



# Wrestling

The sport finds itself a home in Vietnam



**P**rofessional wrestling is a peculiar fit in the large and cavernous gym that is home to Saigon Pro Wrestling Club (SPWC).

One hundred students in white robes practice karate behind the boxing ring that the wrestlers train in. It's a peculiar juxtaposition — the prestigious martial art alongside a group of young lads practising body slams and headlocks, a gigantic poster of Filipino boxing demigod Manny Pacquiao hanging from the ceiling.

Wrestling is often seen as the ugly stepchild of combat sports and for as long as it's been around naysayers have shouted: "But it's fake!" or "It's not really a sport!" Part theatre, part sport, it's an art form that has long been denigrated, and the founder of SPWC, Rocky, is hoping to change the perception of pro wrestling in Vietnam.

He set up the club a year ago, and they have now moved to a larger gym to accommodate the growing number of recruits that wanted to learn a figure-four leglock or a powerbomb. Because the sport was previously non-existent in the city, they are all self-trained. Rocky and SPWC are building wrestling here from the ground up.

"Pro wrestling was not even a thing in Ho Chi Minh City," says Rocky. "Me and my friends would practice our moves anywhere we could, even in the park." This led to some concerned citizens calling the police believing that it was a real fight. Rocky laughs. "We are happy to have now found a home."

### The Good, the Bad

In wrestling there are the good guys, called babyfaces, versus the bad guys, or the heels.

It's a battle between good and evil that is as old as time. To Rocky, playing the bad guy is infinitely more fun. By day he is an assistant manager at a local school and by all accounts is a warm and friendly chap. However, when he portrays a bad guy in the ring it allows him to explore the darker sides of his personality.

"I want to learn new things about myself, so I want to be the heel," says Rocky. In the ring the heel will carry himself like a villain, performing any number of dastardly tricks on their opponent — from a low blow to a cheeky eye gouge when the referee isn't looking.

"Before we set up SPWC, there were no opportunities here for people who wanted to be wrestlers," he says. "I want to establish SPWC, we are creating a wrestling culture here in Vietnam, and we have a long way to go. Our first show was in Danang in the summer at a festival that celebrated Vietnamese and Japanese culture, that was the beginning."

SPWC doesn't recreate the outrageous characters and over the top storylines of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in America. Instead, they lean towards a heavy-hitting Japanese style which emphasizes realism over anything else. Rocky baulks at the mention of John Cena, the current megastar of American pro-wrestling. "He is a big star, but to be honest, his moves don't impress me."

### The Ugly

He stresses that they want their trainees to be safe in the ring, however, war wounds are inevitable. One of the wrestlers today sports a busted lip, and Rocky says that a back injury at the Danang show could have ended

his career. "I thought it could be all over," he says.

The most painful move he took was from veteran Japanese wrestler Ryoji Sai, who performed the "diving double foot stomp" on his chest. It does exactly what it says on the tin, and he winces as he describes how Sai dived down from the top rope right onto his sternum. Try telling Rocky that wrestling is fake after being on the receiving end of that.

That said, the winners and losers of the matches are predetermined. Once it has been decided two trainees will wrestle, they spend weeks practising their moves and making sure everything is timed right. It's not ballet, though, and the wrestlers at SPWC are encouraged to improvise as they go, depending on how the match is going or how the crowd is reacting.

SPWC wrestler Sinister Sid explains the importance of listening to the audience.

"It's all about getting a reaction from the crowd. Without that, wrestling is nothing. If there is no connection with the audience and the crowd is bored, we have failed," he says.

"We have talent," he adds, "but the hard part is how to grow that talent into something that is professional."

This year will see their first show in front of a crowd in Ho Chi Minh City, which will be a giant step forward for SPWC. This is still early days for them, and Rocky, Sinister Sid and the rest are determined to make a name for themselves in the strange world of professional wrestling. — *Thomas Barrett*

*Anyone can come and join on Sunday mornings from 9am to 11.30am at 219 Ly Thuong Kiet, Q11, HCMC. You can contact Rocky through the SPWC Facebook page, [facebook.com/sgpwc](https://facebook.com/sgpwc)*