

Sports



BANGKOK: This photo taken on November 13, 2021 shows Iranian Muay Thai boxer Keivan Soleimani (left) competing with Chinese opponent Yan Chaohong at Lumpinee Stadium in Bangkok. — AFP



This photo taken on November 13, 2021 shows Muay Thai boxer Kullanat Omok (left), fight name Nongnuk Rongriankilakorat, competing with Australian opponent Celest Hansen at Lumpinee Stadium in Bangkok.

# Revolution at the home of Thai boxing after COVID

## Lumpinee Stadium welcomes fans in January, with precautions

BANGKOK: Out with the gamblers and harsh neon lights, in with female fighters and fancy lasers — after a 20-month coronavirus break, Thai kickboxing's spiritual home is embarking on a revolution. On fight days before the pandemic, thousands of passionate fans would pack Bangkok's Lumpinee Stadium — the symbolic heart of the ancient, brutal art of Muay Thai. It was not just admiration for the fighters' skill that drew the crowds: on big days more than a million dollars could change hands in bets, in a country where gambling is largely illegal.

Then in March 2020 everything came to a halt as Thailand's first COVID-19 outbreak was traced back to the stadium, which was immediately closed. But rather than throw in the towel, the stadium owners — the Royal Thai Army — say they have bounced back off the canvas to turn the enforced break into an opportunity. Major General Ronnawut Ruangsawat, deputy chief of the stadium, said that the grand old arena was "taking advantage of the pandemic to revolutionize itself". "The arena has been completely renovated, betting is now prohibited and women are allowed to fight," he said.

### 'Clean up the sport'

Gone are the harsh neon lights that once bathed the ring in an unforgiving white glare, and on Saturday

fighter Sithichoke Kaewsanga stepped into the ring under a shower of ultra-modern red and silver lasers.

Behind him, giant state-of-the-art screens previewed the bout with pictures of the 21-year-old and details of his record. The stands were empty of fans and much had changed, but the hooks, jabs and knee strikes were the same, as was the backdrop of traditional Thai music played by a live band.



### Women fighters compete for first time

Lumpinee will welcome fans back in January, albeit with a greatly reduced capacity and strict virus-prevention rules such as testing and social distancing. And betting will be off the cards because the army decided it "led to too much cheating with players sometimes being paid to lose the fight", Ronnawut said. "We want to clean up the sport and we hope that other venues in Thailand will follow."

But industry professionals are skeptical the army's good intentions will succeed. "They will continue to bet online — gambling is part of the Muay Thai DNA," Jade Sirisompan of the World Muay Thai Organization, one of the main international federations, warned. "Many gamblers, among them many gym owners, make a living from it and can pocket thousands of dollars on a good day. They are not going to give it up."

### Taboo-smashing bout

No less revolutionary is the decision to allow female fighters to take part in bouts at Lumpinee's main arena. For years, women — including fans — were banned from even touching the ring because of a superstition that their menstruating bodies might break the magic protecting it. Other Muay Thai venues have accepted female fighters for some time, but Lumpinee — the sport's equivalent of Lord's in cricket or football's Wembley — held out. After a low-profile bout in a backroom in September, Saturday saw two women compete in the main ring for the first time. After beating Australia's Celest Muriel Hansen, 21-year-old Thai fighter Kullanat Omok said: "We are so proud to have been the first women to fight here. We've been fighting for more equality for years."

Wiping blood from her head, the 27-year-old Hansen added: "We have come such a very long way.

This was so much more than just a fight." For Kullanat, getting back in the ring to earn money after the long break was just as important. "I hadn't fought in almost a year. I used to earn a hundred dollars a match, then nothing for months to support my family," Kullanat said.

### 'Lost its soul'

Deprived of bouts because of the pandemic, thousands of professional boxers — men and the much smaller number of women fighters — returned to their villages. After so long away from the gruelling daily training regime the sport demands, many will never make it back to the same level and the government has offered no financial support.

Many fighters found themselves with no choice but to take side jobs. Sithichoke became a rider for a delivery service. His five-round victory in Saturday's bout earned him less than \$1,000. Before the pandemic he could earn triple that. "It was really strange to fight in an empty arena. It's not easy without the energy of the crowd," he said. And perhaps inevitably for a venue seen as a bastion of tradition, the changes have not gone down well with everyone. "We don't recognize anything. The Muay Thai temple has become a big showroom," lamented Jade Sirisompan after watching a broadcast of the matches. — AFP

## DeRozan runs riot as Bulls torment Lakers

LOS ANGELES: DeMar DeRozan erupted for 38 points as the Chicago Bulls scored an emphatic road victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Monday. DeRozan was the tormentor-in-chief of a Lakers team who saw Anthony Davis ejected for only the second time in his career as the 2020 NBA champions slumped to a 121-103 loss. Barring two fleeting moments early in the first quarter, the Bulls led throughout, at one stage surging into a 28-point lead at the Staples Center. DeRozan found support from former Lakers player Lonzo Ball, who weighed in with 27 points while Zach Lavine added 26 points.

Talen Horton-Tucker led the Lakers scoring with 28 points while Russell Westbrook had 25 points. Davis finished with 20 points before being tossed late in the third quarter after remonstrating angrily with officials for restarting the game as he attempted to put a shoe on. The Chicago win leaves the Bulls in second place in the Eastern Conference standings with a 10-4 record. The loss dropped the Lakers to 8-7, just outside the playoff places in the Western Conference.

In Dallas, Kristaps Porzingis and Luka Doncic combined for 52 points as the Mavericks overturned a 13-

point third quarter deficit to defeat the Denver Nuggets 111-101 at the American Airlines Center. Porzingis finished with 29 points and Doncic added 23 points while laying on 11 assists in a see-saw contest which saw the lead change hands no fewer than 13 times. Reigning NBA MVP Nikola Jokic led the Denver scorers with 35 points, with Monte Morris adding 17. After trailing for all of the third quarter, the Mavs came roaring back in the fourth period, outscoring Denver 32-18 to close out the win.

There was a scare for the Mavs in the final second however as Slovenian star Doncic limped off injured in the final minute after appearing to twist his left ankle. Porzingis later told reporters Doncic appeared to be in good spirits in the locker room. "He's always just, 'Hey, I'll be good. I'll be good.' Hopefully he is good," Porzingis said. "I don't think we know yet what it is, but we're hoping he's healthy and he'll be back soon in a little bit of time." In Minneapolis, the Phoenix Suns stretched their winning streak to nine games with a 99-96 victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves. A late burst by Phoenix veteran Chris Paul helped the Suns over the line while Devin Booker led the scoring with 29 points. Paul finished with 21 points — 19 of them coming in the fourth quarter — while Deandre Ayton added 22.

Karl Anthony-Towns led Minnesota's scorers with 35 points and 13 rebounds. The Timberwolves might have snatched victory in the final few seconds, but D'Angelo Russell's three-point attempt bounced off the backboard and the Suns held on. Suns head coach Monty Williams believes the win is yet more evidence that his team — who reached last season's NBA Finals — is rapidly maturing as a unit.



LOS ANGELES: DeMar DeRozan #11 of the Chicago Bulls shoots the ball during the game against the Los Angeles Lakers on Monday at STAPLES Center in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

"When I first came, we were the youngest team in the league and a lot of those close games didn't always go our way because of inexperience or calls or whatever," Williams said. "When you have a young team they really don't know what to stay. But when you've got a veteran squad, there's a communication back and forth with the staff that's pretty substantial."

In Washington meanwhile, the Wizards overturned a 19-point deficit before scoring a 105-100 win against the New Orleans Pelicans. The Wizards' fifth straight win saw them improve to 10-3 to lead the Eastern Conference standings. Spencer Dinwiddie had 27 points with nine assists while Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 18 points. — AFP

# Classifieds

## Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Kaifan	24849807
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Shamiya	24848913
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shuwaikh	24814507
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Chest Hospital	24849400	Nuzha	22526804
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Adan Hospital	23940620	Qadsiya	22515088
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300		Dasmah
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000		22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9		22531908
			22518752
			22459381
			22451082
			22456536
			22465401
			25746401

### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
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