what I needed so my attendance eventually came to a halt. I also had enrolled in college and training took backseat to the pursuit of my career. I studied full time and worked full time. I ate a lot of fast food, stopped exercising and got to be about 30 lbs overweight over the course of about 4 years.

After I got my degree, I started looking into martial arts training again. Things had changed at my old gym and the type of training I was after wasn't being offered. I wanted to kickbox again because I knew that I would achieve tremendous results. Kickboxing is one of the best workouts. It utilizes all parts of the body. The structure is one of the reasons I enjoy martial arts. I like to be challenged and being in a group setting where someone is pushing me to try harder, it is a great motivation for me. I am not the type to join the nearest gym and hit the treadmill for 90 minutes. I feel silly doing aerobics and have an aversion to "step class". Over the course of 4 years, I searched and tried many different schools from *tai kwon do* to *kung fu*. None of them seemed to have what I was looking for. I was ready to get serious. I wanted to get into shape and I needed a school and instructor that would help me reach my goals.

In 2004, I started thinking a lot about my life and the things I have accomplished up to that point. I had completed college and got a degree in Commercial Art. I was about mid-way into my career working as a

Marketing Manager. I was happily married and a homeowner. I had accomplished a lot but always felt that there was more I could do with my life. I started to realize that human beings are capable of so much. There are some people who are very admirable, seizing every opportunity that is presented and making the most of it. I have a lot of respect for people who do things and really do them well. It astonishes me how much people are capable of, yet so many people choose to do so little. It doesn't even matter what your background is, rich or poor, most people can accomplish whatever they choose. It's a matter of motivation and the will to really achieve. At the point that I was realizing all this, I realized that I wasn't satisfied with going to work every day from 8-5 and plopping myself in front of the television every night after work. It's an easy rut to get into and I was ready to get out. I knew that I could do more and I wouldn't be satisfied until I directed my energies to something that would make me feel good. I figured my first step to feeling better would be to overcome my physical limitations. I was out of shape. I wanted to do something about it. Around that time, a good friend of mine was training for a 26 mile marathon. Most people (including myself) can't even comprehend running that distance. The thought of it seemed horrific to me. Yet, here was someone close to me who came from a similar background and she was able to do it. I was fascinated with the idea of training to make the body perform under those circumstances. I knew it had to do with "mind over matter" and that I needed to experience this for myself. I always interpreted enlightenment as an astute state of mind. I am not religious, nor am I a fan or organized religion. I feel that drive and motivation has to come from within an individual. I think of enlightened people as those who know and understand how to control the mind as well as the body and they are able to make these parts function together as one. There is a certain level of spirituality that comes with that. It was important to me to discover this power for myself and move beyond the place that I was in mentally.

I decided that I wanted to kickbox again. I wanted to achieve something great; I wanted to make my body strong. I wanted to have total control over my body and push myself beyond my weaknesses. I wanted to understand what it meant to be enlightened. I knew that my body working in unison with my mind would be my first step.

March 2004, marked the beginning of my arduous journey and the path to becoming a Muay Thai fighter. I began looking for a school that taught kickboxing. More specifically, I wanted to learn the art of Muay Thai. Muay Thai translates to Thai Boxing. It is a form of martial art practiced in several Southeast Asian countries. My mother is from Thailand and the sport is part of my culture and heritage. It has always been somewhat mystical to me. I was Americanized growing up, I had neglected to truly explore and embrace a big part of whom I was until then.

I didn't have any luck finding a good martial arts school in the Tampa Bay area. I did a "Google" search and found Master Mehrdad's website. The school is located on ML King Jr. St. in St. Petersburg. I was eager to learn and willing to make the commute. I browsed through the images and knew instantly that it was exactly what I was looking for. There were pictures of Master Mehrdad being run over by a truck, being hit with a 2x4 and more. I know that there are very few people who can accomplish feats like this. I have seen Shaolin monks who can harness energy like that and withstand painful acts. I think of this power as a form on enlightenment. I contacted the school and shortly after that I went for my first class. It was mostly men as I had expected. I didn't feel intimidated because I had been to enough classes to feel confident about working out in that type of setting. I took one class and knew it was for me. The workout was tough and I loved it. I have been back every week since then making the commute from Tampa.

I had a great connection with Master Mehrdad and early on, I felt that he supported and believed in my abilities. When you are doing something that is as demanding as this sport, your coach will play a big part in your success or failure. I felt nothing but encouragement and positive reinforcement and that made me want to pursue more. In other schools, instructors have very little interaction with the students and it is probably one of the main reasons that people abandon their studies. You need encouragement, to know that you are progressing and the challenge of being pushed beyond your perceived limitations.

After about 6 months of training, Master Mehrdad put a small group of students on a 30-day “body transformation” program. I eagerly participated. It was demanding and required going to the gym 5 days a week in addition there was a strict diet (diet being a word that was not a regular part of my vocabulary). I followed the diet, which actually relied a lot on common sense about which foods are bad for you, and which foods are best. Everyone achieved great results in 30 days. I lost about 14 lbs and over 13 inches. I was so pleased with the results.

Master Mehrdad’s organization MKM Knockout Promotions, organizes fights 3 times a year. I attended the event in November. I knew that it was something I could do. I think when one decides that about something, when you say that you can do it, it is only a matter of time and you will accomplish it. I saw other women competing and I was excited and motivated. We talked about it in class and it was unanimous that I would fight in the next event. I believed I could do it and having my trainer believe in me enabled me to move forward.

Fight training began in January. I can’t go into details about everything that we did but I will talk about the results that I have achieved since I began. The most difficult aspect of training for me has been weight loss. I had to lose 30 lbs to prepare for the fight. The dieting has been strict and the workouts have been hardcore. I have been working out an average of 5-6 days a week for the last 5 months. I don’t flinch when I am facing a 3 mile run; a year ago I could barely run 1.5 miles. I am doing workouts that consist of over 100 push ups of varying difficulty, 4-600 sit ups and as many as 800 in one night. As a woman, I have trained along side of men in grueling distance runs, sprint drills and sparring matches. I’ve been punched and kicked and tossed around like a rag doll by guys twice my size. There were nights that I had 4 ice packs on my legs and bruises the size of pancakes. I have survived it all. It hasn’t been easy and some nights left me questioning why I ever agreed to do it in the first place. However, the more I think about what I have accomplished, the more I am motivated to work harder.

Here I am 30 pounds lighter, 2 sizes smaller and 3 weeks away from getting into the ring. I feel healthy, strong and happy. Mentally, I feel focused and driven. I sacrificed a lot of time but it has all been worth it. When I look at my “before” picture I feel a sense of satisfaction. It is like I am a new person in a sense. I know that my body has changed but more importantly is how I have changed mentally. I have a new understanding and respect for my body and its ability to adapt. I know that I can push myself through the most rigorous of workouts. I am not afraid of the unknown. Physically, I have been pushed to the extreme and I have endured. I essentially went from being mildly athletic to becoming a fighter in a little over a year. Although there was nothing easy about it, I am within a few pounds and a few weeks of reaching my goal and I know that on June 11, I will be more than ready to face my opponent. I am proud to be the only female representing my gym in one of the world’s most challenging and dangerous sports.

“Our bodies are forged in the iron of our will.”

Natalie Keene

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