

# ROSSE



## Flight of fancy

Discover England's Eden  
from the sky page 8

## Getting her kicks

Meet Hilary Mack, Scotland's  
Thai boxing queen page 3



**Kick boxer's  
solid ring of  
confidence**

**T**hwaack. Hilary Mack's shin hits a plastic-covered pad with a noise that would wake a baby. Bouf bouf thwaack. She throws a left hook, a right jab and another pad-cracking round-house kick. It would be graceful if it were not so blatantly pugilistic. And neck-cricketing fast.

This is not Mack, 28, the Scottish and British Thai boxing champion, in full fighting mode. This is a little light sparring with her trainer, Guy Ramsay, on a sleepy bank holiday at the dog end of the festive season. There is precious little other activity visible in the industrial estate in Maryhill where Ramsay runs the Griphouse gym. But inside the squat brick building, the skipping ropes are still warm, the punch bags are taking a well-deserved rest and the sweat-soaked gloves are hanging up to dry. Mack is starring in Fight Spectacular, Scotland's biggest martial arts show yet, at Glasgow's Braehead Arena in March, and she plans to be at the very top of her game.

Fight Spectacular, which will be watched live by an audience of 6,000 and shown across Europe on Channel 5 and Eurosport, is just one sign that Thai boxing — also called Muay Thai — has moved into the 21st century. A glance at fitness trends and gym timetables are another: the moves that Mack hones to whomp her opponents are the same ones that Jack Osbourne used to banish his man breasts, and Coleen McLoughlin puts down her shopping bags to demonstrate in her exercise DVD.

"I'm not surprised that celebrities have discovered it," says Mack. "It's a good body workout, it gives you a nice shape. You don't look manly at all: it gives you a toned body rather than a big body."

Ramsay adds: "It's a whole heap less tedious than the gym. It keeps you fit, it keeps you focused, it's a fast, hard chess game so you're staying switched on mentally as well."

Without her satin shorts and boxing gloves, Mack, a softly spoken educational psychology graduate from Lenzie, seems an unlikely fighter. Only the flat stomach and determined eyes hint at the athlete warrior beneath the T-shirt. But put her in a ring and she sets about Ramsay, several inches taller and 10-odd kilos heavier, with a whirl of legs, arms, gloves and hair.

They segue from hand-to-hand grappling to balletic kicking and relentless punching, and back, without pausing for breath. In a grunting three-minute bout, they cover every corner of the ring. After watching them, I'm ready for a rest. They are prepared for a one-minute recovery break before doing it all again.

Having been a child gymnast, Mack discovered Ramsay's boxing classes at Strathclyde University.

"I wanted something where I could still use my strength and flexibility," she recalls. "I'm not very

British champion Hilary Mack packs a powerful punch, but it's her mental strength that really gives her the edge, writes **Anna Burnside**

graceful, so dancing was out. So I tried Thai boxing."

It was not all love at first punch. "I wasn't very good at the beginning. But I'm a perfectionist so I liked the fact that it was difficult to get right."

As she progressed and improved, she could not resist adding in the challenge of competition. Before she knew it, she was stepping through the ropes and walking around the ring in the psyche-out ritual dance that precedes every Muay Thai match. It was summer 2002, the fight was in the Atlantis nightclub in Bolton. "There were lots of cheesy dancing girls and a big party afterwards," she says. "It was not quite Phoenix Nights, but not far off."

The fact that she was trounced only made Mack's resolve stronger. "It made me determined to win my second one." And, she adds modestly, "I did that quite well."

## ‘I’m not very graceful, so dancing was out. So I tried Thai boxing instead’

According to Ramsay, who has 20 years of martial arts experience, that attitude gives Mack her edge.

"It's mental strength you notice first," he says. "Whether or not they have that competitive edge. I can turn anybody into a technically good mover, but I can't make everybody a fighter. You can win or lose a fight in the changing room, before you even step into the ring. And anyone who tells you they're not nervous, or scared, before the fight is fibbing." Mack agrees. "It's all about how focused you are, how confident."

Of course, the will to win is no use if the only thing you can kick is the cat off the sofa. Thai boxing is as physically demanding as it is mentally arduous: five three-minute rounds of full-contact, face-to-face kicking, punching, ducking and blocking. The aim, as in conventional boxing, is to knock your opponent out. Failing that, it is to beat them on points, awarded for the technique and power as well as the number of hits. Unlike conventional

boxing, Muay Thai uses the elbows, shins and feet as well as the fists. This requires strength, speed, flexibility, mental agility and the ability to pirouette into a front push-kick straight off a mean upper-cut.

Having mastered the psychology and the sit-ups, Mack also has to cope with being a female within a male-dominated sport. This is not a problem while training: Ramsay advocates in-ring equality, and would love to see more women taking up Muay Thai.

It does, however, make it hard to earn a living as a professional. As the top female fighter in Scotland, Mack has to look to England, or further afield, to find suitable opponents. Even that does not always go to plan. At her first professional fight in Thailand, she was up against a former jailbird. "I thought Asian women were all tiny until I get in the ring and there's this huge big Thai lady with tattoos. That was scary."

Were she 10kg heavier, and a man, she could have a fight a fortnight. As a 55kg woman, she has had 10 professional bouts since she started four years ago. "Often Hilary will be giving away weight to get a match, fighting somebody five, six or seven kilos heavier," explains Ramsay. "And if that does not sound like much, pick up one of these" — he indicates a heap of hefty medicine balls — "and throw it at someone. That's what it feels like to have a 4kg weight advantage."

But moaning and Muay Thai don't mix and Mack is looking forward to fighting at Braehead. Later this month she is off to Bangkok for some intensive coaching, then it's back to Maryhill to put the finishing touches to her preparations. In the run-up to a fight, she will do two-hour sessions twice a day, six days a week. Her warm-up might be skipping, running, shadow-boxing and sit-ups, then she will have a session with the punch bag, followed by pad work and sparring. For fuel, there is plenty of water, porridge, bananas, chicken and rice. "No drink." She pulls a face. "And I really try not to eat too much bad food."

Before she steps into the ring, Mack plaits her hair off her face, paints her toenails blue, adds a white cross in the middle and drapes a larger saltire over her shoulders. After that, her rituals are all mental: visualising herself winning, or thinking of how she will get out of difficult situations.

The ring be Mack's second home, but there is one person who is still coming to terms with her unconventional career choice — her mum. "She pretends to not like it, but she loves it really." She has been to a couple of training sessions, watched her daughter demonstrating and loves telling her friends about the latest title or victory.

*Power of Scotland: Fight Spectacular, Braehead Arena, March 12*

Stuart Wallace



Kick start: Mack found Thai boxing combined physical strength and flexibility with mental agility to make the perfect sporting mix