



More than just for kicks

Natalie Keene will compete in a type of full-contact martial arts that is anything but simply recreational.

By ERIC MUSKATEVC
Published June 11, 2005

ST. PETERSBURG - As she sat barefoot on the floor of master Mehrdad Khan Moayedi's martial arts school Wednesday night, Natalie "Boncrusher" Keene wore an eager smile. Keene, 26, who had gone through six months of uncompromising training, stretched her veined hands over her charcoal-bruised knees out to her toes, laughing.

The butterflies started to set in as she talked about the upcoming days, fighting another woman in a ring and having to tell her mother she would fight full contact in today's Shin Do Kumate VII at the University of South Florida's Phyllis P. Marshall Center.

"I was real Americanized as a kid," said Keene, who is of Thai descent. "I've played in punk bands, I used to go to shows, and I had the crazy, funny Asian mom."

What started as simple kickboxing when she was eating fast food and getting her commercial art degree at the University of South Florida, quickly turned into a soul-searching training marathon with Moayedi.

Moayedi, "the Persian Warrior," is 39-3-0 lifetime in professional bouts that include several martial arts styles. He opened his school at 3028 A 9th Street N. and began drafting rules for a competition that suited his style of full-contact competition.

After the Florida State Athletic and Boxing Commission sanctioned his sport in 1993, Moayedi and his MKM Promotions Inc. began searching the world for fighters to compete in Shin Do Kumate events that they have held in St. Petersburg and Tampa since 2002. The hybrid sport allows a fighter with a martial arts background such as karate, kung fu or tae kwon do, to fight using full contact as long as it is upright and there is no clinching. There are four fierce, three-minute rounds.

For Keene, an amateur and the only local female carded to fight tonight, moving through the process of getting fit and studying her forte, Muay Thai or Thai kickboxing, has changed her life.

"Your body has a weakness," she said. "I am trying to find my weakness. To stop and say it hurts ... is the only thing that can stop me."

Keene, 5-foot-7 and 145 pounds, drives from Tampa, where she does marketing for a construction company, to Moayed's every night for stretching, conditioning, sparring and an earful of Moayed's vocal motivation.

"I am not the type of person who can go to (a gym) and walk the treadmill or do weights by myself," she said. "(Moayed) gets into it with me, but I stayed here because of him. ... He has a reputation as being very brutal. People back out of fights all the time against him and against his students."

Keene's mother, born in Thailand where female fighting is taboo, knows Natalie has been training, but as of Wednesday Natalie had not told her she was fighting today. "I'm hoping she will just have to get over it," Keene said. "Coming here has helped me touch a part of my life and heritage I never used to connect to."

Keene eventually wants to teach with Moayed and help the sport spread, especially to women. Tonight, in her first true test, Keene faces Marilyn Vallejo of Denver, Colo. With just a few pads for protection, she hopes she has found her weakness and conquered pain.

© Copyright 2003 St. Petersburg Times. All rights reserved