

MMA world title beckons for Tiffany Teo in Jakarta

Singaporean MMA star will battle China's Xiong Jingnan at One Championship's first event of 2018 on Jan 20

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Phuket

FROM the comforts of her Punggol flat, Tiffany Teo has switched to spartan living in a small first-floor room of a wood-and-mortar lodge that can take only a bed and a cupboard.

Her abode for the last three weeks has been at the remote Puding Lodge room along a dusty street called Soi-Ta in Chalong, Phuket, which is infested with hawkers, peddlers, tattooed muscular men and skimpy-clad Caucasian women.

Not an ideal place for a pony-tailed Singaporean with a choir-singing background and a psychology degree, it seems.

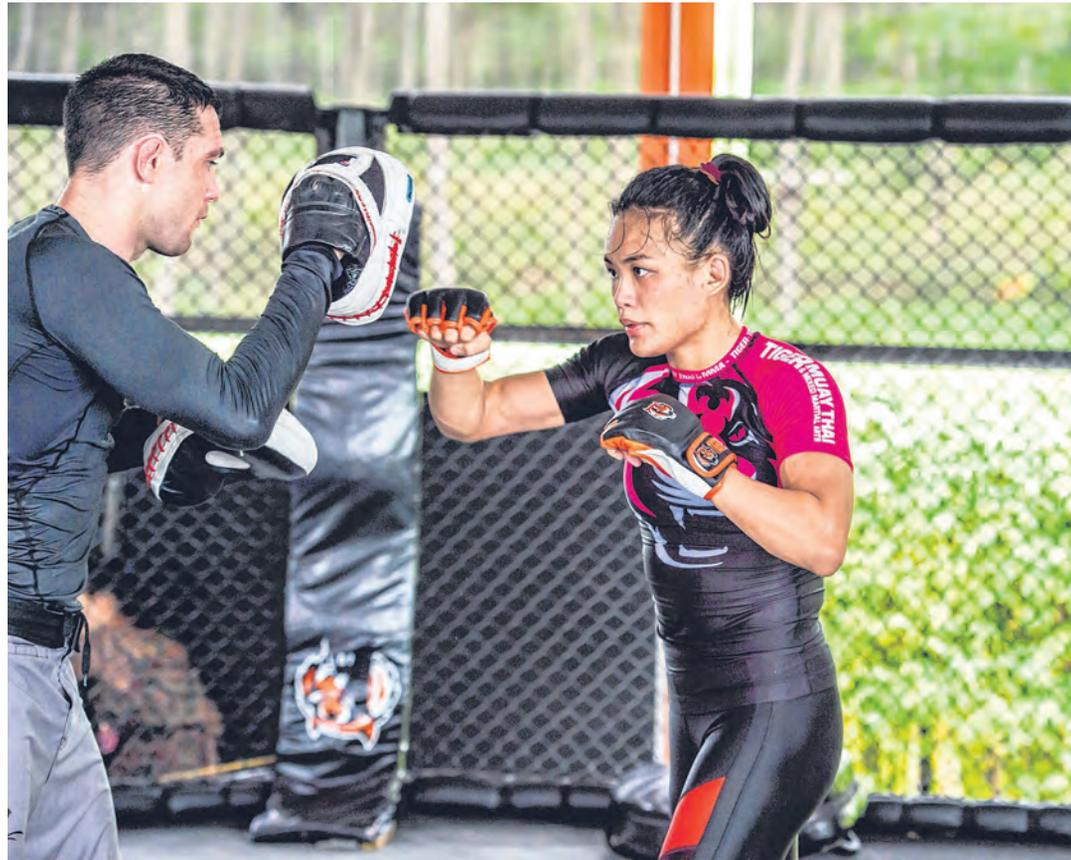
But for a martial arts exponent like Teo, it is an ideal training ground where two major gymnasiums, Tiger Muay Thai & MMA (TMT) Gym and Phuket Top Team, are situated, about a kilometre apart.

So it's by choice despite parental objections that the 27-year-old Teo made the trip to the rustic surroundings where she, like most other exponents, eats right and commutes in small-capacity motorcycles that are available for daily and periodic hire.

The sacrifices are many, and Christmas and New Year were just any other days for Teo – she spent the two holidays on the mats, in the rings and locked in the cages at TMT because she has a dream date coming – a first-ever One Championship world title showdown.

The pasta-loving Bedok-born Teo, with a proud seven-win, zero-defeat record in professional MMA, takes on a tough, tom-boyish 28-year-old Chinese opponent in Xiong Jingnan (10 wins, one loss) in the strawweight title fight in Jakarta on Jan 20 in what is expected to be a cracker of a match.

The event in the Indonesian capital is



Tiffany Teo at her training camp in Phuket. "I was advised by my coaches to come here to prepare for the big fight. I enjoy the environment here, and it keeps me focused on what I want to do," said Teo, for whom black leotards are a daily outfit.

PHOTO: ONE CHAMPIONSHIP

titled "Kings of Courage", and both Teo and Xiong have been given top billing as they are in the main event.

To many, it is unimaginable that a bright Singaporean – she studied at Serangoon Junior College, then Singapore Institute of Management and University of Buffalo – would spar, box and wrestle with beefy behemoths at training six days a week when her fellow peers enjoy the island's city lights.

But for Teo, the focus and concentration towards the title fight cannot come anywhere else but at TMT where some 400 combatants sweat it out in the daily seven-hour grind with different visions, some of whom are just obsessed with the beauty in bulk, and hulk.

Teo, whose training is sponsored by TMT to the tune of about S\$560, would have spent some S\$2,000 for other expenses by the time she leaves for Jakarta on Jan 16.

And it is all for a good, self and national, cause.

"I was advised by my coaches to come here to prepare for the big fight. I enjoy the environment here, and it keeps me focused on what I want to do," said the bespectacled Teo, for whom black leotards are a daily outfit.

"Yes, there are times when I wake up and wonder what am I doing here, and being involved in this sport. But then I enjoy MMA, and the only way to do it well is to win the fights. There are no distractions here. And my coaches have been very professional in getting me ready for the big day."

Teo, a former national boxer who missed out on the 2015 South-east Asian Games because there were not enough participants in her weight category, added: "I don't enjoy team games. I was introduced to boxing by a friend. The I switched to MMA and spent time with coach Major

Overall at Team Highlight Reel (her home gym in Singapore).

"Mind you, I lost my first fight as an amateur, and that defeat spurred me on to continue and do well. So far, it's been good going, although I have yet to fully convince my parents about accepting what I do.

"They have watched me fight, but I'm not sure if they will go to Jakarta to catch the fight. But I'm sure they will follow the action online."

For Teo, nicknamed "The Soul Crusher", injuries and bruises are part and parcel of the MMA game, but for now what she wants to do is remove the word "defeat" from her vocabulary and do her country proud.

A world championship belt in Jakarta, come a fortnight's time, could definitely help her in that quest. And maybe, convince her parents that their youngest child fully knows what's good for her.