

A Guide To The Muay Thai Scoring System



The basic understanding of scoring at the highest and most professional levels in Muay Thai have often eluded not just fans of the art, but even the practitioners themselves as well. This is likely due to the fact that the scoring system in Muay Thai can be considered one of the most unique when compared to other combat sports around the world.

From how strikes are scored, to how rounds are judged; the Muay Thai scoring system differs significantly from the systems the average fight fan may be used to. Because of this, fight fans, practicing martial artists, or even professional fighters who are used to the usual 10 point must system used in popular combat sports like boxing or mixed martial arts (MMA) tend to get confused and frustrated with how a Muay Thai fight is scored.

Which is why if you are a Muay Thai practitioner yourself, or are looking to get serious about Muay Thai, it is extremely crucial that you understand and familiarize yourself with the scoring system used in Muay Thai. So here's a simple guide to scoring in Muay Thai to help get you started.

The Basics: Muay Thai Scoring System vs. 10 Point Must System

In Muay Thai, it is important to first note that judges score every fight in its entirety as opposed to the standard 10 point must system found in combat sports like boxing, kickboxing or MMA – where a set number of points are given to fighters for each individual round based on the performance in that round alone. And although every round is still listed with a 6/7/8/9/10 point recording system on a Muay Thai judge's scorecard, the difference is that whatever is recorded and noted per round is meant only to help the judges paint an overall picture of the fight. For example, in a five-round boxing fight, if fighter A very narrowly drops three or even four rounds to fighter B according to one judge, that one judge's scorecard would have accumulated strictly to a total of 30-27 or 40-36 points in favor of fighter B. This gives fighter A no hope or chance of winning the fight on the scorecards at all heading into the final rounds. The only way left to win would then be to pull off a knockout, an outrageous amount of knockdowns or force a referee stoppage.

However, Muay Thai judges are constantly keeping in mind the fighter who is ahead and the extent of that fighter's lead throughout the fight. So if the example above takes place in a Muay Thai fight, the extent of fighter B's lead would be very minimal. Therefore, it would still be very possible for fighter A to muscle away that lead from fighter B in the final rounds.

In other words, fighter A would still be able to win the fight on the scorecards even without a knockout or referee stoppage in the final round. That is only if the margin of difference in who won the earlier rounds was indeed very narrow and fighter A is able to rally back and dominate the final round convincingly enough to overcome the slight difference from the earlier rounds.

The Unspoken Code: Understanding the First & Fifth Rounds

Because of the unique scoring system, Muay Thai fights have evolved to also somehow develop certain codes and understandings among fighters in the scene. These so-called unspoken codes have caused a lot of confusion among fans and spectators who don't quite understand them. And while these unspoken codes are not exactly part of the judging or scoring criteria, it would be beneficial to also understand how it works alongside and as an outcome of the scoring system.

The First Round

Muay Thai fans and spectators will notice that the action in a typical five-round match usually only picks up in the second or third round, while the first round normally sees the two fighters remaining rather tentative and respectful of one another. This is because fighters usually use the first round to feel the opponent out; meaning that they use the round to scrutinize and study the style and reactions of the opponent.

This, however, DOES NOT mean that the early rounds do not count or matter to a judge; as there have been many false claims especially outside of Thailand that state that the early rounds are not scored. Because a Muay Thai fight is judged in its entirety, it only makes sense to apply this wisdom of feeling out the opponent early in the fight. Which is why most fights are scored 10-10 in the first or second round but also with the judge recording down the fighter who did enough to win the round. But as you will read on later, the margin of the lead would not be significant.

The Fifth Round

After the intensity picks up around the second or third round and reaches its climax in the fourth or early in the fifth, most fans and spectators may see the action start to slow down dramatically in the middle, close to the end, or even at the start of the fifth and final round. They may also start seeing the fighters raise their hands occasionally in confidence or even touching gloves more.

This is due to the fact that in the final round if both fighters believe that they have done enough to win the fight, they will not see the need to dish out risk receiving any further damage. However, in many cases if the fight is indeed extremely close to both fighters or if the stakes are high, the action will continue at a high intensity till the end.

To a Muay Thai fighter, the raising of the hands is a way of claiming victory. If both fighters believe they have done enough to win, they may both carry out this practice towards the end of the fight. If the win is fairly obvious by the final round, the winning fighter may initiate a glove touch. And if the opponent answers the offer of a glove touch, it is usually a sign of acknowledging defeat (as seen in the gif above). In that case, there would simply be no need to fight on if that understanding has been established between the two fighters.

The Three Categories of Consideration

There are several considerations by which a fighter's entire approach against his/her opponent in the ring is scored. These considerations are generally divided into three categories, with each carrying a different level of importance in the overall Muay Thai scoring system. The three categories of consideration are determined aggression, ring and action control, and effective technical execution. Let's break these different considerations down further along with their level of importance:

Determined Aggression

Aggression – as long as it is forcing the action or pushing the pace in a fight against a more tentative fighter – is always considered by a Muay Thai judge. However, the level of importance this aspect of determined aggression holds in the overall decision of the fight is the lowest of the three categories. This consideration, on the other hand, does give an edge to a fighter who is both aggressive and able to score well with effective techniques.

For example, if a Muay Mat stylist – an aggressive Muay Thai fighter by default – is able to somehow execute an equal amount of significant strikes to his/her opponent who wasn't as aggressive, he/she would probably have established a slight advantage on the scorecards.

Ring & Action Control

The aspect of ring and action control holds a moderate level of importance in a Muay Thai fight. Basically, the fighter who is able to control the action and exchanges in the ring in terms of defending and attacking effectively will have an advantage in the scoring.

This is regardless of whether the fighter is constantly advancing or retreating from incoming attacks; as long as the fighter is being effective in his/her defense and offense while moving forward, backward, laterally, or even against the ropes, he/she would be demonstrating the aspect of ring and action control.

A Muay Femur – a natural technician with great ring vision – usually does well at scoring in this particular category. For example, if a Muay Femur faces an opponent who is a Muay Mat or Muay Khao fighter, the opponent would probably be the one pushing the pace and scoring better in the aspect of determined aggression.

However, if the Muay Femur is more effective in the exchanges and in his/her ring movement to nullify the aggression, then the Muay Femur would outscore the opponent as the aspect of ring and action control carries a higher level of importance than the aspect of determined aggression does.

Effective Technical Execution

Effective technical execution should without question be the single most important aspect in judging a fight in any combat sport – and it is definitely no different in Muay Thai. What this particular category basically means is that the fighter who lands the more significant, accurate and effective strikes that showcase and demonstrates proper Muay Thai technique and style will score more and very likely win the fight altogether. This category holds the highest level of importance to a judge in any Muay Thai fight.

However, it is also important to note that what qualifies and scores as significant, accurate, and effective is rather different in Muay Thai as compared to other popular combat sports. But in short, Muay Thai judges look not just for accuracy or power of strikes, but the effect those strikes have on the fighter receiving them. Let's break down what constitutes as effective technical execution and also other scoring criteria and guidelines that exist within this last category further:

The Clean Landing of Techniques

Clean landing of techniques is the most basic criteria for scoring. Whenever a kick, knee, punch, or elbow lands cleanly to an open and unsuccessfully defended target area, it scores – even if the fighter on the receiving end is unfazed by them. And naturally, landing to certain areas like the neck, chin or temple would provide for a slightly better score under this criteria. However, the overall weight of the score would not be as high as a strike which causes significant effect.

The Significant Effect of Strikes

The highest scoring strikes and techniques are those that land and have a significant effect on the fighter on the receiving end. This could mean causing your opponent to stumble or lose his/her balance, shifting an opponent out of his/her original position, causing an opponent to fall, causing a whiplash, and more. It goes without saying that ultimately, strikes and techniques that cause a knockdown or force an eight-count from the referee would score highest and in addition to that, it scores significantly in the aspect of dominance and damage inflicted as well (see next two points).

The Posture and Appearance of Dominance

A Muay Thai fight is very much like a tug-of-war for dominance. Fighters will do everything in their power to show that they are the stronger and more dominant fighter in the match; showing that they are unfazed by attacks, outworking or outmuscling the opponent, or simply knocking the opponent off balance or off their feet.

Techniques that contribute to this posture and appearance of dominance is very important to a Muay Thai judge. And while they don't score as much as a knockdown, techniques like a sweep or throw, or even a successful and significant counterattack after disrupting the balance of the opponent would still score very well on a Muay Thai judge's scorecard.

The Damage Inflicted

In the event that both fighters are scoring equally on all other aspects, Muay Thai judges would then look at the amount damage inflicted to determine the fighter who had been truly effective. Some clear signs of significant damage are opened cuts on the face or head, heavy bruising on target areas like the torso or thighs, or fatigue. However, it is important to note that this particular aspect would only be considered if the fight is extremely close. There have been many cases where significantly damaged fighters have rallied back to win a fight where the opponent was not as battered as them.

Knowing how Muay Thai fights are scored will not only help you to understand the art better, it will also help equip you with the knowledge you need to perform more efficiently if you ever step into the ring. So, remember to invest some time into knowing what matters in a Muay Thai fight and what doesn't.