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In Chinese Bullfighting Circles, He's a Bit Like Mike Tyson

Optimus Prime Is a Transforming Figure Who Humbles Rivals, When He Feels Like It

By Bob Davis

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DAMOGU, China—It's bullfighting season in China and Optimus Prime, the baddest bull in Yunnan province, is bashing his way to victory.

There are no matadors in Chinese bullfighting. It's just bull versus bull in a match that ends when the loser runs away.

Optimus Prime seldom loses. His strategy: Gallop at full speed, smash his rival in the head and send the poor bull sprawling. If Optimus Prime were a boxer, he'd be Mike Tyson.

"He's the king of the bulls," says Li Xuebao, a skinny tobacco farmer who says he has seen Optimus Prime fight 20 times.

Chinese bullfighting isn't a big-money sport, although it is getting there. The Yi people, an ethnic minority of eight million spread over southwestern China, have been fighting bulls for more than a century as a way to celebrate a harvest ceremony called Torch Festival, which fell this year on Aug. 11, and, in more recent years, Lunar New Year.

A decade ago, the bouts were held in fields for beer money. Farmers unhooked water buffalo from their carts to decide whose was the most powerful. Now bullfights draw thousands, first prize money has jumped to as much as 50,000 yuan (nearly \$8,000), and the tiny farming village of Damogu has built a new bullfighting arena.

No one will confuse the structure with Yankee Stadium. The ring, roughly 100 yards in diameter, sits at the bottom of a big stone pit. Spectators sit on stone formations and on the top of the ring. One young woman fell into the ring during an August match

this year and was lifted out before a bull noticed her. Vendors sell soft drinks, bean curd soup and—at one stall decorated with a severed donkey head—donkey meat. Water buffalo relax between matches in a mud pond.

Twelve-year-old Optimus Prime has helped build popular interest. In 2008, Bi Jiangang, a local promoter, says he had a hand in renaming the bull after the Transformers character, to give the bull more pizzazz for a local TV performance. "We said, 'Optimus Prime is very strong, our bull is very strong, so let's call him Optimus Prime,' " recalls Mr. Bi, whose mobile phone ringtone is the Toreador Song from "Carmen." Before that, the bull was known as Little Bull.

Many bulls simply don't want to fight. They roll around in the mud of the bull ring and stare at the crowd. Their trainers use sticks and ropes to rile them. Bouts turn into head-butting stalemates.

Live and let live has never been Optimus Prime's M.O. In neighboring Guizhou province, bull owners got so tired of having their bulls battered by Optimus Prime that they outfitted the animals with straw head cushions, several bull traders say.

But the bull can be defeated. In about 30 matches he has lost somewhere between two and five times, according to local bull trainers. If his initial charge doesn't splatter his opponent, the one-ton bull with anvil-thick horns, loses interest. "It's his weakness. He gives up," says Optimus Prime's co-owner, Lu Baoliang, who owns a local tile company.

At this year's Torch Festival match at Damogu, bull trainer Wang Xueping thought he had a shot at taking down the champ. Last year, one of Mr. Wang's bulls, Big Bull, who has horns twice the size of Optimus Prime's, lasted two minutes 40 seconds with Optimus Prime, an eternity in Chinese bullfighting, before giving up because of injuries. This year, Big Bull was in top condition.

On the day of the match, Mr. Wang's wife, also a trainer, said Big Bull was acting rambunctious, which she took to be a good sign. Her husband had entered three bulls in the heavyweight division, which increased their chances of winning. In all, 23 bulls were registered; losing once gets a bull eliminated.

Optimus Prime's handlers hardly seemed worried. The bull was led to special perch high in the rocks. Black netting was unfurled to protect him from the sun. Bottled water was poured on his black coat, so he could keep cool without dirtying himself in the mud pond. Four dozen eggs were off to the side to feed him between rounds. (On off days, he eats smoked pork.)

He was surrounded by Optimus Prime groupies. "I travel wherever Optimus Prime travels," said Bi Fengmi, a 28-year-old farmer, who said he figured 100 other Yunnanites do the same.

As Optimus Prime descended to the ring for his first bout, the crowd roared. He was draped in scarlet and gold as if he actually was Mike Tyson heading out of the dressing room. As soon as the bull ring door opened, Optimus Prime spied his opponent, galloped to attack and whomped him in the head with his horns. The frightened rival ran away—meaning that he had lost the bout—but Optimus Prime continued his pursuit, chasing him around the ring.

A bull handler then gave chase, grabbing Optimus Prime's left horn in a futile attempt to get the bull to slow down. A second handler grabbed the right horn, as all three raced around the ring. When one of the handlers put his hat over the bull's eyes, Optimus Prime finally stopped.

Optimus Prime

Grabbing a speeding bull isn't dangerous work "for professionals," said Mr. Bi, the promoter, though he added "we buy them health insurance."

For Optimus Prime, the next four rounds were replays of the first, though he didn't chase the losing bulls around the ring so frenetically. During the fourth round, he bashed his opponent powerfully enough to roll him on his back. When the rival stumbled to his feet, Optimus Prime knocked him down again. During the six-hour contest, no bull could withstand Optimus Prime's onslaught, making him the easy winner, though he did come away with cuts and bruises.

Mr. Wang, the trainer who hoped to dislodge the champ, was disconsolate. Big Bull never got a chance even to face Optimus Prime. After head-butting a lesser rival just

once in the second round, Big Bull ran away. "Bad luck," Mr. Wang muttered, as he sat on a big stone and spat out sunflower seeds.

There is another bull that may yet beat Optimus Prime, say Chinese bull trainers. He lives 30 miles away in a farming hamlet called Jingbugan. Red River Heavyweight weighs 1,000 pounds more than Optimus Prime. The 7-year-old Red River Heavyweight has won all of his eight or so fights, but hasn't yet faced Optimus Prime.

The bull owners each say the other is afraid of facing their bull. Bull fighting aficionados suspect they are both afraid of a match because a loss would tarnish one of the bull's sterling records. But if fan interest builds and the purse is rich enough, says Mr. Bi, the promoter, he could arrange a fight.

Says Mr. Li, the Optimus Prime groupie: "Who wouldn't want to see such a match?"

—Olivia Geng and Yang Jie contributed to this article.

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