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Martial arts to be on display tonight

By Kevin Iole
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A promoter for tonight's K-1 card at the Bellagio pleaded with the media not to refer to the sport as kick boxing.

K-1 pits athletes using different styles of martial arts.

But anyone who has seen Cung Le fight would never call it kick boxing.

Le is a San Shou fighter, a martial arts style that merges traditional boxing, Greco Roman wrestling and kung fu.

He will fight Mohammed Lamin Keita in a five-round bout for the International Sport Kickboxing Association light heavyweight championship and K-1 USA title in one of the featured bouts on a 12-bout card that starts at 6 p.m.

But Le, 28, said he isn't worried about championships, honor or recognition. He said he worries about making an impact on young people's lives.

Born in Vietnam but a resident of San Jose, Calif., since he was 2, Le looks at his place in life differently than most athletes.

"It's a great feeling to be recognized by people as a good athlete and a good martial artist, but it's better to be recognized as a positive role model," said Le, who won the California state wrestling championship at 158 pounds while in junior college. "As a martial artist, my goal is not how many titles I can win but how many people I can touch."

Le's story is typical enough in that he was small as a child and was picked on by neighborhood bullies. He turned to martial arts for protection and has become one of the best in the world.

The San Shou style is complex and allows him to show an array of skills, creating action-filled bouts for spectators.

"If a wrestler watched me, he could say, Hey, that was a great takedown or slam," Le said. "A boxer might watch and like the way I punch and use my hands. And somebody in one of the martial arts might talk about my kicks. You can get it from all sides."

That is what makes the San Shou fights so appealing. For every move, there is a countermove. There is rarely a lull. There are no clinches, with the fighters holding the way they do in many hand-to-hand combat sports, because if one fighter tries to clinch in San Shou, the other is liable to body slam him.

"I think people will like it when they see it," said Le, who is 10-0 with seven knockouts as a professional and 36-2 with 24 knockouts including his amateur career. "There is always a lot going on."

But San Shou fighting doesn't pay the bills, so Le has other forms of incomes. He owns one martial arts studio in San Jose, owns another with a

friend and sells equipment.

He hardly complains, though, about having to work so hard to make a living.

"I don't worry about winning or getting all this glory," Le said. "That's not my motivation. I just want to represent myself and my sport well and put on a good exhibition. If the people like what they've seen and if I can be a positive influence on one person, I feel so good, regardless of what else may happen."

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