



**THAI BULLFIGHT**

**BULLFIGHTING IN SOUTHERN THAILAND**

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE VITONE**



*THAI BULLFIGHT*

Thai Bullfight ~ Bullfighting in Southern Thailand

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## ***Bullfighting in Southern Thailand***

*ESSAY BY SUNTHORN BOONKAEW*

Cattle have been in Thailand for a long time. Saying when bovine first came to the Malay Peninsula is not easy. One can see at ancient structures and sites related to Hindu sculptural images of the seated god Nandi, mount to Lord Shiva and the gatekeeper of Shiva and spouse Parvati. Beside, behind, or below the Shiva image, the bull can be seen in most Hindu temples as well as in Buddhist temples with ancient links to Hinduism throughout Southeast Asia. In a further link to religious philosophy and world view grown from Brahman belief, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony has been practiced in Thailand since the early Sukhothai Kingdom which existed in Siam (Thailand) over 750 years ago. This beautiful ceremony marks the beginning of cultivation season and intends to divine the quality of the harvest.

Domestic cattle have been cultivated not only for labor (e.g. plowing a rice field or pulling a cart) but for food. In the south of Thailand, native bulls have been trained to fight for public sport and gambling. With one great

bull pitted against another, Thai bullfighting involves no matador, picador, or horse and is not fought to kill or intentionally maim but to prove power and spirit. This article will provide a look at aspects of the phenomenon as they relate to history, geography, politics, culture, economy, and self-identity of the people in Southern Thailand.

Nowadays bullfighting is popular in this region while declining in other regions. Strategically located in the Malay Peninsula, cities and provinces in Southern Thailand have historically been ports and transit destinations for marine trade. Bullfighting was and is an entertainment of rowdy spectacle and a venue for gambling by both locals and visitors. Bullfighting can be a display of political power. Owners of bullfighting arenas may have direct or indirect connection with politicians at both local and national levels. Through association with local fighting venues, a politician can bolster his celebrity with and the legitimacy of his agenda with rural populations. Such loyalty and support from local groups have helped sustain a healthy interest in the industry of bullfighting from generation to generation.

Recent research conducted by Assistant Professor Rong Boonsuaykwan of Walailak University, reported a total number of 28 legal and 32 illegal bullfighting arenas in Southern Thailand. Dr. Boonsuaykwan estimates that there could be the same number for smaller illegal ad hoc arenas. Twelve of the legally registered arenas are located in Songkla province; and seven in Nakhon Si Thammarat province. The popularity of bullfighting in these provinces has both direct and indirect effects on local economies. Money changes hands not only through betting and arena entry fees, but through ancillary services. During fight days people may pay to park and stalls sell food, drink, and souvenirs. A visitor sees sweet green grass sold from the back of small pickup trucks. Equipment such as ground anchors and other tools related to handling of the animals are also hawked. Hence, bullfighting days in these small rural communities are festive occasions with a market springing up just outside of the arena.

Bulls for bullfighting are a carefully tended native species. Breeders of champions typically mate a prize bull with several cows then select the best young bull from those breed-

ings. The criteria for choosing young bulls include general powerful physique, nicely arcing horns, strong tail, solid hooves, alert ears and eyes, strong teeth, pleasant skin color, and a loud growling voice. At 10,000 to 100,000 Baht (about \$320 to \$3,200), the value of such a two to three year old bull is at least two times the cost of domestic cattle. On rare occasion, a fighting bull might be plucked from domestic cattle. Debut fights occur at an age of four to six years. Some healthier bulls might be able to fight a few years longer than the average eight or nine year career. Once a bull wins a match or two, its price shoots up. For a bull with good bloodlines, the price could go up to one million Baht (about \$32,000).

With this sort of initial financial outlay and potential payoff, it is not surprising to see owners taking good care of their investments. Raising a young bull to be a top performer is a local science. At times an owner will hire a trainer for his animal. During training, the main food for the youngster is a grass rich in nutrients and doled out in a measured way. The animal is fed two or three times a day, given adequate fresh water, and a handful of

sea salt every 15 days. Supplemental food is also essential. The young bull is treated to boiled green bean with crystalline sugar, bananas, juice from young coconuts, jackfruit, eggs, and other types of fruits. 10 to 15 eggs mixed with black beer is a special treat. Just as food is well considered, so is shelter. Stalls must be of sufficient size, well ventilated, and cleaned daily. Owners either maintain slow smoky fires near stalls or use fine netting to protect their bull from mosquitoes, gnats, and fruit flies.

About a month before fight day during which multiple pairs of bulls will clash throughout the day, animals are ferried to the arena by small pickup truck for a matchmaking of pugilists. Two weeks or so before this pairing event, owners and trainers restrict the quantity of food and water fed to the bulls so the animals appear weaker than potential opponents. Hence on these matching days, bulls lounge spiritless and physically attenuated. While there is no specific system for the matching, an agent of the arena owner will consider body size, height, age, fighting counts, and horn shape. If owners of two bulls agree to a match, a contract is signed.

Bull owners must deposit up to 30% of the net betting with the arena manager. This can run anywhere from 20,000 to 5,000,000 Baht (about \$640 to \$162,000). If one of the bull's owners does not have adequate funds to "see the bet" of an opponent, they may still agree to the sum with backing from relatives and fellows from their home villages. Sometimes more than twenty supporters will pool resources to cover the wager. One can expect them all to show up at the arena on fight day. When owners cannot meet the bet proposed by an opponent, the arena manager may step in with possible options. The manager might subsidize costs of transporting a bull to the venue or search for supporters from other areas to subsidize any shortfall. Generally both arena managers and bull owners enjoy high caliber support. As suggested earlier, there are several Southern Thailand arena manager and owners who are politicians at both local and national levels. The ideal Thai leader is a respected person whose word is a trusted guarantee. Once matches for future fights are made, owners and trainers put their best efforts into training and preparing their bulls for the event. The kitchen is open again.



The traditional pre-fight regime becomes the daily hour-to-hour routine for the fighters:

- 06.00 Walking and running five to ten kilometers.
- 08.00 Bathing, soaping, brushing, and combing the bull's hide.
- 09.00 Consuming grass and water.
- 10.00 Sunbathing (a training technique that helps the bull to be more patient).
- 12.00 Relaxing and consuming grass and water.
- 16.00 Walking, digging horns into the ground, and visiting the arena.\*
- 18.00 Bathing, soaping, turmeric scrubbing, brushing and combing, feeding grass, keeping the bull in warm shelter, and protecting the bull from mosquitoes and other insects.
- 20.00 Providing supplementary feed at times mixed with stout.
- 20.30 Sleeping.

\* Typically someone bringing in a bull from outside of the immediate village will rent a stall near the bullfight arena. Preferring to be fined for his deposit rather than lose his bet or his bull, an owner might decide to cancel a fight if his bull is unfamiliar with the fighting arena.

Just like their charges, many bull trainers stay fit, trim, and tan for raising these animals gives

ample opportunity for exercise and time in the sun. During pre-fight periods trainers are wary of strangers being near their bulls. They fear someone may poison their animals since betting on the sport is very much a part of the sport. Owners or trainers often live and sleep in the same shelter as the bull. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, their lives are dedicated to the care of their bulls. They are passionate about and committed to their animals.

The bull's horns are scrubbed with honey and purgative made of aloe latex. This process turns horns an oily black. The points are sharpened with sandpaper. Some owners and trainers also observe folk rituals that one might consider outright superstition. For example a number hold that using a mixture of eel's blood and steamed rice to scrub the bull's horns can lend a sort of "poison dart" effect to the fighter's points since it is believed that an eel has no fighting spirit. Another bull pricked by these horns will lose its desire for combat. Some do not allow Buddhist monks to approach their bulls. They believe that bulls could be blessed with mercy and consequently unable to win a match.

Most owners pray and pay homage to the spirits of their hometowns for luck, protection, and strength for their bulls. Since these local spirits hold no power outside of their home geographic area, upon arriving at the arena on the day of the fights owners often pay homage to or bribe local spirits to protect their bulls. Such quid pro quo appeals can be seen as trees wrapped with red cloth, flowers, candles, and joss sticks.

Most bullfighting arenas in Southern Thailand schedule bullfighting once a month for two to three days with a few rounds per day and two or three matches per round depending on the number of paired bulls. A drummer gives a sign for bullfighting to start. It is an exciting time. This is the proving ground that each of the bull owners has worked toward, hoped for. Bullfighting is a rough and raw game of true and violent competition. Both bulls with nose leads are put into a ring -- a rounded fighting field with wooden fence of 1.5 - 2 meters high. About five to ten backers from each side are allowed inside the ring as the match begins. The arena is quickly and fully occupied with 2,000-5,000 spectators. Entry fee is 100-300 Bat (\$3 to \$9) per round

with cost based on opening or featured fights and on the fame of the paired bulls. Foreigners are often allowed to enter free of charge.

The arena's master of ceremony gives another drumming signal that indicates its time for owners to clean their bulls prior to a final check by referees. The animals will have face, neck, and the bases of horns and ears cleaned and inspected. The bull owner will ask his entourage to observe the referees' work to ensure that it will be a fair fight. For a high value match -- betting over one million Baht (over \$31,000) -- washing water for bulls usually comes from the same source provided by the referees. Handlers then use sand from the floor of the ring to scrub both the bulls' horns. In a final preparatory step a ripe banana is crushed and smeared on the bull's face, ears, horn bases, and neck to conceal the smell of the animal. The intent here is to protect younger bulls from betraying potential fear of an older more experience rival. The slick banana can also act like a human boxer's Vaseline reducing the friction and abrasion of butting heads.

Bullfighting starts at the drummer's third signal. Owners release rope from the bulls' nose

freeing the animals to begin their attacks. The bulls' owners with some of their entourages remain encouraging their bulls. Both sides shout, signal, and exhort their bulls to press the fight. Loud voices from the stands add to the din of the spectacle. Gambling and negotiation are rife. This is sport within the sport. While some hold papers for bets, others shout them on the fly to bookies in the stadium. Betting numbers have different meaning for different areas of the arena. A ten in general public seating means ten hundred --1,000 Baht (\$9). This same number for audiences seated in the VIP area refers to 100,000 Baht (about \$3,000). If one of the bulls feels exhausted, turns tail, and runs away, a drummer signals the beginning of timing paced by a coconut shell floating in a tube-shaped glass container. If the retreating bull turns back ready to return to the fight before the coconut shell sinks to the bottom of the tube, the second round is started. At this point, betting odds have changed with the retreating bull becoming more of a long shot. Trainers of the two bulls encourage their animals into another round of fighting. Voices grow louder as all eyes focus on the two combatants. If the same bull again retreats, he has lost the

match. If one of the bulls falls and cannot get up to fight again, the opposing bull can claim victory. Sometimes one of the owners throws a white cloth into the fighting field indicating he does not want his bull to continue fighting. Such a decision to surrender is made in order to save the bull's life or to hold off its retirement for a few years. Blood is lost and injury sustained by both animals. This is the primal Darwinian combat of nature and indeed of business. The bull will live to procreate. The owner will prosper.

Unsurprisingly many feel uncomfortable with this spectacle and have concern that it is blood sport of needless brutality. Others counter with the argument that it is a dance choreographed at a genetic level and a part of rural Thai culture. Some would argue that bullfighting represents people in Southern Thailand. For owners and trainers these bulls are their lives -- the things they love dearly. They are passionate for their animals.



*ROOM AND BOARD*



























## *TESTING FOR AGGRESSION*

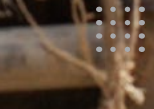








ผลิตภัณฑ์จากธรรมชาติ  
เพื่อสุขภาพที่ดีและปลอดภัย  
สำหรับทุกคน  
**จัมบาลแมลง**  
Mudang  
**Jambal**  
insect  
ผลิตภัณฑ์จากแมลงเพื่อสุขภาพที่ดีและปลอดภัย















## *PAIRING THE BULLS*



























*FIGHT DAY*







## *THE FIGHT*







































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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE PROVINCE OF NAKHON SI THAMMARAT, 2013



Tending to an infant in living area attached to a bull stall rented near the fighting ring.



Bull tethered in the sun in corral adjoining its stall.



Feeding sweet green grass to a fighting bull.



Bull adorned with talismanic necklace.



Dodging the heat, family of bull owner sits in the shade of a platform attached to stall.



Boy lounges on motorbike parked between a series of rented bull stalls near the ring.



Bull owner in town prior to bullfights and renting one of the stalls near the ring.



Owner's hand stroking bull's head.



Flip-flops modified for wear by a prize fighting bull.



Placing protection on the hooves of a prize fighting bull.



Resident caretaker posed with sunning prize bull.



Sheathing a bull's horns prior to a round of timed sparring to assure adequate aggression.



Entrance to the bull ring.



Bull's handler scurries clear of the tethered sparring animals.



Each bull is on a tethered nose ring in this controlled test of aggression and fighting spirit.



Animals colliding violently during a restrained sparring session.



Bullring agent entering contract information for owners of bulls matched for competition.



Prior to fight day, people and bulls begin to gather for the combatant pairing event.



Side by side comparison of potential opponents.



Man gently scratches ear of his fighting bull.



Men milling about viewing the many bulls present for matching up for future fights.



Bull goring the ground in show of power and aggression.



Vendor tables set up prior to beginning of the day's bullfights.



Young men pressing against fence of bullring for a view of the fight about to begin.



Fresh and strong in early stages of combat, the bulls lock horns.



Immediately prior to fight, a team ready to wash horns stands attentive to ring supervisor.



Positioning animal at edge of ring for wash and preparation of head.



Removing protective sheath from the bull's sharpened horns.



Washing horns moments prior to combat.





Smearing banana over bull's head to mask scent and slicken contact surfaces.



The ring with fight in full swing: clashing bulls, support teams, spectators, and bookies.



Wrestling for superiority the two animals plow each other to the ground.



The victorious animal drives off the defeated bull.



Spectator at ringside rips his program sheet.



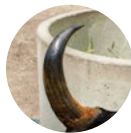
With the first session of fights completed, the crowd exits the ring at a break in the action.



Men converse and enjoy an iced confection following the first set of fights.



June 10, 2013 program listing of bullring matches.





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