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Trainer Shuki Rosenzweig fastens Nili Block's protective headgear before her fight at the 5th Amateur Muay Thai World Championship at Bangkok's National Stadium; Block, 18, won the final becoming world champion in the under-54kg category



GETTING A KICK OUT OF IT

Israeli girls demonstrate
their prowess at the
Amateur Muay Thai
World Championships

By Tibor Krausz *Bangkok*
Photos by Dennis Thern

A petite starling of a girl who loves to sing and dance, Noam Kurland, visibly tense, sits on a plastic stool and readies for her moment in the spotlight. But the 12-year-old from Karmiel in the Galilee isn't here to sing and dance; she's here to fight.

Her father, Ohad Kurland, 38, who runs a Thai boxing gym in Israel, fastens the laces on her kid-size boxing gloves, and the sixth-grader is ready to rumble – and not for the first time, either. The plucky youngster, girlishly shy and mannerly outside the ring, already has nine official fights under her belt, six of them against boys her age from Israel. “I won them all,” Kurland tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

Tonight's fight, however, is her biggest ever in her burgeoning Thai boxing career. She is competing in the final of the under-30kg cadet category at the 5th Amateur Muay Thai World Championships at Bangkok's National Stadium. Her opponent is homegrown champion Wanalak Pilapong, an equally diminutive prepubescent pugilist, who arrives at the venue wearing a pink Minnie Mouse T-shirt.

Muay Thai, a full-contact martial art, is no child's play. Derived from hand-to-hand combat techniques developed on ancient battlefields, the sport equips its practitioners with a punishing arsenal of punches, elbow chops, knee strikes, shin kicks and foot thrusts that leave opponents bloodied, battered and bruised during grueling bouts.

“As a parent you do worry that someone might get hurt,” admits Ohad Kurland, who is dubbed the “King of the North” in Israeli Muay Thai circles and runs the largest

training facility for the sport in the Galilee, where he trains around 120 boxers – boys, girls, men and women. “My wife doesn't like it at all,” he concedes. “But I'm very proud of Noam. Many people who train hard never get into the ring.”

To reduce the risk of injuries, contestants in amateur competitions are encased in well-padded protective gear, including head and shin guards, and they are not allowed to strike at their opponent's head. Still, Noam clearly means business tonight. At the end of her traditional pre-fight dance ritual, she taunts the Thai girl with combative pantomime, earning good-natured cheers from local spectators. The little foreigner is an instant crowd favorite.

And off she goes right from the gong, plowing forward, her fists and feet flying furiously, as her father rewards each well-executed punch and kick with rousing Thai-style cries of “Oy!” and “Ohoy!” Midway through the second round, she sends Wanalak to the ground with a feet swipe. She begins the third and final round in the same way she started the first two – on the offensive. The Thai girl clinches to avoid the onslaught, landing some kicks and punches of her own in return.

AT THE final gong Noam retches and vomits. It wasn't her nerves that got the better of her, she later insists; she'd been suffering from an upset stomach. Wanalak wins the fight on points, dashing Noam's hope of becoming an amateur Muay Thai world champion at a tender age, when many other girls still play with dolls. “Why did I lose?” Noam wants to know, incredulous, as she acknowledges the jovial thumbs-up from local boxing fans by pressing her palms together in a Thai-style *wai*. “I had

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better technique,” she insists.

Soon afterwards, though, she is all smiles as she poses for photographs with the Thai girl.

The night isn't over yet for Team Israel's young female fighters. Gearing up for their own finals are Nili Block, from Beit Shemesh, and Sarah Avraham, from the settlement of Kiryat Arba in Hebron.

“Nili is a killer. Sarah has the heart of a tiger,” says Shuki “White Lion” Rosenzweig, a battle-hardened, veteran professional fighter from Jerusalem and a legend in Israeli Muay Thai circles, of the two 18-year-olds. “If I had money in my pocket, I would put it on both of them,” he tells *The Report*.

His hint at a wager isn't merely rhetorical flourish. Among the throng of ringside spectators, animatedly gesticulating Thais are betting on tonight's finalists. Block fancies her chances. “I'm gonna win,” she vows in between mock-sparring with Rosenzweig to warm up, and pressing a plastic bag of ice cubes down on her head to cool down in the muggy heat.

“Nili has everything. She has punches, she has kicks, she has *jangwa* [Thai for rhythm]. She's tall, she's lean, she's got long arms,” enthuses Rosenzweig, an erstwhile fishmonger from Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market turned professional world



Sarah Avraham, 18, celebrates after winning her fight, becoming world champion in the 60-63.5kg category

champion, now in semi-retirement, whose face bears the marks of many a bruising fight in the rings of Bangkok, and who has broken more bones (both his own and those of others) than he cares to count. "I was very impressed with her the first time I held pads for her at a gym in Jerusalem [last year]," he adds.

"Keep up the pressure, but stay on your guard," he tells Block in his prefight prep talk ahead of her bout with Bulgarian boxer Pamela Filipova in the final of the junior women's under-54kg category. "Feign, whirl around, then bang, bang, bang," he adds, demonstrating a potent combination of fist and foot.

Boyishly lean and sinewy, with veins bulging in muscular biceps, Block boasts a formidable six-pack and wears her long mousy blonde hair in dreadlocks, belying the stereotype of the young Orthodox Jewish woman that she is. She studies at a girls' religious school and keeps rigorously kosher; but she plays baseball, basketball and soccer.

She also participates in Israel's Women's American Football league and was a

member of the national team, which came second last year at the European Championships in France. In March, two weeks before her trips to Thailand, she won the Jerusalem Marathon's 10km race in the 16-19 age group, completing the distance in 44 minutes ahead of 500 other contestants in her category. "I have a lot of energy and endurance," she notes. "I don't go out with friends. I just concentrate on [sports]."

BLOCK, WHO was born in Maryland, in the United States, and moved to Israel with her family as a toddler, began dabbling in Thai boxing at the age of 10, when her mother, a volunteer police officer in Jerusalem, took her along for self-defense training. "I used to be a big tomboy, always playing with boys," she recalls, laughing. She trains five days a week at a gym in Jerusalem.

Her Bulgarian opponent, who reached the final by easily beating a Vietnamese fighter, starts off strong, letting kicks and punches fly in furious succession. Momentarily taken off guard, Block looks ready to retaliate. "Don't barge

ahead! Keep blocking! Go with the knee... *beseder!*" Rosenzweig shouts to her from the corner.

Throughout the three 1.5-minute rounds, Filipova keeps up her glove-fisted barrage, but Block responds in kind, trading punch for punch, kick for kick. "The Bulgarian girl is a powerhouse. She's stronger physically. But Nili is a great technician," Rosenzweig offers by way of ringside commentary.

The Thai punters who have wagered on the Israeli teenager are in luck: Block is declared the winner of the fight, becoming Israel's first amateur world champion of the night.

"My fight wasn't that hard," Block comments laconically afterwards. "I just went into the zone."

Many more young Israelis, too, are getting "into the zone" at the dozens of gyms, large and small, that have sprung up around the country to teach Thai boxing to local enthusiasts. Many of them are teenage girls and young women. Kurland alone coaches some 20 women at his training facility in the Galilee.

"It's a great sport for getting into shape and letting off steam by pounding away at

Sports



Noam Kurland, 12, (right) during her fight in the under-30kg cadet category final

punching bags,” explains Sarah Avraham, who is originally from Mumbai and immigrated to Israel with her family in 2009. “You don’t have to become a fighter.”

Then again, she has been a fighter – in more ways than one. Last August, the young Indian convert became an Israeli national Muay Thai champion in Jerusalem. Tonight, she is hoping to do one better by becoming an amateur world champion.

AS PART of a well-coordinated Islamist attack around Mumbai on November 26, 2008, two Pakistani militants forced their way into Chabad’s local center, taking the Lubavitch movement’s emissary, Rabbi Gavriel Holtzberg and Rivka, his heavily pregnant wife, hostage. In short order, they executed the couple, along with four other hostages.

The terror attack was a personal tragedy for Avraham, 14 at the time, and her parents. “We were traumatized for a month,” she recalls. “Rabbi Holtzberg and his wife had been teaching us about *halakha* and how to be real Jews. We were like family.”

Avraham’s father, a Hindu doctor, and her mother, a Protestant nurse, had been flirting with Judaism for years. “As a child, I was always told stories about Israel,” she recounts to *The Report*. “I always felt proud of my Judaism even when I wasn’t yet a Jew.”

The family insisted on attending Mumbai’s historic Orthodox synagogue, Knesset Eliyahu, she says, despite a measure of hostility from some members of the local community who looked askance at the non-Jewish newcomers. “They didn’t like us at first; they didn’t take us in,” she says.

The teenager was used to being ostracized. At the private school she attended, Avraham says, she was picked on by other students both for her dyslexia

and her dark skin, which is seen by many Indians as a mark of lower status. “I have never felt that way in Israel,” she stresses. “In fact, people come up to me and say what beautiful skin I have.”

I had very low self-esteem, I felt I wasn’t worth anything. This sport has boosted my confidence

Soon after the Mumbai terror attack, her family, determined to continue on the road to proper conversion on which the late Holtzbergs had set them, decided to move permanently to Israel, where they now live in the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Arba in the West Bank. For Sarah, who bears the names of both the patriarch Abraham and his wife, Sarah, who are believed to be buried in Hebron, the place holds some extra special resonance. “I love it there. We’re not a bunch of gun-toting fanatics,” she insists defensively apropos the popular image of the settlers as religious extremists.

The Avrahams, who left India after a terror attack, soon found that terror awaited them in Israel, too. “I’ve had friends killed [by Palestinians],” she says.

The teenager, who suffers from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, started training in Muay Thai at a gym in Jerusalem

two years ago to “discipline myself. I had very low self-esteem,” she explains. “I felt I wasn’t worth anything. This sport has boosted my confidence.”

But it didn’t improve her relationship with her father, who holds traditional Indian values about the role of women. “He was furious,” she says. “He wanted to kick me out of the house. The daughter of a doctor isn’t supposed to be a fighter. He didn’t speak with me for months. But after I won the Israeli championship, all was OK.”

Her father now has more reason to be proud of Sarah’s Thai boxing career. In the final of the women’s 60-63.5kg weight category against Kya Meylan from England, Avraham stakes her claim on the title right from the get-go with a flurry of kicks and punches in what presently develops into an all-out grudge match. Like a feline predator sizing up her prey, Avraham fixes the British fighter with a gaze of unwavering intensity. She feigns, attacks, retreats, feigns, then attacks again. In the second round, she sends her opponent to the floor; she does so again in the third.

As the referee raises Avraham’s hand to signal her victory, she shrieks and jumps with joy. She’s still beaming when a member of India’s Muay Thai team approaches her ringside to offer his congratulations. “I did it!” Avraham says and pumps the air triumphantly with a clenched fist. “This win is for Israel.” ■