

## SPORTS

## YAN on the map in the Muay Thai kick boxing world

BY DON DECKER,  
YAN News

Clifford Larson and his wife, Pita, assistant coach for Larson's Boxing and Fitness in Camp Verde had an astounding summer with collecting 3 international muay thai boxing tournament championships.

Mr. Larson's fighters Lauren Willis, Wesley Loveall and his brother Jonah swept into Des Moines, Iowa June 21-24 and captured the highly prized championship belts. Another Camp Verde fighter, Victor Rivas of Camp Verde fought as well going the distance but coming up short on the win.

Known as Thai Boxing Association Muay Thai tournament, the local Camp Verde fighters fought their way through some of the toughest opponents according to Mr. Larson. One fighter came all the way from Australia to participate



**Camp Verde brothers** Wesley Loveall and younger brother Jonah Loveall show their championship belts.

and it is for this reason that the annual Des Moines tournament carries the distinction of being international. "You have gyms from all over the world at the tournament. For us to be a part



**Lauren Willis** declared a Champion kick boxer (r) stands with coaches Clifford and Pita Larson with Master Thai

of that group means representing the Nation, the community and to be from here (Camp Verde). It's a good feeling that we are proud in representing not only the Nation but the outside communities," said Mr. Larson referring to the non-members who took the championships.



**Championship kickboxer** Lauren Willis (2nd from R) poses with Master Thai, Clifford Larson and Pita Larson (far right)

In June of 2016 one of the Camp Verde muay thai fighters, Shayla Murdock won the Championship at the same Iowa tournament. The Larson's gym took 5 fighters to that fight where they had 5 wins, 4 losses and a championship by Ms. Murdock who was 14 at the time. Shortly after that, the Larson's traveled to Bangkok, Thailand with Ms. Murdock where she competed for a world title in Muay Thai.

"We have developed and established ourselves outside of the community into the real world," said Mr. Larson.

"Our gym has grown where we now have a solid program which is very successful and this past tournament, we took 3 adult fighters and 1 junior and we brought back 3 champions." Their Iowa record was 6 wins and 1 loss.

Mr. Larson said part of his new emphasis in running the gym was doing away with the old and bringing in the new. "It's been a hill climb for us at the gym. I had to re-shape my skills as a coach, to develop new techniques, adapt and grow instead of staying in traditional basics of old style martial arts. I've grown as a coach," he

said. Interestingly, one of these innovation is adapting to the changing needs of adults who sometimes have schedule conflicts to attend the workouts and training at the boxing gym. By focusing on the age group who also have family responsibilities,

Mr. Larson has been able to enroll more adults in the training facility. "This past year we've had 4 adults and we have made it to where they can compete," he said.

One of those adults is Lauren Willis of Camp Verde who made it to the Iowa meet where she won the championship.

Mr. Larson also has a contract to work closely with the Yavapai-Apache Nation's diabetes program under the coordination of Robin Hazelwood to provide a vigorous exercise program for 10 individuals who are keeping in shape and staving off diabetes.

Camp Verde brothers Jonah and Wesley Loveall brought back the Iowa championship belts as well.

Wesley's winning the championship holds the record for being the youngest adult person to hold that record.

"At 18 years old, this was the biggest accomplishment for him," said Mr. Larson.

Wesley has accepted entrance to Grand Canyon University in Phoenix for the coming fall to gain more insights on a sports medicine degree so he will no longer be with the Larson gym.

Mr. Larson knows every quirk and strengths of his fighters and said that Jonah had some health issues and adjustments were made during the hard 6 months of training prior to the Iowa event.

"We did our best to make it work for him. It boosted his confidence level. He wasn't nervous and he fought hard and the other kid couldn't find his rhythm," said Mr. Larson about Jonah winning the Iowa championship.

Clifford is a former champion kickboxer having fought across the

country and winning the world title under the coaching of Richard Williams of Camp Verde.

Mr. Larson paid homage to the Master Chai from Thailand meeting with him in Iowa where the Master posed with the Camp Verde champions.

"Master Chai brought Muay Thai to this country and he is one of the pioneers who spread the knowledge about the Muay Thai culture and it grew from there to where it is now. When it first started they had less than 100 people and now it has over 800," said Mr. Larson.

Interestingly, when Mr. Larson met Master Chai and they hit it right off. As Master Chai found out Mr. Larson was from



**Lauren Willis** is declared the champion.

Yavapai-Apache Nation. "He's collector of Native American artifacts," said Mr. Larson.

Mr. Larson's star adult female muay thai fighter is Lauren Willis from Camp Verde who won the Iowa championship. "She started from the fitness class and just progressed rapidly strength wise, technically and we told her that, 'You should compete and give it a try.' She was up for it. She felt the confidence and wanted to challenge herself," said Mr. Larson.

Willis had been working on starting her cake making business all the while maintaining a single parent household with 3 children in Camp Verde.

Like a story out of a self-help magazine for women, Ms. Willis took matters into her own hands and put some boxing gloves on. "She had a lot on her table and for her to accomplish what she did back then was a testimony to women, girl power that motivates women in the gym and set a story line about

how anything is possible regardless of situations," said Mr. Larson.

"This was a good fight," recalls Mr. Larson about Ms. Willis Iowa win. "She fought on Saturday and beat the gal and on Sunday—the championship. It was a challenging fight and the other woman was very



**The Larson kick boxers** line up for a championship photo. Victor Rivas (r) also fought in the tournament.

strong. She (Ms. Willis) was exhausted and she ended up getting the win."

Pita Larson, wife to Mr. Larson, is also a trained muay thai fighter and has participated in winning some fights in Iowa and Florida 2 years ago. That was when Shayla Murdock won her championship title. Mrs. Larson is an active member of the local kicking boxing gym and Mr. Larson gives lots of credit to her for making things happen for the gym. This includes conducting fundraising events making contacts with sponsors who support the gym's travel expenses to nationwide tournaments throughout the year.

"She's the backbone of all the fundraising. She makes 100 trips to get people to support the gym, to add funds to cover the fees for airfare, hotels, food and registration. We always try to have extra funds and sometimes we don't make that goal," Mr. Larson said.

Mrs. Larson is the other half of the Larson coaching team and when Mr. Larson isn't in the corner yelling out commands and encouragement to the fighter, Mrs. Larson takes over.

"She's very supportive and very vocal in the corner too. Lot of the times, I'll sit quietly when her voice stands out more compared to mine."

There was one other

muay thai fighter from Camp Verde, Victor Rivas who competed in the Iowa muay thai tournament as well. Although he did not place in the event Mr. Larson gives credit and praise to Mr. Rivas.

"The big thing for him was kick boxing but he never found the opportunity to dig deeper and to find a place to train. And with us, he found that place. I told him 'Anything is possible, it's hard grinding work effort into what you do and you have to come everyday,'" remembers Mr. Larson about his first contact with Mr. Rivas.

Right after that is when Mr. Larson gave Mr. Rivas a "crash course and flying within 3 weeks".

Mr. Rivas's readiness would require more intense training which seemed out the question for Mr. Rivas based on Mr. Larson's coaching experience. However, there seemed to be light at the tunnel for Mr. Rivas.

"I was fully confident in my ability as a coach to get someone who knows nothing to train them, to give them confidence, the skills to go the ring and not get hurt. That was my ultimate goal," Mr. Larson said about Mr. Rivas.

Mr. Rivas finished the rounds in Iowa despite his loss. He will continue to train and prepare for the next muay thai tournament in New York coming up in November.

The analogy of a medical student studying medicine in medical school best explains the devotion necessary to become a muay thai fighter according to Mr. Larson.

"A lot of people don't realize the potential they have. If you want to be a good doctor, you got to go to school, study and sometimes that homework, all that reading is going to get overwhelming. It makes people want to quit. If you can just pass through that and take that one little step, the extra one and then you will realize it's not so bad. That's when the extra confidence comes in and then we realize, 'hey, I can do this'"

## YAN tribal council takes 2nd in B-Ball tournament

BY MARGIE CAMPOS-  
YAN News

Tribal council members from Arizona had a tournament at the Ak-Chin Community in Maricopa, Arizona on June 8, Friday.

The White Mountain Apache Tribal Council "No Brainers" took 1st Place by besting Yavapai-Apache Nation 'Fighting Scouts' who took 2nd Place.

This 2nd Annual Ak-Chin Tribal Council Basketball Tournament was sponsored by Ak-Chin Tribal Council who took 3rd Place in the tournament. They had high hopes of displacing the 'Fighting Scouts' to no avail.



**Yavapai-Apache Nation** tribal council take 2nd Place at basketball tournament in Ak-Chin.



**Jamie Valles** keeping the ball safe from a White Mountain Apache council member during the Ak-Chin Basketball tournament.

