

Every glove that made him: Thomas Taubman in Dubai

Tej Rae catches up with Thomas Taubman and finds out what led him to yoga



THOMAS TAUBMAN teaches at Yoga Works in L.A. He also leads Teacher Trainings and workshops, specialising in using yoga for the lower back. His blog is Yogasportslife.com; his website is ThomasTaubmanyoga.com

Madison Square Garden 1987. The Golden Gloves boxing championship. In one corner of the ring, weighing in at 139 pounds is Thomas Taubman, fourth child of a Staten Island cop. In the other corner was his opponent, with 80 fights under his belt. Thomas had zero. He kept his head down and tried not to make eye contact with the other fighters in the room, so he wouldn't

lose confidence. His coach hit and slapped him to keep him on his toes while he waited. The details of his boxing days are still fresh in Thomas' mind as he traces his unlikely path to where he is now: at a coffee shop next to Zen Yoga in Media City in Dubai, where he has flown in for two weeks to conduct a YogaWorks 200 hour teacher training, coordinated by Liz Terry of Satya Flow.

A sports writer for the New York Daily News described the unexpected outcome: 'Another boxer who wouldn't be stopped was Thomas Taubman'. While he did not walk away with the miniature gloves made of gold that give the tournament its name, he was victorious in that bout. Thomas attributes his unlikely win to the passion of Frank Sinatra. Afterwards, he threw up in the shower. And just like Rocky, he went to his local bar to celebrate.

In those days, he was called 'Tommy T.' in the Italian/Irish neighborhood where he grew up, surrounded by 21 of his first cousins. Paul Castellano, who was The Godfather at the time, lived close by. Everywhere Tommy T. went, he dealt with people who were a lot like him: they all went to Catholic school, ate pizza and cannolis, and wore thick gold chains across their chests. "I was a troublemaker. A bit of a bully. My father used to say he knew when I got home from school because that's when the fights would start."

Think *Goodfellas*. Or, if you're old enough, John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. Think *Jersey Shore*. (Staten Islanders flock to the shores of Jersey in the summer, creating the legendary culture that brought us Snooki.)

Now, picture Snooki's boyfriend's best friend becoming a yoga teacher. Not just that, but a teacher of yoga teachers. Statistically, it was extremely unlikely that Tommy T. was going to find his way to the union of breath, mind and spirit.

Boxing was the catalyst. As a young man, Thomas had a lot of aggression to expend, from growing up with a father who didn't reign in his own anger. "All my friends were on the corner, smoking or drinking. Hanging out. And I would go to the boxing gym. It was a relief valve for me. I would feel pent up, and boxing made me feel good. It didn't take care of the why [I was so angry], but of the result of the why."

Like other boxers who lacked grace and fluidity, Thomas' trainer sent him to dance class. "To learn how to move my feet," he explains. "But I boxed to be more macho. Dance class was not on my radar." Exacerbating the situation was the location of the dance class: right next to the boxing gym. His friends ribbed him endlessly. For the love of the sport, though, he endured the teasing, and ended up at Broadway Dance Center in Manhattan. "So here's Tommy T.," he reminisces, "a boxer who can't even speak good English. The owner saw me coming in, and I think he took pity on me." Thomas speaks English just fine, but his Staten Island accent was a cross to bear in Manhattan.

He was terrible at ballet. When the class moved across the floor, he stayed in the corner, embarrassed. At night, he worked as a bartender. He ate at Wendy's every day because that was all he could afford. But he danced five days a week, seven hours a day, and things changed. "There were a lot of chicks, man. I went with being surrounded by all men to being with all women."

On the weekends, he went out to clubs with his friends, in his MC Hammer pants, to show off his moves. "I just loved it. Dancing freed me. I used to be able to jump up and do a split, Roger Rabbit, running man. Maybe I looked crazy, but I was holding my own," he remembers. He entered in a dance contest, and like the Golden Gloves competition, became the

unlikely winner of 1,000 USD. At this stage, his life was not that different from Billy Elliott's.

As he moved through various sports, jobs (tiler, house painter, sports announcer) and cities (New York to Los Angeles), anger issues kept surfacing. Road rage. Heated confrontations. He couldn't manage his emotions, even if he was spending most of his time channelling his energies into movement. "Before my wife and I got married, we went to therapy, and the therapist said, 'If this man does not get help, run for the hills!' She said this in front of me!" Thomas spent three years in anger management class surrounded by men who were court-ordered to be there.

Dance led him to yoga, and to teacher training at Yoga Works. "I am a YogaWorks child," he beams. The two founders of YogaWorks fused Ashtanga and Iyengar. Thomas compares this to his ballet training: Iyengar is the barre and Ashtanga is the movement, the breath, like when you go across the floor. "It's easy to teach when you believe in something, and I believe it's a great foundation."

His teaching style blends his experience as a boxer, a dancer, and even a sports announcer. "You announce the poses," after all. The aggression he used to feel as a boxer has changed its form. "I'm relaxed now," he reflects. "Because I'm teaching mostly women, a subconscious switch goes off in my mind. I'm more of the Yin." Having two daughters helped him open up and get in touch with his softer side. "Actually what it is to be a man is to be more sensitive, and not intimidate people with your rage and your anger," he says with all sincerity.

When Thomas goes back home to Staten Island, some of his old friends don't know what yoga is. "We're lost in time there. The Dubai thing has been a big deal [back home]." In the past two weeks, he has posted photos of riding on a camel and visiting the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi. "I don't know how many people call this place home," wonders the man who lived in the same neighbourhood, surrounded by all of his extended family, until he was 26. ❄

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