

S.A.T.R.A.A. | Thai-American Muay Thai

Jonathan CC Los Angeles, muaythai, nakmuay, Satrawoot May 28, 2020

SATRA



From an Industrial Designer to a Graphic Designer working in fashion and consumer goods to envisioning “The HUNDREDS of Muay Thai”, Jack Jittkaroonrus has come a long way. I had the fortune to sit down with the founder of Satrawoot, a Muay Thai-centric street wear company, and discuss his story.

It’s a story of an LA native that fought through adversity and many path changes along the way; sometimes riddled with gangs, other times a part of the mundane and pragmatic grind, but ultimately leading to a path true to his goals and narrative. This is the story of Jack Jittkaroonrus.

GROWING UP THAI-AMERICAN



Born in Los Angeles, California to Thai immigrants, Jack's parents arrived in 1968 via business incentive and a newly alleviated immigration policy. Growing up, Jack knew what it was like to be rooted in tradition but polarized by the Pacoima streets that he called home. On the one hand, his family opened the very first Thai restaurant in LA but on the other hand, racial segregation between the youth defined the generation.

It was a crazy time during the early 90s.

Pacoima continues to be predominantly populated by visible minorities, significantly Latinos, and a synonymy with rock-n-roll innovator and Chicano Ritchie Valens. During the 90s, tensions were high throughout LA with a combination of the widespread distribution of crack cocaine, poverty, and a distrust in the LA police department, eventually reaching a fever pitch with the Rodney King riots.

The disparagement of the residents was and still is a major contributing factor to racial tensions; the colour of your skin could be the difference between safety and a beatdown. When it came to Jack, this meant that the Asian kids had to stick together, defending themselves with the one tool that was drilled into them at an early age - Muay Thai.

"The reason why we're fighting was because it was always a race war. It felt like jail during high school - Mexicans versus blacks. And then we had to backup the blacks if a rumble broke out... it was crazy. It was a crazy time during the early 90s.

We learned how to fight. [We would] go to school and defend ourselves. We're getting bullied because we're not Mexican or Black...so we would have to fight, you know."

It's well documented that the system that Jack found himself within did little to favour the residents of Pacoima, and to this day continues to be underrepresented and underserved. It is difficult to fight against a system that moves in a digressive pattern, but if we know anything about being a Nak Muay, circumstance doesn't stifle us - it strengthens us.

Any slow step is better than no step.

TRADITION

Growing up, Jack saw the Thai community support one another on a daily basis. His parents opened their restaurant in Los Angeles, serving authentic Thai-Chinese food. There was nowhere to get this kind of food; it was a first in LA.

The central focus of the restaurant was to cater to the Thai community, namely the employees at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel, located in Beverly Hills. By providing a daily drop-off service, also known as “pinto”, his family would bring a bit of the homeland to each patron’s lunch time.

The food was so good, that it eventually started to attract the faculty and students at the nearby LACC. But the food never changed and the core stayed true to their Thai traditions.

The same was seen in other aspects of life - Jack’s father started to train him in Muay Thai after being bullied in the 6th grade with additional training at the Thai Temple on Saturdays. Jack would also have a brief stint at the Muay Thai Academy, the first Muay Thai school in the USA.

During these times, the students trained like Thais, taught by Thais. No shinguards, just roughneck conditioning.

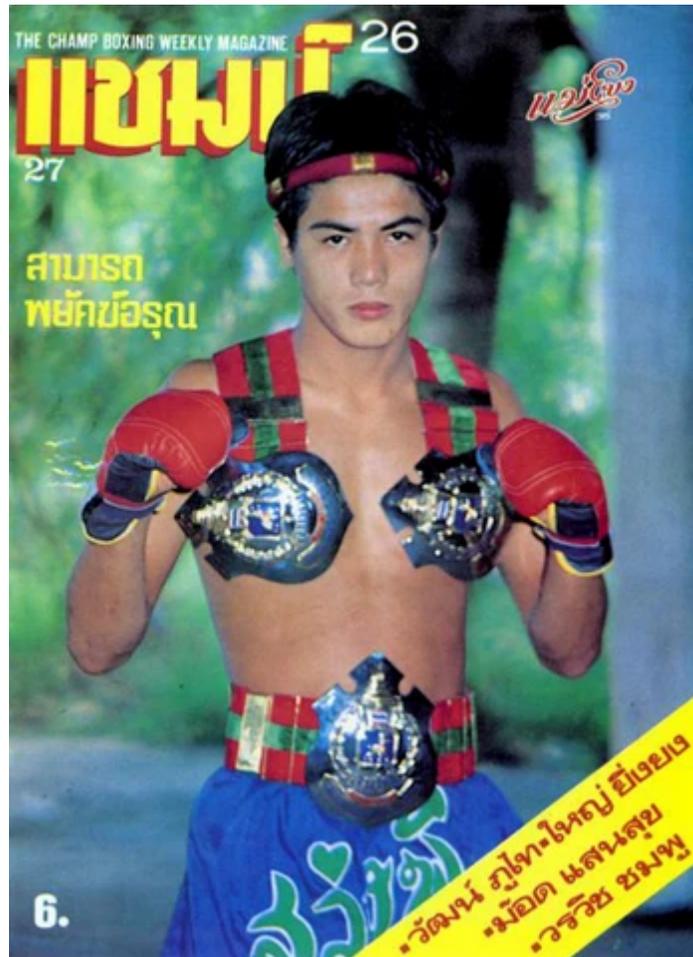
Recollecting the olden days, Jack reminisces on what his father once told him, “If you want to make your shins harder, you have to start tapping poles when you’re walking home.” This ultimately led to the kids having shin fights, a game of mercy for your legs. The rules were simple: check the first kick, then let your competitor rip your leg.

To note, I’ve been practicing Muay Thai for around 8-9 years and I’d be hard pressed to voluntarily take a full blown leg chop...and that’s what separates today’s practitioners to yesteryear’s, we have the access and widespread western appeal to put in safety parameters. This is something seen when sports begin to become widely popularized.

The first time he saw protective gear being used in Muay Thai and being practiced by non-Thais, Jack thought it was another martial art. With a chuckle, he says, “It was a shock to me! ... I'm so used to having a Thai teacher and they’re fucking mean as hell!” No half-assery was permitted.

Look, if you’re going to fight, you better know that you’re going to get hit.

SMOKE(RS)-N-MIRRORS



"Golden Era" Fighter Samart Payakaroon - photocredit: [Fightland](#)

When Jack first began practicing Muay Thai, it was a sport only geared towards the Thai people. With Muay Thai being such a new sport in the US, smokers were introduced as the only way to get any sort of ring experience.

Jack does remind us of “The Golden Era”, the first widespread international glance into the world of Muay Thai. In the late 80s and early 90s, practitioners of all types of martial arts would assemble for international bouts to prove martial art supremacy; Nak Muays against Dutch kickboxers would draw some of the largest crowds. This art-vs-art competition was rooted in Brazil’s vale tudo.

As time wore on, Muay Thai’s popularity began to fizzle out, especially amongst the immigrant Thai population.

This is the immigrant's dilemma - first generation-born children tend to push aside tradition, to achieve the American/Canadian/British/[*insert 'first world nation'*] dream. A 2007 study found that many first generation-ers are more focussed on studies and dominant culture accolades then keeping up with tradition, a mentality often supported by their parents.

Jack explains that many Thais see the career path as a fighter as a lowly one, which is a partial truth. In Thailand, Muay Thai fighting is another potential income stream for impoverished families, encouraging their children to pick up the national sport. On average, children begin training between 6-8 years of age, progressing to amateur fights by the age of 8-10.

“[For Thais] and our parents, it’s a low class sport. They’re like, ‘We didn’t bring you to this country, to learn how to fight and to be a thug. We brought you here so you can have a chance to build a future for yourself and your future family.’”

But this is a juxtaposition. Jack points out that the ancient art of Muay Thai (Muay Boran) was originally a nobleman technique, taught to commoners to thwart off invading nations. Interesting how the origins of the art form is easily forgotten once it becomes accessible.

As Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) began to emerge from the taboo shadows in the early 2000's, Muay Thai became one of the prominent striking styles used. This prompted a paradigm shift - as Thais focussed on Muay Thai less, foreigners became more fixated.

***Everything had to be beautiful.
Fight with your mind, not with your physical strength.***

NOW OR NEVER

At age 25, Jack had an epiphany: he wasn't happy where life had taken him. He was working a passionless IT job without honing in on his love for art - then his father passed away.

This massive loss in his life changed everything. It was now or never.

“I always wanted to go to art school. I dropped everything, quit my job. I really pushed myself and disciplined myself to keep drawing. And I got into art school, the Art Center College of Design, as an automotive design engineer. I did that for about three years, and then I got kicked out. I wasn’t good with the academics.”

Down but not out, Jack used these new tools and built his way up in the design world. After a brief stint at the Art Academy in San Francisco, studying portraiture and plein air, he began working everywhere from Suzuki, showcasing cars, to Wayforward Technology, developing Wii games.

Then 2008 hit and the stock market crashed. The only jobs available where Jack could apply his skills were in graphic design. This led him to CAD (Computer-Assisted Design) work in fashion and enter into the apparel world.

Pushing everything aside to pursue his dream career, Jack began itching to get back into the gym, briefly practicing Jiu Jitsu in 2013. While rolling one day, he noticed a Muay Thai class led by international champ David Huerta. Jack joined the next class and never looked back since.

COMING HOME | S.A.T.R.A.A. - Stay Ambitious To Rule All Adversaries

Approached in the gym one day to sponsor Lance Dixon and design shirts for his next fight, Jack agreed. There was a caveat though - he only had BJJ designs on deck. Telling us about his first official batch of shirts, Jack recounts,

“There was nothing in Muay Thai... it was so small at the time... I designed some shirts awhile back that I did for fun and didn’t think it would mean anything. So I grabbed the print, and just showed it to them... He just kind of looked at it like, ‘That looks dope but, whatever, they never do what they say.’”

Jack’s only response was “Just watch me”. They watched... and then believed in what would be later known as Satrawoot.



Satrawoot Hanuman Graphic Tee

Discovered while on a trip to Ayutthaya, the brand is named after an ancient Siamese word meaning ‘weapon’. Jack decided to use ancestral terminology on purpose - to always ingrain Thai tradition into every element of his designs. From the respect of the Thai flag and hanuman, which should only be present above the waist, to the unique blend of LA street and traditional Thai imagery, Jack continues to be meticulous with this process.

So it makes absolute sense why the mantra for his Thai-made shorts is “Designed by Thai. Made by Thai. For Muay Thai.”

Satrawoot would then become the trusted sponsor for the likes of Marvin Madariaga, Jackie Buntan, David Huerta, and April Vergara.

NO LOOKING BACK

If you want to make money in Muay Thai, you can't do it for the money.

At this point in Jack’s career, his professional client portfolio was healthy, ranging from Disney and Swiss Miss to Arm & Hammer and Universal. But he began to feel the same unfulfillment that he had some years earlier when he was an IT tech.

Jack vividly remembers the day that he looked around the gym and realised his brand covered the backs of almost every gym-goer. This sparked the decision to leave his design job and go all-in with Satrawoot.

"If you never pull the trigger for what you want to have in your life, you'll never know if you're gonna be able to achieve it. I felt like I had nothing to lose, you know? I didn't care anymore because I was always working for somebody and I wasn't happy. I have all this savings here... What's all this savings for?"

Being an entrepreneur is never easy, even if your business is based around something you love. Jack says every day brings its own challenges and fears; the constant desire to better his last design. But then it turns into an organic flow, almost like second nature, breaking down the crippling inhibition of doubt.



Satrawoot paisley bandana shorts, Holiday '20

Onto their third collection, Jack pulls from his environment for inspiration. With the anticipated release of their paisley bandana shorts, an LA-typography collaboration with lettering specialist B Loved One, and nationwide launch parties in the works, the future looks very bright for Satrawoot.

Before we parted ways, I asked what it means to be a Nak Muay to Jack Jittkaroonrus. He responds simply, “Being a Nak Muay is accepting yourself, to never back down or give up.”

We’d like to thank Jack and the rest of the Satrawoot family for taking the time to chat with us. You can find their current products at satrawoot.com, and stay up-to-date by following their [Instagram](#).

Khop khun khap!

About the writer:



Jonathan Chan-Choong (JCC) is a Toronto-born, BC-based copywriter, poet, and content creator with 8+ years as a Nak Muay. A penchant for lifestyle and editorial content, JCC writes to invite his readers to take a glimpse at the world all around us, if nothing else.

Learn more at jayseesee.com and follow his Instagram [@jayseesee](https://www.instagram.com/jayseesee).