



Clockwise from upper left: 1) 20-year-old Khmer refugee Phiream prepares to spar, the tattoo honouring his slain father on full display. 2) The fading script adorning Phiream's fraying boxing shorts is distinctively Cambodian. 3) Memories of home and good times past adorn the walls of the Khmer Kickboxing Centre. 4) Local living legend, former champ and the club's owner, Oumry Ban passes on some tips of the trade. STEPHANE JANIN / ASIA MOTION

Kickin' ass in the city of lost angels

STEPHANE JANIN / ASIA MOTION

FIRST point of entry from the Pacific for Asian immigrants is Long Beach in California – one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the US. It hosts the biggest Cambodian-American community with 50,000 people.

The Cambodian community of Long Beach is most visible in the “Anaheim corridor”, a long neighbourhood along Anaheim Street, between Atlantic and Junipero Streets. In 2007, this “Little Phnom Penh” officially became “Cambodia Town” with recognition from Long Beach city.

On 223 West Anaheim Street, a modest building hosts the city's only Khmer Kickboxing Centre. The club is managed by Oumry Ban, former Cambodian kickboxing champion who arrived as a refugee in 1981.

Let's follow 20-year-old Phiream, who's been in the US since 1997.

Phiream, how did you get here?

“A good friend of mine was doing kickboxing back then. One day he took me there and I got hooked quickly. It's a fun sport. You can kill each other in the ring for three minutes, three rounds, but you know that at the end you will shake hands, hug, and feel good about it. You don't have to worry about the guy coming after you; there's a lot of respect.”

What values attract you?

“You get in the ring, do your best. If you don't

win, then you just go train harder. If you win you know you did your best. But you have to work on it; nothing comes easy, you really have to focus...”

Behind them, the club's manager Oumry Ban motivates his boys. Some consider him a living legend. Besides being a brilliant kickboxer (309 fights with 278 wins, 200 via KO), Oumry Ban joined the Cambodian army in 1970, and was probably part of brutal and bloody battles. In April 1975, he went to work in the fields like most Cambodians.

He arrived in the US in 1981 as a refugee, and moved to Long Beach from Chicago in 1986 – the year he opened the Khmer Kickboxing Centre. Oumry Ban, father of five, has now run this modest studio for more than 20 years.

He recognises that he struggles to make ends meet, yet has turned down several buy-out offers. Kickboxing is his life, and he has too much respect for Cambodian culture.

Phiream returns to the center of the room and positions himself in front of his sparring partner. On his back a large tattoo shows RIP - “Rest in Peace” - in memory of his father, a Funcinpec colonel and Secretary of State at the Ministry of Interior – killed in Phnom Penh in July 1997 in what human rights groups allege was an execution.

Shortly after, afraid for their lives, Phiream, his mother, his brothers and sisters flew to America to start a new life...



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