



Ariana Ramirez practices kicks with Master Toddy in the gym at Le Meridien Phuket Beach Resort.

A gritty dose of reality

By the time you read this, the pretty faces in the main picture may not look quite so pretty. Black eyes, bumps and bruises are all part of the game when you're a Muay Thai boxer, which these ladies from the US are.

The three girls were in Phuket to film the climax of a new reality show revolving around Muay Thai, *Fight Girls*, which will air in the US and elsewhere, including on Star Sports in Asia.



The show follows the trio as they learn Muay Thai while at the same time juggling family and day jobs, fight their first fights and then come to Phuket for the big slug-out, on March 10, at Saphan Hin against Thai women boxers.

The *Gazette's* Alasdair Forbes caught up with them as they trained at Le Meridien Phuket's gym.



The reality show has, in fact, brought a whole new reality to her life. In Thailand, according to Master Toddy, she and the other fighters face serious Thai opposition in their Saphan Hin bouts.

Lisa knows that the bar has just been raised massively. "I've observed that so-called Muay Thai masters from outside the Thai culture are not as good as the Thai trainers," she explains. "So regular fighters I fought may be good but they will not be at the level of a Thai opponent."

Being surrounded by a crowd of spectators who really know the sport inside-out is also a challenge, even though Master Toddy teaches using Thai instructions and is careful to explain cultural details.

"It's one thing in the US when you've got people drinking beer and thinking they're at just another fight, and they don't understand *Ram Muay* [the pre-fight dance] and they're asking, 'Why are they doing that dance thing?'"

"But here in Thailand they are judging you [with expert eyes] from the moment you get into the ring to the *Ram Muay* – and you've got to get it right because they are going to know good, bad or indifferent.

"If I'm doing knees, they'll be looking at my footwork and going, 'Oh, she's not on the balls of her feet...'"

"Here you've got people who understand the sport and are going to critique you to the end of the earth, so you have to step up your game."

Do the girls worry about being hurt?

Ariana Ramirez sells real

Lisa King's mother didn't want her to do Muay Thai. "Mom thought the girlie things were more appropriate for me, and she didn't want me to get hurt or get broke up in any way," she says through one of the widest grins in the world.

But Lisa had two older brothers who practiced boxing and other martial arts. When she graduated from high school and subsequently moved to Las Vegas, she figured she was old enough to make her own decisions.

She was terminally bored with normal gym work so, "about nine years ago I enrolled in a course with Master Toddy [Thosaphon Sitiwatjana], basically as a form of self-defense

and to keep myself in shape.

"I didn't start fighting till three years ago. It's a whole different training regime. It's a different mentality."

Up to now, the 32-year-old has juggled being a mother of two, a marketing and PR job and her dedication to Muay Thai.

Back in Vegas, she gets up at 5:30 to run a few miles, "just to get it out of the way", gets the kids ready and takes them to school, then heads for work. At lunchtime she trains for an hour and then, at the end of the day, she and the children, a daughter of 15 and a son or five, all head for the gym.

"My daughter does kick-boxing and my son does tae kwon do. I do about an hour of pad work and an hour of sparring, so that's three hours' training a day."



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Fight Girls: From left, Kourtney McCarty, Ariana Ramirez and Lisa King.

estate and is also a part-time model. She has astonishing violet eyes and one has to wonder how a black eye helps with the modeling.

But Ariana, whose husband is a champion in both Muay Thai and tae kwon do, is philosophical. How does she handle a battering? "Lots of ice. It just takes determination and perseverance. It's in your heart - you have to have a lot of heart."

"I've taken my lumps and my bumps - and I've given them."

Lisa firmly believes that Muay Thai, in addition to teaching how to fight, also teaches them their limits, and this protects them from too much damage. "I have a child who fights and I tell her, 'Be prepared. Don't get in the ring if you don't feel you can do what you're supposed to do."

"Don't ever go in there overmatched. You have nothing to prove."

That wide grin again: "The same things can go wrong if you drive a car, even in Thailand - everyone drives a little bit more crazy than they do in the US, so I think I stand more of a chance of getting hurt in the street than in the ring."

Are the girls prepared for

the fame that will follow if the *Fight Girls* reality show takes off the way that *Survivor* or *The Bachelor* did? None of the three seems that interested.

Ariana says, "I don't have any expectations about that. I didn't do this for stardom. I did it because I love Muay Thai and I'm hoping it will do a lot for the sport - not for me or my career."

"If that happens it's going to be insane, 'Oh my gosh! I'm one of those reality stars!' But it's more about the sport and I really hope that people will come to have an appreciation for it, as we do. I think they will."

Kourtney McCarty, a 27-year-old freelance writer from Wisconsin, says she is not even comfortable with talking to the cam-

era. In any case, she does not believe fame will follow.

"You don't remember those [reality show] people after. I don't really watch TV and I'm not into reality shows. I'm doing this because they're giving me a great opportunity, and I'm enjoying it."

"It's definitely strange. Not every person gets to be in a reality show, but the world is not my stage. I'd rather stand back and observe." She writes every day "to keep sharp" and, for her, the experience will make a book.

Lisa, too, says she is taking part in the project to promote the sport, "because I love it".

But, she adds, "If this turns into the reality show that they hope it does, then yeah, my whole life is exposed to everybody. Fortunately I don't have too many skeletons to hide, so I'm okay with that."

"And if at any given point I don't like the way things are going I can just say, 'Stop'."

To see how the trio did in action against their Thai opponents, see this week's sports pages.

REAL DEAL

The boxers, who were picked after a nationwide talent search, arrived in Thailand to film the climax of a pilot for a reality show, *Fight Girls*, revolving around Muay Thai. Heading up the film crew are producers Clay Roberts and Scott Messick. Mr Roberts produced the *Charlie's Angels* movies while Mr Messick, who ran MTV Sports for a couple of years, was the Supervising Producer and Director of the first *Survivor* series.



Co-producer Clay Roberts.

Funding for the pilot has come from Oprah Winfrey's Oxygen cable channel, the sixth-biggest in the US, with an estimated 200 million subscribers, of which Mr Roberts expects 20 to 25 million to tune in to see the pilot.

If the initial show is deemed a success, then a series will follow, with the cast and crew expected to return to Thailand every eight episodes to match the cast against Thai opponents.

Training the fighters is Thohsaphon "Master Toddy" Sitiwatjana. Originally from Surat Thani, he has run a highly successful Muay Thai gym in Las Vegas for 20 years, and returns to Thailand with his best fighters from time to time.



Thohsaphon 'Master Toddy' Sitiwatjana.

The pilot is expected to air in June in the US. For those who cannot wait, a made-for-DVD reality movie, *Ring Girls*, which also features Lisa King, is due to hit the stores in May - or earlier in Patong.

For more information see also www.mastertoddy.com and Lisa King's website at www.theblackwidow.us

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