

Interview with Natalie Fuz

Contributed by Sylvie von Duuglas-Ittu
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I arrive at Five Points Academy a few minutes early for my interview with Kru Natalie Fuz. After announcing myself at the front, I sit on a bench and have a semi-obscured view of Kru Natalie wrapping up a personal training session with an older man. She helps him off with his gloves and wraps, wipes his face with a hand-towel, and then fans him with it, in long, vertical sweeps about a foot from his expressively fatigued face.

As I watch her in this gesture, I wonder if I would find it as charming in a male trainer. I question my own gender biases, pondering if this kind of physical contact, though certainly not affectionate, is demonstrative of a level of care that feels intimate in a particularly female way.

She coaches him in push-ups, which I can't see him perform from behind a knee-high wall, so I concentrate on Kru Natalie, who is so focused on her client I am a little surprised when she looks up and acknowledges me. I smile and wave, hoping she'll know who I am and understand that I'm happy to see her in her element, rather than trying to rush her toward our appointment. She understands, continues winding down her personal training session. Her client stands and I see that he has impressive muscle definition in his arms — hard earned, I have witnessed — and a kind of confidence in his body that is not overt, but distinct: the confidence that divides trained and untrained.

Once her client has headed off to the locker rooms, Kru Natalie approaches me and gives me an enthusiastic smile and an equal handshake. She invites me back to a studio in the rear of the gym, where she perches on a medicine ball and pulls out a tall noodle-soup, asking me where I train and for how long. She strikes me as a very steady woman and her questions feel to me like a means — if unconscious even — of gauging me, figuring out my levels. Levels of what, I'm not entirely sure — intelligence, honesty, experience — but it doesn't feel like a test; more like tapping gloves.

I set up my recorder and take my turn at posing questions. I wrote four pages of questions and only asked the first one as a direct inquiry. All else was covered in the steady progress of discussion during our time together. One can tell a lot about a person by how s/he answers questions; more so even than what they answer. Kru Natalie answers with a thoughtful and casual honesty that encourages the succession of questions to be equally considerate.

I read an interview with Kru Natalie in which she had said she'd always been interested in martial arts as a kid, but did not state whether or not she'd studied any. When I ask her if Muay Thai was her first martial art, her answer sets our path for the rest of our conversation: Kru Nat: Muay Thai was not my first martial art. I did karate and a little bit of Judo back in the day. When I had said that martial arts was an interest of mine since I was very little it actually really was, but my mother who is very gender-oriented didn't think it was a girl's sport so I was not allowed to practice.

I ask if she had to wait until she was out of her mother's care before she was able to practice any traditionally male sports. Kru Nat: Way past that. But my father — my parents were divorced since I was a little kid — my father was a Karate black-belt actually, a Judo brown-belt, so when I was on vacation with him the first thing I would do is put my Gi on and I would live in my Gi for the time of the vacation. And then I would practice stuff with my dad, so my dad was okay with it. My mother, no way; she just wouldn't have it. So I did a lot of sports as a kid, but I wasn't allowed to do martial arts. So when I was a teenager I tried Thai boxing actually, in France, back home. I didn't really get into it because I was so into Karate at the time. I was obsessed with it, so I really didn't pay attention. It was fun but nothing else. And it wasn't until fifteen years later that I discovered Muay Thai, here, after I moved back to New York, and that's maybe 12 years ago or 13 years ago. And, the first time I tried it here I fell in love with it. I took a general class with Steve actually, and I felt — I really want to do that. I talked to Simon and said — I want to train private with you, one on one — because I knew I just wanted to do it right, to get into it right away. So I didn't even want to bother with classes. And so that's it, I've been doing it since.

There's a kind of quiet in the way Kru Nat relays these facts. She does not sound condescending to or vindictive of her mother, or even pretend that her gender-oriented bias that kept her daughter from her interests is "old fashioned." She does not excuse her mother, but I don't feel that there is any question of whether forgiveness is in order. Maybe this is an American concept: the wounded child finding solace in adulthood by confronting and "processing" childhood trauma. Rather, Kru Nat draws a direct line between her forbidden passion as a child and her fulfilled passion as an adult. The question for her is not how she was stuck, but how she got out, how she made it here. She hints at no inhibitions when she began at Five Points; instead, she was confident and focused and knew how she wanted to learn — one on one.

I find similarities in her story and mine. My mother is not really gender-oriented, but my family is almost entirely men. Growing up with three older brothers, I was expected to be able to keep up, but discouraged from blurring the line between me and "one of the guys." I was, and am, expected to be feminine, but never in a noticeable way — like, not wanting to watch football on Thanksgiving, unless it's to help Mom in the kitchen. When I came to Muay Thai, I began almost immediately with private sessions because that method felt right and I'm pretty sure this practice both feeds and comes out of obsession.

But Kru Nat is talking about 12-13 years ago. We're not living in a gender-equality paradise now, but Kru Nat was coming to this sport without ready names of female Muay Thai fighters. It is not uncommon to be the only woman in a gym, even now, and even more unlikely that more than a few women at any gym will be very serious about the sport of Muay Thai. But women now can look at Germaine de Randamie, Julie Kitchen, Angie Rivera Parr, Gina Carano and the other girls of Fight Girls, and Kris Cyborg. Back in Kru Nat's day there were (and still are) numerous women fighting in Holland and England, but they weren't (and often still aren't) really known in the US. Funny thing, too: Kru Nat has fought Kitchen three times and knows Carano personally, from training with Master Toddy and was actually at Carano's first MT fight. Natalie Fuz is right there on the list of women of Muay Thai who have opened doors — or kicked them down, anyway.

When she first began Muay Thai, she just walks in to Five Points, takes a class, and then tells the trainers she wants to learn one-on-one; and when she's there at the gym training there are very few women — and almost none who were there for the sport — and she's just going for herself, because it wasn't even in her mind to compete. She says it was all guys sparring there at the time, and I get this automatic reaction in my body that feels like something between frustration and excitement. For a while I was myself sparring only with men — always significantly larger than I — and I had to keep telling them that it's better for me if they don't tap me, to please just hit me harder so that I can respond and get some semblance of that pressure and rage one gets in a fight. Without expressing any of this aloud, Kru Nat relays that she experienced the exact opposite, which she attributes to her size: Kru Nat: [Being a bigger woman… what I found is [that it's] different when guys spar with smaller girls vs. women that are their size or closer to their size. They get very threatened. God forbid you should have better moves or you should be in general better than them. This whole ego thing starts happening and they start hitting really hard. But with smaller girls they are much more cautious, that I notice right away. When smaller girls started coming around there was a different approach, they were careful not to hurt them, while with me they didn't really [punching her own hand]…you know, full on. That's the only thing, I thought ‘hmm, that's kinda bizarre’, I said to myself ‘But I can take it, it's good for me, it's not going to get any worse than that’. You know, a 160 or a 180 lb guy is hitting me really hard, when I get in the ring with somebody my size, a woman, it's not going to feel like anything.

The male vs. female sparring response is far more complex than just a size issue. What isn't taken into account by size alone is that the size-aesthetic of women who practice Muay Thai directly affects the hetero-male dominance factor of training Muay Thai in gyms. Women training today have an aesthetic difficulty in that the "hot female Muay Thai" practitioner has become the dominant image for American audiences. The female fighter is meant to be physically feminine and attractive to the hetero-male eye; her body is not judged by its ability to perform Muay Thai, but her ability to look good doing it. The recent MMA bout between Brazilian contender Kris Cyborg and American icon Gina Carano is a lucid example of this disparity. Both women are — simply put — big, fighting in the 140+ lbs weight class. Cyborg came out looking incredibly built, with bulging muscles and a strong, square jaw; hair braided in corn-rows and an aesthetic that generally expressed strength. Carano came out looking like she works out — toned rather than built — with curves and areas of softness, a heart-shaped face framed by pig-tails and an aesthetic that made me think she looked "cute." (That said I still wouldn't get in the ring with her.) Thing is, both women entered the ring wearing makeup — lipstick on Cyborg, mascara on both. The fight was brutal and Cyborg dominated the whole thing, but I don't know that if it had been reversed that Gina would be called a "beast" in the way that Cyborg often is.

Kru Nat does not groom herself to a heterosexual aesthetic. She's unmistakably strong and clearly puts work into her physique, but it's one of usefulness — taking care of her body so it takes care of her in the ring — rather than one that is sexualized by a heterosexual male gaze. I'm not offering that Carano does not train "right" or that she's in any way wrong for her image; but I do suggest that if you put Cyborg, Kru Nat, and Carano in a ring with a group of guys for sparring, Carano would be hit the lightest, whether this is conscious or not.

Kru Nat is not unaware of the "hot girl" image of current female Muay Thai fighters. She sees the difficulty in it, the unfortunate obstacle it presents, and acknowledges that she has not personally felt pressured by it. But she's not prepared to absolve sexualized women from all responsibility. I asked her how she regards this problem in the story of female Muay Thai: Kru Nat: It's not going to be [easy] right away because it's still a male dominated sport, and running into that whole spinning the sexy thing drives me absolutely crazy… I was really

outraged the way we're not taken seriously as athletes sometimes, and it's still going on. I was just thinking, like, Gina is a perfect example; I know Gina personally. I saw her first fight in Vegas, when she first started I was training with her; it's just like, you know, just so disturbing. Or even Julie [Kitchen], I totally respect her, but you know, [;] we can blame the men for doing that to us, but you also have to take responsibilities. Then they make a choice to be presented that way, you know, and there are repercussions, it's not just about you, it's about also all the other women around. I didn't get that, not being put in that bag. Because of who I am I think it's a little easier, you know. I don't fit the profile: young with long hair and make-up and all that. And my sexual orientation is different, I think that is a huge part of it. My approach is a bit different because, I'm just so tired of it, the fact that that comes first before a woman is a frickin' great athlete – being a sexy girl. There's nothing wrong with it, but like, where are you drawing the line?

[Part II tells the story of how Kru Natalie came to Muay Thai. We touch on the difficulties in becoming a female Muay Thai fighter in the US and the differences between amateur and professional in this country.]

Kru Natalie is perched atop a silver exercise ball, stealing bites of noodle soup between paced, considered strands of thought. At times she raises the cup to her mouth in a gesture of taking another bite, but lowers it again immediately, placing the cup on the floor, as if the object in her hand hinders her speech as much as the food in her mouth would. A practiced gesticulator, Kru Nat doesn't speak with her hands full.

This up and down motion comes to illustrate Kru Nat's experience in entering the ring. As a female competitor in New York 10 years ago the options and opportunities for female fighters on Muay Thai cards was incredibly limited. (In fact, her first opponent was not even experienced in Muay Thai, but was a trained Western Boxer.) Her path into fighting was marked by these spikes in excitement and preparation, followed by the ebb and disappointment of cancellations.

I ask her about her experience getting into fighting:

Kru Nat: The first fight, the girl canceled before we were supposed to fight. It was less than a year since I started my training – I started June '98, and that was April '99. The girl canceled at the last minute, so I did an exhibition match with Emily Bearden, who is a colleague of mine and is much smaller; she had just gotten into Muay Thai.

So that was fun, but I was kinda disappointed; definitely. We tried again in August, I was supposed to fight somebody, again canceled. I was, like 'okay, this is not good,' and then finally November '99, that was my first fight.

In the great big city of New York, where anything seems possible, it is still challenging for female fighters to find Muay Thai bouts. The organization, preparation and execution of sanctioned and unsanctioned fights are still marked by limited opponents and frequent cancellations. Muay Thai cards very rarely feature more than one female bout in any given event and the odds that one fighter will cancel remains high. For many women, offers to appear on Muay Thai cards are sometimes empty gestures at the possibility of finding an opponent, rather than a likely outcome. Kru Natalie fought 20 amateur bouts and has, to date, fewer than a half-dozen at the professional level. Often times for female fighters in the US, going pro means even fewer fight opportunities.

This 'American Pro Freeze', for instance, is illustrated by the bifurcated paths of two fighters: Sylvie Charbonneau and Amy Davis. Both women fight in the lowest weight class offered in the US, which is variably listed as under 107 lbs, which may help account for the difficulty in finding fights. (I too fight at this weight and have experienced great difficulty in finding opponents.) But the story goes like this: both women hail from North America and they fought one another very early in their careers; both went on to fight professionally. Charbonneau moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand and Davis is in Idaho Falls, Idaho. Both are top-ranked fighters in the WIKBA rankings of 2009. However, Charbonneau has had just under 50 professional fights (in 2.5 years), whereas Davis' has had 3 professional fights (having gone pro in 2008).

There is an obvious disparity here in that Muay Thai is the national sport of Thailand and fights are held every day; furthermore, there are more female fighters at this weight in Thailand than in the US, and fighting in either country is thought of very differently: in Thailand a fighter has opportunity and is encouraged to fight several times per month, as fighting is not a huge production but a fact of doing Muay Thai; in the US opportunity is less and our attitude toward fights is that they are big productions for which one trains exclusively, causing each event to be infrequent and a treat of doing Muay Thai. On Charbonneau's Facebook, she comments that she loves fights because it means she gets the day off from training. She is able to fight several times per month because she is always training for a fight; in this country one must have advance notice of a fight in order to train toward this particular fight, so one ends up going up and down in training, peaking and resting at extremes.

It's interesting to me that the US criticizes the now-just-changing attitude held in Thailand that women must not

enter the Muay Thai ring because it was considered bad luck – and it’s a valid criticism. However, for a country that holds itself as having a better attitude toward women fighting Muay Thai, there does not seem to be more or even better opportunities for women to do so here in the US.

I ask Kru Nat about her transition from amateur to professional, if she experienced any unexpected changes from one to the other, or if the only difference is that one has a purse and the other doesn’t. She smiles and says, “yup, that’s it right there.”

Kru Natalie doesn’t see a meaningful difference between amateur and professional, at least in the US. She advocates for the adoption of a class system, which is used in Europe, which basically orders fighters in class A, B, or C according to experience, rather than capital-gains standing.

I ask her about her own movement into professional fighting:

Kru Nat: [In the US] anyone can turn pro whenever they want; after their first fight they can turn pro. What does that mean? Nothing. I had 20 amateur fights before I turned pro – for a reason. Because I knew that if I turned pro I couldn’t fight any of the amateur girls: that was it for me. There’s no turning back. So I thought to myself that I want to fight every woman I can possibly fight because already the options are so little for my generation. Now it’s much better, even at my weight class. But my weight class, at the time, was very difficult, so I wanted to capitalize as much as I could – and I did. It was a strategy for me, it was my strategy, I made my choices. I had a very clear vision. So I did exhaust the list – I had a list of women I wanted to fight, I went through my list – and when the list was done, though it was not completed, not because I didn’t try, but because they didn’t want to do it, or it didn’t happen and I’m not going to wait around for years for one match to happen – I moved on to pro. The difference is: I fight, I get paid. Is it a lot of money? Forget it. You still need to have a fulltime job, trust me. It’s ridiculous.

As Kru Natalie explains it, it’s pretty clear that professional Muay Thai fighters – in this country – don’t do it for the money; it’s simply not lucrative enough. This is significantly different from Thailand, where children begin fighting at an early age and are often the providers for their families through Muay Thai fighting. In this context, it makes sense to fight professionally as soon as possible. But Kru Nat is quick to explain that Muay Thai is not a mainstream sport in the US and is therefore not going to result in the kind of money that Football, Basketball, Baseball, or even Western Boxing athletes can earn. Yet Kru Nat is not advocating for the mainstream popularity of Muay Thai; she doesn’t want it to be mainstream. She feels that the sport is a “big enough niche that there’s a ton of possibilities… a ton of growth possibilities, but… it’s never going to be a mainstream sport in the US; most sports are not.”

But her feeling that going pro in Muay Thai in the US is negligible does not keep her from noting strong opinions on the unequal pay to male and female fighters, as the subject arose in our conversation:

Kru Nat: Because we are women, they think it’s okay [to pay us less], because that’s the way of the world, but that doesn’t mean that we should be complacent about it, or just accept it. For me I need to push that glass ceiling up all the time, in everything I do. And now as a Kru going into the business and building my own team, it’s going to be men and women. Lots of women because I know what every woman talks about, why having a female trainer is just more bearable because we understand each other; we are not a different species.

For women fighting Muay Thai in the US, there are usually a lot of plates spinning at once. Kru Natalie is co-owner of a number of clothing boutiques in NYC and maintains this business while pursuing her Muay Thai. Returning to the issue of finding fights and her early experiences with Muay Thai since she began her training and then decided to enter into fighting, she told me about how the difficulties lead her into teaching.

Kru Nat: It was like pulling teeth trying to get a fight, and getting put on the card. And whenever I had the opportunity, I kinda got discouraged because after a year and half I had more cancellations than fights; it was kind of a joke – it became a joke – I had to make humor out of it because, it really sucked. I had a fulltime job. I had three stores in New York; it’s hard. It’s more than a fulltime job, and then I had to make time for training, and the fight gets canceled. I mean it happened to everybody, and yes, you get better and better every time, because training, no matter what you’re going to feel the benefits of that, that’s great. But every time to be canceled on, it was like ‘Why am I doing this?’ you know, what’s the point? There wasn’t money in it because I wasn’t making any money, which is good, I think, but after a while it was like ‘okay, I really need to rethink that’.

So that is kind of why I decided to become a teacher, because after a year and a half of that, [I thought] ‘No, I don’t have time for this’. [But] ‘I love Muay Thai’…I know there’s a calling here, so that lead to teaching, I was really curious about it. I went with Master Toddy in Vegas to get my certification, and then I

found out about all those female Muay Thai fighters in England or in Europe before my generation, that were really ground breaking, but there was nowhere to find out about it.

So, in the US that feeling of being kind of a pioneer, it's true. At the same time, I think because of that I really need to do something to catch it on. I need to help upcoming women to not experience the same thing I experienced, to make it better.

When she first began her training in Muay Thai, Kru Natalie didn't want to fight. Her background in Karate, Judo, and a great many other sports had equipped her with competitive experience, but she wasn't interested in that aspect of Muay Thai. This training was for her and she just wanted to have fun – something that she felt competition squelched, rather than quenched.

But when she tried Muay Thai in New York, she knew right away that she wanted to stick with it. I know what this feels like, because I knew straight away that Muay Thai had fed something in me that I didn't know needed nutrients, and it only got stronger. I ask her what it was about Muay Thai that grabbed her I wanted to know what it was about Muay Thai that captured her heart:

Sylvie: And so the movements in your body just clicked in a certain way, or the aesthetic of it… what was it that really caught you when you first started doing it?

Kru Nat: Well, I thought it was very practical, which Karate is not. I always felt that [with] Karate I couldn't really do anything with it until I was a black-belt basically –

Sylvie: – Because of the katas and stuff like that…

Kru Nat: Yeah, it's just that I loved Karate but after a while it's just like uhhh, you know, it's not going to get me anywhere;, and I don't know if I want to dedicate myself to get to the black-belt level. I just wasn't in love with it as much [as I came to be] with Muay Thai, so I didn't pursue it the same way. When I came back to New York I knew I didn't want to do Karate again, but I knew I needed to do something. And my personal trainer at the time, Shauna was like ‘Those guys upstairs, they're doing Muay Thai kickboxing, you should really try it because I'm sure you would do really good with it’. And I was like ‘Okay, I'll try’ and then that's it, that's how I got into it.

It's interesting to think of why one martial art appeals to an athlete over another. In a time when Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is at an all-time high in popularity, when folks turn on the TV and have a better chance of catching an MMA bout than a boxing match and are more familiar with an octagon cage than a traditional ring, it seems that the appreciation of one particular form over another is not really encouraged. For instance, the MMA fighters in the WEC and UFC are often listed as having “strong Mauy Thai skills” for their stand-up fight, but one would be hard-pressed to find any good Muay Thai techniques in their repertoire at all. So, practicality seems to an appropriate term for why one chooses a front kick over an axe kick or a Jiu-Jitsu hold over a western wrestling move (try using a wrestling hold when someone is allowed to punch your face!). In MMA, moves are chosen based on practicality in a situation, rather than their place in one particular art form.

But Kru Nat isn't talking about MMA, at all. She's talking about the difference in Muay Thai from the bulk of all other eastern Martial Arts, which is that one does not learn techniques in a regimented order, or advance from one stage to another, marked by colored belts or the next set of “katas”, or a specific set of moves. Rather, someone like Kru Nat, who has practiced Muay Thai for over 10 years and continues to study will still be learning how to perfect her kick, her elbows, and knees. One isn't an expert in a shorter time than one studying other eastern Martial Arts, but one is certainly able to apply a battery of techniques and moves that are intended to hurt, stun, or dispatch an opponent without years of training. Certainly one becomes more proficient at each technique, stronger, faster, more adroit in dominating an opponent – but, like Western Boxing, once you can throw a jab, you can control someone opposing you.

The word practicality alludes to the concept of practice, which, one could argue means that the practicality aspect of Muay Thai invites one to put the moves into action. The question becomes then, whether there is a difference between practicing moves, and putting moves into practice, ie. fighting.

I was curious to know how Kru Natalie made this transition to actually fighting.

Kru Nat: – Simon asked me very early on if I wanted to fight and I really had to think about that. I mean, I was 32 years old first of all at the time, and I was kinda freaked out about it. I've had an old history of getting into sports since I was very young and because I was always athletic I usually did pretty good and I just wanted to do it for the fun of it. I never wanted to do it for competition. But again and again I was pushed into competition, and not asked if I wanted to

— I was pushed, forced into competition. And it was a disaster, I never did well because I didn't like it, I didn't want it. I just wanted to have fun, you know? So when that happened, that was like... childhood trauma [laughing], I don't know. I was like, wow, okay, I'm an adult I can make my own decisions and yeah, why not, it can be fun. So ...we tried to set up something.

Sylvie: And did you get a taste for it, I definitely want to keep doing this, or was it still a hard decision —;

Kru Nat: No, no, I was full-on. That was why I asked Simon for two weeks. I said, 'I need two weeks to think about this and when I tell you my decision it's going to be a full commitment, or no commitment at all.' And so I was like, 'yeah, definitely I want to do this.' So my first fight was actually here, at Church Street gym.

Sylvie: Who did you go against?

Kru Nat: Colleen O'Brian, she was a boxer at the time, she had only experience boxing. It was a very good fight, I didn't win... she got a split decision by one point. It was a really good fight. She was really hard and she was a very good boxer. It was the lightest I ever fought — I was, like, 140 or something, and I felt a little light on my feet, and in retrospect I think it would have been a bit different if I was a little bit heavier. So after that I actually decided I should fight around 145, just those extra pounds have made all the difference.

And since then Kru Natalie has been quite consistent. She's fought at her lightest 143 lbs and up to 149 lbs, a range of 6 pounds. In a sport where competitors will drop 20 lbs for a fight, it is noteworthy that Kru Natalie knows her body well and even more so that Kru Natalie, as a woman, is confident and aware enough to maintain a fight-weight that she feels to be right for her own body, over time. The pressure that women face just in daily culture to be conscious and critical of their weight, moving always toward the 'lighter is better' ethic, is not excluded from the world of sports, where women are expected to be slight, rather than built and will exaggerate down to a weight class well below their walking around weight. This doesn't seem like a complicated issue in Kru Nat's mind; she explains, simply, that 'it's just where my body is comfortable.'

Part III [Part I here, Part II here]

Article by Sylvie von Duuglas-Ittu

The studio is small and bare, with one mirrored wall directly parallel to a wall of windows, which lets in a thin, lazy light, as well as the heaving sounds of traffic and horns from the Chinatown street below. The room's hardwood floor and low ceiling send the noise all around the room, while Kru Natalie and I sit in the farthest corner, leaning toward each other when a particularly loud truck groans by.

It dawns on me in this little room, isolated from the busy New York crowd below, how remarkable it is just for the two of us to be here: two women, a generation apart, discussing our love for the art and challenges in the sport of Muay Thai. Kru Natalie has experience and knowledge; she's made Muay Thai a vector point in her life and it is a large root that keeps her planted in the USA. I have only just begun and I am each day making Muay Thai a bigger focus for myself; it is a passion that has brought great people into my life and it is a limb that reaches to take me out of the US. She is a teacher, but she's not my teacher; I am a student, but I'm not her student. And yet these echo through the room as we move through topics that excite us, or issues that make us cringe. Our voices jump and bounce off the walls, floor and ceiling, interrupting the cacophony that spews through the windows. And I am filled with a sense of awe and gratitude that the overpowering voices in this room are women's voices.

Kru Natalie is singular in many facets of her experience. Not only did she begin studying and fighting Muay Thai at a time when she had very few female peers, but she became an instructor and in October of 2008 received the rank of Kru (a ceremonial and often certified title for teachers) at Five Points. If female fighters are underrepresented in gyms, female instructors are virtually unheard of.

I'm a big advocate of female to female sparring partners. (I've often heard men claim that any woman worth her salt in the ring has sparred with men — it just makes them better fighters. I agree that sparring with men is important, but I do question the validity of this statement. Given the small number of women generally amassed in gyms, the number of female sparring partners a woman might have is probably between one and three. The constant for this female to male experiment is therefore skewed and it's not a matter of gender, but a number game: who does better, a woman who spars only with women and therefore has between 1-3 sparring partners; or a woman who spars with men and therefore has upwards of 20 sparring partners at her disposal?) I can only wonder at the benefits of having a female instructor, whether the advantages be inspirational, aspiration, or sympathetic. I don't mean sympathetic

in the stereotypically feminine sense of the word, but rather the notion that the instructor might have gender-specific experience that applies uniquely to women.

I don't think of this at first as Kru Natalie's advantage as a female instructor to female athletes; instead I experienced it as a woman standing at a parade and watching Natalie casually and confidently announce that the emperor has no clothes.

Sylvie: I was reading an interview with you and I was so stunned because you are the first person I've heard mention menstruation for women athletes, other than that at high levels of athleticism one might lose it or something like this. I thought, my God, in a sport where making weight is so prioritized, how can it not be a topic. And then you have women with this body hatred thing going on at the same time & I'm conflicted in my own mind whether it's never mentioned because it is a male dominated sport and women should just know and men don't want to hear about it, or whether it's just that as a woman you don't even think about. For example I know girls who won't train while they are menstruating. I believe you should be able to make that choice for yourself and that's great, so long as it's a conscious choice. But for me, as someone who's dealt with it for 13 years, it came as an utterly unexpected obstacle when preparing and actually going to fight. I mean, it didn't even enter my mind as something I should consider when weighing in or having energy or anything! It's just never talked about.

Kru Nat: Well, that's the other thing about male trainers vs. female trainers. Any female athlete that ever had a female trainer in any sport & I can assure you that it's been addressed, because we all know how much it sucks. And you know, like you said the point is that in this sport you have to make weight, you can't just show up and whatever. So, we all know biologically you put on a few pounds at a certain time of your period and because you can get weighed the day before, but then boom, you get on that scale & when you're younger it's two or three pounds, when you're my age it's five or six.

The thing about not training while you have your period, that's really extreme; you deal with it. I do check on my cycle, I always know when it's going to happen because I'm very regular and I need to know, especially going into a fight, because I'm going to have to adapt. If I'm in the middle, it's fine, with the traveling and all that I might be a little off; but if it's right to a certain day and it's really heavy then I'm going to have to drop down, because otherwise I'm going to be in trouble. So it's a real concern. I think, again, it's a cultural thing. You know I hate to bring that up, but it's true. Over the years I didn't think that being from another country necessarily meant anything, just the fact that you are from another country, but it's pretty amazing & the impact of culture in early formative years and what you take from it. You know I've been gone from France for 20 years and I have no intention of going back & I love France, but not to live or run a business, I'm very clear about that. This is where I want to be, this is where I'm at, but culturally, those things, like any body thing &

Sylvie: Very hush hush.

Kru Nat: Yeah, here it's very hush hush. It's that all Puritan, repressive thing and over there people make fun all the time that we are nudists, or whatever; so there's not that sense of being hung up on the body thing. So for me it's very easy to talk about it. And, you know, my trainer is English & that's the worst & because I would just bring it up and he would be blushing and I would just think: get over it. It's become a joke between us because we're such an odd couple in that way, because of the cultural difference, but it is very important to address it. I'm sorry, but this is a huge part of being a female athlete, you know? You're just not the same at certain times of your cycle. Not the weight, or even up here [motioning to her head/heart?]. At a certain time when I'm training, if it's two days before I'll be super focused and then the next day I'm not focused, I can't really concentrate, or I'm not as powerful. I mean it affects you and that's the way it is.

Another thing that I address is sexual behavior. Addictions of all kinds, drinking, drugging, all that is out the door; you cannot do that, and sex has to be addressed too. It's one thing for a man, it's another thing for a woman. And I talk about those things, believe me. When I start & most of my girls are from here [NY/the US] & they're like [looking shocked, smiling] -

Sylvie: [laughing]

Kru Nat: - oh, I'm very humorous about it, so they have a humor about it, and they are used to it by now, but I'm going to talk about it. I don't care how you feel about it, I need to talk to you about these things, it's part of it.

Sylvie: How do you address it with them? It terms that it needs to be a point of focus or do you actually give them this as

part of the regimen? I mean, clearly you don't drink, clearly you don't do this -

Kru Nat: Oh yeah, you have to. You can't be seriously getting ready for a fight and being horny and drinking away, or worse taking drugs. You have to dry up.

Sylvie: It's your body, and you're using your body, so…

Kru Nat: Well, I mean you can do it, but you're not going to be 100%, and never mind 150%. It's just a fact of life: it's your body and you need to get super healthy. You smoke and you're going to fucking die; it's intense. Again, you're going to pay the day of the fight. You disregard that advice you'll pay for it in the ring.

Sylvie: Speaking of sexual activity and health of a fighter, I was really stunned when I went to this gym in New Jersey. It was a couple of years ago, pretty soon after I started, so I was maybe 23 years old. I watched the class just to see if it was something I wanted to supplement my private instruction with. And the teacher actually brought up to me that because I was so young I needed to take into account the fact that doing, I assume fighting in, Muay Thai might make me unable to have children. I couldn't believe that he had brought it up to me. I was actually really offended, as if my baby-making abilities were the primary concern of a young woman getting into a sport. And I couldn't tell if it was that it was a combat sport, that it's that you are getting hit so you are going to hurt your uterus, or if it was that of course that is supposed to be my primary focus, as opposed to me, as an athlete doing things. Of course, I appreciate that it's a legitimate warning for some people. But I thought, you never say this to men; if a man gets nailed really, really hard, I'm sure they might have some kind of problem -

Kru Nat: Oh, sure.

Sylvie: - but it's just not addressed; ever. That was pretty shocking to me.

Kru Nat: That's crazy.

I think it's important for me to take a moment to explain this particular example and why it was offensive to me. I've gotten to know this trainer over these years and his intentions are most certainly good, coming from a place of care and meticulous attention to health and well-being for his clients. I'm not certain that he gives this warning to all his female clients, although he did point to one female fighter, perhaps a decade older than I am, and said she'd already made this decision for herself that children were not likely in her future and therefore it was okay for her to risk her reproductive health for the sport of Muay Thai. There were a few younger girls in the class, none of whom trained to fight, and I reckon they likely did not receive the warning as training at this particular gym is not full-contact.

To be fair, I do not train at this gym as a regular client and this man is not my trainer. As such, I cannot say what other aspects of women's health he would or would not have brought up to me over the course of training with him with the intention of fighting. I don't know that he wouldn't talk to me about menstruation & keeping track of my cycle and working around energy crashes, weight gain, bloating, emotional challenges or mental fatigue & but I do doubt it. I don't know that any male trainer & outside of someone who trains a large number of women over many years & would be aware of or sensitive to this particularly female aspect of training fighters. I wonder what it would do for my own training to be open about these issues & if I would be more forgiving of myself on bad days if I were more aware of the biological catalysts and my trainer knew when to work with it and when to push against it. As it is, I'm always pushing against it and am generally unaware when it might be a hormonal change that's making me exhausted or frustrated or totally unable to focus. Or when it's actually burn out.

Kru Natalie is open with her students about any issue, and she is individually able to address a number of possible challenges that conventional trainers may not have on their radar. Her upbringing in western European culture leaves her unabashed in discussing sex and drugs and body functions, but her non-hetero orientation allows her to address sexual issues that non-hetero students might face; her gender-identity and biological gender allow her to relate to women, who are underrepresented in gyms; and her age, life- and fight experiences permit her to offer advice to students who face any number of challenges.

The sexuality of a trainer may appear to be an irrelevant factor in the quality of the trainer, but it has a direct influence on the quality of the dynamics and relationships within the gym. With so few female trainers & or women in authoritative positions in gyms & the power dynamics within a gym setting are typically male dominated and, when sexualized, heterosexual. In the handful of gyms I've visited over the years, the majority of them host a romantic relationship between trainer and student & something I'm not ruling out as a possibility for a female trainer & but it is noticeably a power structure between a male trainers and female students. This is not a criticism of the romantic relationships themselves, but a question of how the power of that relationship affects the dynamics of a gym and & because in my experience it is uniquely women dating trainers & how it affects these women as

fighters.

Sylvie: It's a difficult line. I train independently and I've noticed when I go to visit gyms it's a stepping-in, stepping-out kind of thing, like a snapshot of each place. So it's not an in depth understanding of any gym, but a number of places I've gone there have been very small groups of women — three to five, something like this — and the girls who seem to have a promising future or who have a kind of power with where their future is going are often times dating their trainers —

Kru Nat: [Nodding her head] — It's all encouraged.

Sylvie: I don't want to say that there is something wrong with it, but this power is coming from romantic involvement, which is very weird.

Kru Nat: Yeah, and it goes out the door the moment the romantic involvement is terminated and then everything goes out the door, which is a shame. I think that there is — I understand two people fall in love and all that, that happens — but there is also a total power dynamic, power-oriented dynamic, wanting to be the special one, the teacher's pet, getting involved romantically. I just don't believe it's a great idea in a workplace, but especially when it's a teacher/student kind of thing. There definitely need to be boundaries. I can see how easily — because I am a teacher, I can see the dynamic can happen between teacher/student = you come to this person with kind of admiration, an awe, you get that kind of romantic awe; but it has to stay on the Platonic level, as far as I'm concerned, and that's where the teacher has to draw that boundary. The student makes — the power dynamic is there, but ultimately I hold the teacher responsible for drawing that boundary. The ego is getting stroked, but then it creates a whole wrong atmosphere and kind of defies the purpose of wanting to make this sport our own as far as the woman's side of it is concerned, and just progressing with our own power, and being sovereign women as I like to call it. With the whole dating thing, this is totally massacred.

Sylvie: I think it's really difficult for a lot of women because there tend to be so few us in gyms at any given time. It'll be one or two, maybe five at the most, kind of scattered, and because they don't have consistent participation and their attendance can be spotty for whatever reason, some of the gyms that I have gone to I've notice that there is either a kind of near cultish or religious type feeling where women get so involved in their group. Or maybe people in your normal life don't understand you (as a woman) doing Muay Thai, and you kind of compartmentalize and find solace in the people who actually get it; -

Kru Nat: Yeah.

Sylvie: - So I can see how that happens. But, speaking about getting it, what is your approach with your students with advising or even directing women who train with you in how to have a healthy balanced training regimen with the rest of their lives?

Kru Nat: I'm very much about that, because as a fighter I've never been the type to over-train or to be fanatic about anything, dieting or my training. I've always been very balanced about it, and it worked for me. I'm 42 and I can still fight because I have incredible balance in my life between Muay Thai as a passion. But also I like to live and I have my relationship, my other business, you know, a lot is going on. I had to find a balance otherwise everything would be out of whack, basically. So I'm very sensitive to that issue, and anytime I train students, whether they be men or women, it's kind of like the "over-achieving American" mentality here, and I'm not from here — I'm from France where we're just more laid back about stuff and I can see how the quality of life is so important to us, in France, and just having a life outside whatever it is, so maybe that's what it is, culturally maybe I'm more inclined to that; I think it's easier for me to incorporate that into my life.

And for women, it's even more intense because they feel that they have to perform, it's so important for them to perform well and do everything; it's that over achieving thing, over-training, dieting too much. And the nutrition thing — don't get me started on that, because I can go on with that, you know, because women are really traumatized with that because of the culture, everything they see in the frickin' magazine — everything about training is reinforcing that garbage and lacking that understanding that the woman's body is very different from the male's body, and there's something you can do with a man that doesn't work for a woman, it's out of control.

With me, all these things are addressed, that's the first thing. Anybody who wants to train with me, and especially competitively — I sit them down, and I tell them exactly what they are going to get. Are you down with the program? When I tell you that you run three times a week, don't do it five times a week. Whatever I tell you, just get down with the program. It works. I have been piloting it for ten years, I've been training other people, and it worked in general, it's just common sense. And yes, it is a case by case basis because not everybody is the same, like no women are the same, but there is a certain regimen that the body can take and will be enhancing your performance and you'll be totally a 100%, or even 150%. But then there's a whole other thing, you think "oh my God,

I didn't do enough, and you think, 'I'm going to do a little bit more over there,' and when you do that little bit over there you can just erase everything else you are doing, because then you are on overdrive. And then you injure yourself and that's way it's going to catch up with you — not before, it's never that, it's the day of a fight and you're going to pay for it, in the ring. As a trainer I take this very seriously, and as a coach and as a Kru, I take this very seriously. It's all about safety, and I'm all about the responsibility I have of looking after somebody to make sure they are completely ready to get in that ring. So I am very sensitive to that, they need balance in their life. You know, do your thing, get out, get a life, go get together with your friends, go to a movie, because people get obsessed, people get manic, they really do. And yes, there are worse addictions, but an addiction is an addiction, and an addiction is never healthy.

I've personally been advised by more than one female fighter that women are prone to over-train. I question whether this is an aspect of female psychology, that we are more willing to ignore physical pain or fatigue, or at least to use our minds to override these stresses when our bodies are telling us to slow down. But I wonder too if this is true of female athletes in all sports, or whether it is a feature particular to sports where women are greatly outnumbered by men and generally not surrounded by experienced female peers. I assume it's not only the latter.

When women of Muay Thai do get together, in gyms or across gyms, there is a prevalence of positivity and support among the group. A few months ago I organized an all female sparring circle for women of boxing and Muay Thai in New York. The idea was that women who either don't have adequate sparring partners in their own gyms, or who have grown accustomed to sparring the same two or three girls in their gyms could get together to have sparring experience with more and different women, and to foster support among women across gyms. The group came together quickly (after only a few weeks' planning) and was met with great enthusiasm from many members, as well as the generous offer of weekly space for the group — for no fee — by a gym owner in Brooklyn. As women have joined the group and attended the weekly sessions, I have consistently been impressed by how cool women who train Muay Thai and boxing are. I don't know whether it is something about the sport which attracts an independent and strong type of woman, or whether the act itself — and our getting together — brings out the best in us. There has been some resistance from trainers to encourage their female students to attend the meetings, but many women come without ever requesting permission from their gyms. (I respect the commitment that women have to their gyms and like very much when the circle is discussed between trainers and students, as I think there is strong community and a great deal of trust between students and their trainers. That said, a few girls have remarked what a relief it is to spar without having their trainer over their shoulder, as it subtracts a degree of stress from sparring — the circle is not training per se, but is just independent and very informal practice.)

Kru Natalie just recently attended our female Sparring Circle for the first time, bringing with her a number of her female private clients. I was most impressed that Kru Natalie got in the ring and enthusiastically sparred with everyone for a continuous hour and a half, while giving small pointers to her students or other girls in the group. There were twelve of us total most of whom she had not met before. She was the last one out of the ring, with a smile, and seemed to give everything of herself. As a woman who began at her gym when there were so few woman students and who has grown with that gym over the years, which now boasts the ratio of female students to be 50%, I wonder how Natalie feels about the inter-gym organization of the Sparring Circle.

Sylvie: Do you see a benefit of, for example the sparring circle of a bunch of girls getting together even outside of their individual gyms just as a group, and sparring each other?

Kru Nat: Awesome. I mean, I love it! I commend you for doing that. I think it's really great. I responded right away because I was so excited when Deb told me about it -

Sylvie: [laughing]

Kru Nat: I don't come from a separatist mind, but I really believe in women working together. Even as a gay woman I never want separatism, and it may surprise many men but I don't have that. I believe in working together, as a woman and as women, I think it's great. And then also to train all together, which is equally important for me.

I do think it is good for women to spar with men, I think it really helped me a lot, but I can see that for smaller girls it's hard. At my weight, actually, I think I benefited a lot. Not that I didn't spar with smaller girls, because that works on your speed and that's good for me. Just working with different people, different sizes, different experience, it's all good, I'm for that and you have to do it. You can't be just one way or another, that's stupid. You need both.

Kru Natalie has a vision for how she wants to train her students as she has just recently left her Muay Thai alma mater, Five Points and has charted out to start her own gym and form her own team, which she calls Chok Sabai (transl: fight happy/relaxed)

Kru Nat: I'm really looking forward from this point on to more of everything I've told you today, to create a

space where everybody works with everybody no matter what. That's going to be my motto, my agenda. And I offer zero tolerance for anything that's not in line with bringing a good attitude, you have to check your ego at the door and just work with everybody; just a happy place. You don't come from a fulltime job to be harassed or bothered, you know? It should be a happy place, a place you look forward to going to, and have fun and learn something. And I can do that. This is who I am, so I want to do it, not just for me, for everybody – a real community. And I really love creating community, this is really a good thing, and teamwork is a huge thing of mine which I haven't completely experienced, honestly; So I'm going to do it.

What is most inspiring to me about Kru Natalie and what I feel most strongly in her presence is that she makes things happen. She comes to a river and finding no way to cross it, she builds a bridge. She is a woman who makes opportunities for herself and through her strength and generosity she has passed opportunity to the women who have come after. But she is not an absent architect; she is with us as we cross these bridges and build new communities. She is a vital part of us for women of Muay Thai.