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NEW STRAITS TIMES LIVE IT UP ON SATURDAY



Ready to rumble

Ann 'Athena' Osman makes her mark on pro mixed martial arts
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PICTURES BY NIK HARIFF HASSAN

Don't be a victim

The country's first female pro mixed martial arts fighter, Ann Osman tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** why she took up one of the fastest growing sports in the world today

It has been a long day in the office. You have no choice but to walk in the dark to that dimly lit car park. Even though all your senses are attuned to your surroundings, while you reach into your purse for your car keys, someone comes up behind you and threatens you. At that moment, all your training in martial arts kicks into gear and, in the next instant, your assailant is on the floor. This, of course, is if you have mastered one form of martial arts such as karate. What happens when you're also into muay thai, kung fu, silat, jiu-jitsu, judo, kali, shuai jiao, aikido and others?

"Mixed martial arts combines the excitement of a prize fight, the athleticism of the Olympics, the tradition of martial arts and the adrenaline of a rock concert," explains Victor Cui, 44, the chief executive officer of One Fighting Championship (One FC) which is hosting the One Fighting Championship: War of the Nations on March 14. One FC is the world's most exciting mixed martial arts promotion.

The fastest growing sport in the world today, MMA is the artistic expression for martial artists. MMA athletes utilise the best techniques from any and all martial arts to compete standing up or on the ground. "Malaysia is one of the fastest growing markets," says Cui. "Our fans are very knowledgeable, passionate and excited each time One FC comes to town." He expects the event to be "Las Vegas-style entertainment fea-

turing pyrotechnics, exciting walk-outs and scintillating ring girls."

MMA is physically demanding and competitors go through months of intense training to maintain peak condition. These include champions in the various disciplines who have reached the pinnacle of their respective sports and want to challenge themselves against world-class champions. Cui adds: "They are absolute professionals both inside and outside the ring. Some have devoted their entire lives to mastering the sport and will not stop at anything less than perfection."

ATTITUDE OF THE WARRIOR

One such person is Nur'Ain Osman or Ann "Athena" Osman as she is more commonly referred to. As one of Asia's top MMA artists, the 28-year-old is set for a re-match with one of Singapore's top MMA fighters, Sheryl Lim, in March. This re-match is necessary because Lim won the first bout via split decision after three back-and-forth rounds.

On any given day, Ann trains with

her team from the Borneo Tribal Squad which is based in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.

"Sabah is home. I am here in Kuala Lumpur frequently, but I'm based in Kota Kinabalu," she says while on a break from her training session at the Klinch MMA facility in Sooka Sentral, KL. "My parents are retired and run a small food business. My father is from Sabak Bernam and my mother is Dusun." Why would a young woman with a financially rewarding (but demanding) career as regional business development manager in a property company subject herself to gruelling physical activity?

Ann confides: "When I was in boarding school (I went to Sekolah Menengah Sains Sabah from the time I was 13), I read news of women being attacked. It made me very sad. I wanted women to be empowered. One was the story of Canny Ong. I didn't want this to happen to me and I don't want to be in that position. I hated reading stories like that."

She quickly adds: "I was in a good

place to start training. Boarding school toughens you up. It builds character. Nothing like having no water and having to climb a hill and then another three flights of stairs carrying two pails of water. All this builds character ... and muscles. If you're sad, you can't seek help."

As she rattles off the many water sports she's into, from sea kayaking to white water rafting, one wonders how she finds the time to do it all. "I plan ahead," she says. "I divide my time properly. I have sales targets to meet every month and I don't want to sacrifice my performance. It's in my nature. I want to do the best I can in whatever I do. It's determination."

This disciplined approach to life was observed and noted by her coach, One FC Featherweight stan-

dout, AJ "Pyro" Lias Mansor.

"I gave her the stage name Athena," he explains. "When she's talking to you, she looks so sweet and gentle but you have to see her when she's training or in a competition. She's not so sweet then. She has the attitude of the warrior and that's why I gave her the name of the Goddess of War. She's ready to go to war, sparring full on with her opponent."

In spite of the inevitable sores and injuries she sustains, Ann insists that there's no gain without pain. "Actually, I wish to set an example. I want to reach out to other parents to support their children if they want to join something like MMA. Ever since we were children, my brothers, sisters and I have been taught to focus on our education. We had to earn whatever we wanted. One ringgit was so hard to come by. My sisters and I used to pull weeds in our garden to get that money. Today, I see that it's so easy for children to get money from their parents."

Reiterating the point about empowering women,

Ann concludes: "And for girls, there's no need to be a victim. I take as many precautions as I can. In my line of work, I often come home late, but at least I know how to defend myself in case anything happens."

One Fighting Championship: War of the Nations

Where Stadium Negara
When March 14
For info and tickets,
visit www.onefc.com
and www.asiasiaedix.com