

Shoot! It's boxing made-in-Japan

Combination of kickboxing and wrestling knocks out the audience By **PATRICK JOHNSTON**

T HAS ALL THE HYPE OF professional boxing, the camp of pro-wrestling, and the excitement of a Rocky fight. Shoot-boxing, a hybrid of kickboxing, is a young but increasingly popular sport in Japan — and it really packs a punch.

The brainchild of kickboxer "Caesar" Takeshi and pro-wrestler Satoru Sayama, shootboxing is a unique Japanese creation. Six years ago, the two set out to create a sport that combined features of both wrestling and kickboxing, the result being a more violent — and lively — fight, where the sharp blows of kickboxing mix with the aggressive holds and throws of wrestling. The "shoot" of shootboxing refers to the backthrows that are a part of regular wrestling.

Unlike kickboxing, which generally has five three-minute rounds, the longest a shootboxing match goes is three rounds, each getting progressively shorter. (The first is five minutes, the last three.) Given the rough and tumble nature of the sport, however, many matches don't even make it past the first or second round.

"In shootboxing, there is less emphasis on umpire decisions," explains Alex Easley, ring announcer at major Japanese competitions. "What's important is seeing one of the fighters go down."

Hardhitting, violent: Shootboxers move quickly around the ring, fight aggressively and die hard. The speed of the fight tries them quickly, and a few well-placed blows by a strong competitor can send a lesser fighter reeling.

Says Easley, "They like to go for the kill, and if someone isn't knocked out by the official end of the fight, they start adding rounds."



Women shoot-boxers go at it with a ferocity equal to their male counterparts.

Patrick Johnston photo

There are eight weight classes in shootboxing, starting from a women's 50-kg "sparrow" group to the 80-kg and-over "eagle" class. Points are awarded for shooting (throwing the fighter down) knockdowns, and basic strong fighting. Points are deducted for foul play, which includes thumbing, choking or kicking the fighter when he is down.

"If the fighter is not knocked out even after extra rounds, the judge and the referee work together to determine the points the fighters accumulated," says Hiroyuki Fukase, former shoot-

tion was a match between Nobuki Iwashita and "Soldier" Ogata. Iwashita, a rising star in the shootboxing world, pummeled Ogata just one minute 40 seconds into the match.

"Caesar thinks Iwashita will become the new champion," said Fukase, referee of the fight. "He is fast and very powerful."

If your image of Japanese women is one of tea-pouring OLs or coddling housewives, then watching them shootbox will be something of an eye-opener. Japanese champion Terumi Fujisawa and "Sugar" Miyuki went at it with a ferocity equal to their male counterparts, the seesaw match eventually going to the champion on the strength of one powerful shoot.

The excitement didn't let up even after the fighting did.

Between rounds, a couple of nubile young ladies carrying round signs easily kept the predominantly male crowd's attention focused on the ring. Between fights, Alex Easley, dressed in black and yellow tights, a cummerbund and bow tie, danced frantically around the stage to some pounding rap, simultaneously providing information about the next fight.

Comments Easley, a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on his routine, "I want to do something that's different from other sports, give the people some entertainment and keep the energy level high."

Unique, exciting, and entertaining — that's shootboxing in a nutshell.

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