

Chartchai Chionoi: Still Going Strong **By Scott Mallon**



He is Thailand's second world champion in professional boxing, having followed the great Pone Kingpetch, and is considered the great grandfather of boxing in Thailand. He was one of the King of Thailand's favorite boxers, occasionally spending time at his palace and often receiving his public praise. He is a devout family man who was possessed by the need to give his wife and four children a good life and is revered by many of Thailand's great boxers including Samart Payakarun, Muangchai Kitticasem, Saman Sorjaturong and Sot Chitalada.

I took the 6AM train from Bangkok to see Chionoi at his home in Chiang Mai, arriving in the early evening. His son Boi had arranged to pick me but in typical Thai fashion, the entire Chionoi family was waiting for me at the train station. I had a hotel reserved but was told they would have none of it and I would be staying at their home. We stopped and had dinner at one of their favorite restaurants and then made the forty-five minute journey from the city to their home in the hills.

The Chionoi home is set on a hill about two hundred yards in from the main road, hidden behind hundreds of trees in a lush, green forest. The tallest trees are in the back of the house and when standing on the doorstep of the house the tip of the Doi Suthep Mountain is just visible. A small pasture lies between the house and a creek just before a huge row of soaring trees that extends all the way to the main road. To get to the house, you must first negotiate a rickety, twenty-foot long wooden bridge that descends forty-five degrees and allows one to cross the creek. Another hundred yards through an alley between a line of shrubs and the house is upon you.

Chionoi's home is a museum of memorabilia and a shrine to the three-time flyweight champion. It is a traditional Thai home, made from wood, two stories and set on thick wooden pillars. Modest but comfortable, you can't help but scan the busy walls of the home and take in the memories of Chionoi's life.

That first night we stayed up well into the wee hours of the morning, talking about everything life has to offer, of course, boxing included. Family and relationships are also popular subjects and there was never a shortage of conversation. There were times we talked only of boxing and others we spent having fun; like our trip to Chionoi's waterfall on his property or our late night B-B-Q discussing the virtues of staying single or being married. I was not only given an interview but an inside look into the life of Chionoi and his family before and after boxing.

All along the way, Oot, Chionoi's wife of 45 years, has been his constant friend and companion, doing everything her husband has with the exception of physically getting in the ring and doing battle. Nonetheless, she has felt her share of the punches and still does.

When I first met Chionoi, I had a hard time understanding him; like countless other pugilists who have fought in many-a-hard battle, he slurs his words. I originally thought he might have Parkinson's or Alzheimer's but later found doctors don't know what is specifically wrong with him other than his brain has been damaged from being on the receiving end of far too many punches. Fortunately he has the resources to receive the care he needs and is examined every three months.

Several times a day he would motion to me, telling me he was spinning and suffering from a headache. Noise compounds his condition, filling his head with confusion. A room full of people talking normally could set off a headache, which is why he and his wife moved to the countryside in Chiang Mai – serene and uncluttered his mind could settle into peace.

I found myself telling him more than once how many children I have and that “Yes, I am married to a Thai woman. She’s home in Bangkok taking care of the kids.” His short-term memory is virtually non-existent but his medium to long-term memory is excellent.

I’ve resisted the urge to feel sorry for him and thankfully so. Much like Muhammad Ali he wants no sympathy and is quietly content. He is far from destitute and is full of life. He has land throughout Thailand and a doting wife and four children who help make sure he is well taken care of. They are all extremely proud of what he’s accomplished and sacrificed and are acutely aware he has given his blood, sweat and tears - for them.

When at the end of our time together I asked Chionoi if it was all worth it, he wasted no time in telling me “Definitely.”

“Boxing has been good to me and my family,” said Chionoi. “Sometimes it’s painful to always see my championship belts and the photos on the wall because I miss the excitement of being in the ring, but if I had it to do all over again I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Even now, 31 years after his last fight, his face and name are still remembered in Thailand and around the world. When a group of us went to a tiny food market on the side of the road, a woman asked, “Didn’t that guy used to be a fighter? He’s... Chionoi... right?!” Chionoi simply smiled and waved, happy to be remembered but slightly embarrassed.

