

The quest for kingship

by Miles Erwin

Peter "The Chief" Graham is on a seven-month quest to become Oceania's top kickboxer. The excitable Australian has been Oceania K-1 champion for two years running but has been frustrated in the tall shadow of K-1 superstar Ray Sefo, which has put a question mark over Graham's status.

Sefo is universally regarded as the pre-eminent kickboxer to emerge from Oceania. However, for the past decade he has fought only in the lucrative Japanese market, where rising Oceania stars like Graham can't challenge him.

The ambitious Graham has been taunted by Sefo. "When you make your own name and can generate enough sponsorship for a decent purse then you can fight me," said Sefo in March. "Until then you should keep your big mouth shut and concentrate on winning fights."

The frustrated Graham is sick of the talk and just wants to get in the ring with Sefo.

"In Oceania Sefo has been touted as the best fighter in a decade but he hasn't fought here in a decade," says the Australian Graham.

"He doesn't want to go backwards by fighting people ranked below him. I know it's nothing personal but it does become personal when it holds back your career."

However rule changes to the Oceania K-1 fighting circuit mean that Graham could get the chance to prove himself. A new tournament and points system will see three Oceania K-1 fighters gain entry to the Oceania World Grand Prix and the chance to compete in the K-1 World Grand Prix Final. The journey will include a likely face off with Ray Sefo – a challenge



PHOTO: KATE FISHER

KINGS OF OCEANIA: Peter Graham prepares for the next round at the kickboxing tournament.

Graham relishes.

The new Oceania circuit splits fighters into three pools of four fighters with competitors facing each other once and getting two points for a win and a bonus point for a knockout. The competitors face each other over three tournaments — in Auckland last July and this October and December on the Gold Coast.

An interesting mix of bubbling enthusiasm and ruthless determination, Graham is far more eloquent than a stereotypical kickboxer. In the dressing

room before his July fight he was chatty, lively and quick to humour, albeit generally low-brow. However, beneath the veneer of vibrant personality Graham is obviously a serious and focussed man. This determination is the product of a lifetime of martial arts and competitive fighting. He turned to martial arts to get more focus when he was a "wayward child".

His misspent youth may have been dispelled but he hasn't repressed his obvious character. He jogs to the ring to AC/DC's *Thunderstruck* and has trade-

marked his special moves like his somersault kick, The Rolling Thunder.

Graham is taking preparations for the tournaments seriously and based himself in Auckland for weeks before the July tournament to get established. To become more accustomed to Auckland he trained with the New Zealand Warriors rugby league team and sparred with heavyweight boxer and Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Shane Cameron.

In his July fight, Graham wore a Warriors jersey to win

the support of the home crowd. The plan worked as the genial Graham was a crowd favourite even though his opponent was Ray Sefo's brother Ron, a popular Auckland fighter.

Graham's kickboxing quest is in good shape following the July tournament. He beat Ron Sefo conclusively and topped his pool. However, "The Chief" has been fighting too long to become overconfident.

As he says of kickboxing: "In this game one punch or one kick can be the difference between a win and a loss."

Women wrestlers wow the crowds



MANIA GIRLS: Tabitha and Tellulah wrestle at the half-time show.

by Miles Erwin

Take three half-naked women rolling around on a mat and you have the Mania Girls, the perfect halftime entertainment package for a sports event.

At the July Kings of Oceania kickboxing competition in Auckland they wrestled during the intermission. There were three bouts including a tag team fight, which both delighted and confused the sell-out audience.

Mania girl Tabitha says the growth of the sport shows it is just as entertaining as other martial arts. It's also more compatible with everyday life as head shots are not allowed.

"You can compete in a real sport without getting the black eyes and injuries. It's nice to be able to go to work without scars," she says.

Mania wrestling is the latest mix of sport and entertainment. It was developed at the Mania Gym in Sandringham and

blends Greco-Roman wrestling with martial arts such as judo, jujitsu and aikido. The rules are confusing but the crowd doesn't care — it's half time after-all.

The fights are taken very seriously, says Belinda Dunne from Mania Gym.

"People ask why we don't do striking to the face when men do — it's because guys are already ugly."

Instead of partly dressed women escorting giant sweaty men to the ring, the Mania girls are accompanied by giant body-builders. They're called "him-bos" and strut their stuff between rounds.

Mania wrestling is growing in popularity with about 50 women fighting competitively and 130 more training at the gym. It provides more regular competition than other women's fighting sports like kickboxing.

There is the potential for six half-hour shows screening on TV3 next year and a DVD is in the pipeline.

PHOTO: KATE FISHER