Pankration

A Historical Look at the Original Mixed-Martial Arts Competition

About 3,000 years before the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Extreme Fighting, PRIDE and all the other mixed-martial arts competitions of today, there was *pankration*—arguably the closest that a sport has ever come to no-rules combat. Pankration was one of the three empty-hand combat sports practiced in ancient Greece—the other two being wrestling and boxing—but it was the one that most closely approximated all-out fighting using virtually any technique. In fact, the word "pankration" alludes to "the most powerful" or "the one using all powers and means."

Pankration was described succinctly by Philostratus in the third century, who called it "a dangerous form of wrestling, which involves bruising strikes to the face, grappling techniques—including after falling to the ground—different types of chokes, foot and arm locks, and strikes and kicks; all

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A Hellenistic-era Greek bronze shows a pankratiast using a leg entanglement to immobilize his opponent while he applies a shoulder lock.

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this except biting and gouging." Aristotle described it as an event in which "it is required to do what wrestlers do and what boxers do." Philostratus expressed a similar view in another work, in which he called pankration a combination of impure wrestling and impure boxing.

A study of the millennium-long practice of pankration can enrich the MMA experience, which is in essence what pankration competition was. The historical data not only give us clues as to specific combat techniques but also address broader questions of how one should approach empty-hand confrontations.

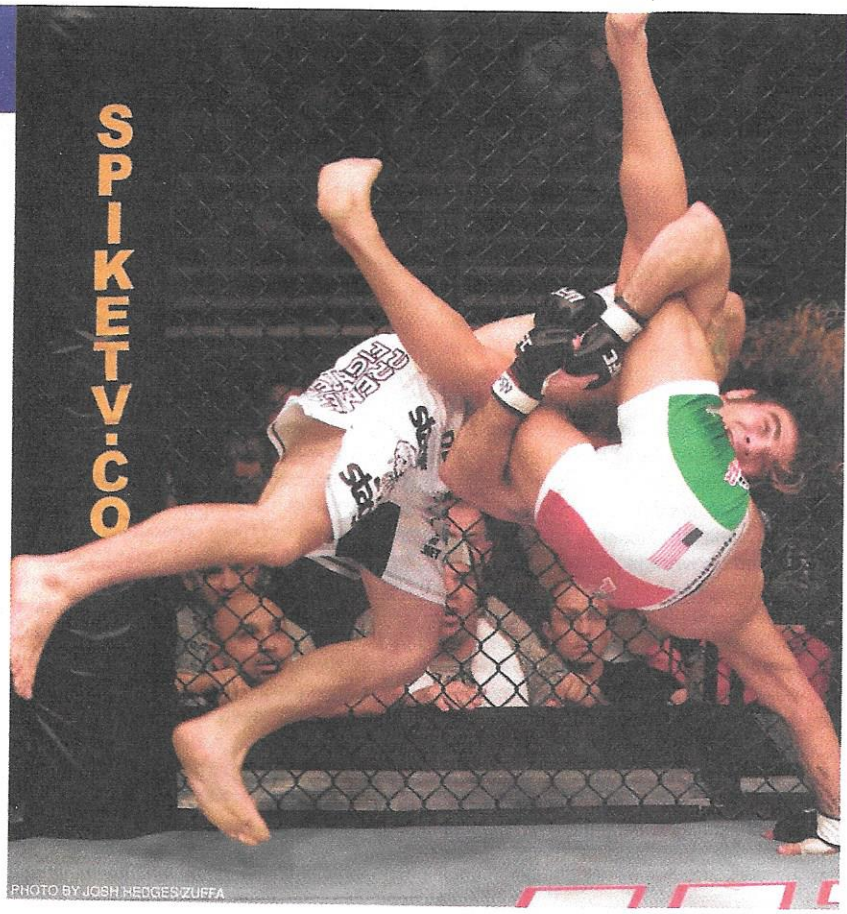
Beginnings

The Greeks put the origin of pankration in their myths of gods and heroes. Hercules was considered one of its fathers, having won a contest in Olympia and triumphed in a competition organized by the Argonauts. He's also said to have won in the first Pythian games at Delphi, organized by the god Apollo. Another tradition has it that Hercules first used pankration techniques to subdue the Nemean lion. Theseus, an important mythical hero, was said to have defeated the Minotaur in the Labyrinth using pankration.

After lifting his adversary with a reverse frontal waist lock, a pankration athlete prepares to slam him to the ground. Hellenistic bronze sculpture.

Turning to more historical sources, pankration is believed to be a product of Greek society in the seventh century B.C., whereby as the need for expression in violent sport increased, it filled a "total contest" niche that neither boxing nor wrestling could. There are arguments to the contrary, however. There's evidence of the combat/self-defense—as opposed to the sport—form of pankration in Homer's description of the confrontation of Ulysses and Irus in *The Odyssey*. While that points to the existence of combat pankration, it doesn't imply that there were pankration competitions at that time. The evidence for the latter comes from the second-century testimony of Pausanias.

In his travelogue about Olympia, Pausanias argued that the Olympic Games were first introduced well before the descent of the Doric tribes into the Peloponnesus, the southernmost part of mainland Greece where Olympia lies, in the 12th century B.C., and that this first period of the



The Ultimate Fighting Championship and similar mixed-martial arts contests represent efforts to revive the combat sport of pankration, the author says. Here, Clay Guida hoists Roger Huerta into the air before slamming him to the mat in the finale of The Ultimate Fighter, Season 6.

games was interrupted after these tribal movements. The Olympics didn't resume until the eighth century B.C. In this context, Pausanias recorded the view held by the people around Olympia that they gradually reconstructed the games as they added back the events from the first period. Thus, according to this view, pankration competitions had taken place more than 500 years before their (re)introduction into the Olympics in 648 B.C.

Pankration was practiced at least until the end of the fourth century A.D., when the games were abolished by Emperor Theodosius. Thus, pankration competitions in the revived Olympics lasted more than a millennium.

Popularity

Pankration was arguably the most popular athletic contest in ancient Greece. In a dialogue, Philostratus had one of his characters comment, "You have come to the Olympic Games themselves and to the noblest—or best, most beautiful, most popular—of the contests held at Olympia; for this is the men's pankration." Philostratus wrote elsewhere, "From all the competitions, the one that is most popular is the pankration."

We also have evidence, in the form of a list of prize money for a competition in Aphrodisias, that victors in pankration were by far the highest-rewarded winners in the Olympics in which material prizes were given. Another piece of evidence that pankration was the most popular event in the games was its position as the last event, which is when one would expect the favorite event to be held.

Other evidence indicates that pankration was popular and widely practiced at least until the end of the fourth century, when the Panhellenic games were abolished by imperial decree. St. Basil, one of the fathers of the Christian Church, writing in the second half of the fourth century, felt compelled to use examples from the preparatory training regimens of pankration—and the importance of those regimens for victory in competition—to make a point to young Christian men about the similar need for spiritual preparation to meet their spiritual challenges.

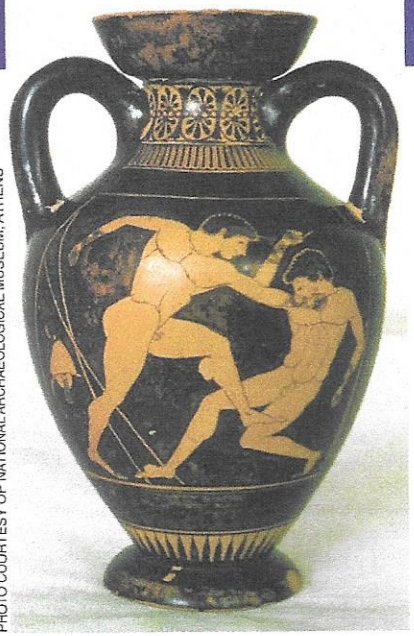
Finally, it's abundantly clear from ancient sources that pankration spanned the social spectrum and that the sport was particularly popular in the higher social classes of the classical and later periods, which often descended from the ruling warrior classes of the archaic period. The playwright Aristophanes made reference to the "aristocratic" appeal of pankration in his comedy *Wasps*. He had the character Bdelycleon, who tries to instruct his father in the ways of polite society, suggest pankration as a suitable subject of conversation in such circles. We know that pankration was not only followed but also performed by rulers such as Philip, king of Macedonia. Philip was described as practicing with another *pankratiast* while his soldiers watched.

Physicality

Pankration, wrestling and boxing constituted the heavy events of the ancient games, probably because they were the domain of large athletes. Plutarch explicitly noted that heavily muscled athletes eventually crush their opponents and defeat even those who have good timing and skill. But although successful pankratiasts needed to be heavily muscled, there was an effort to increase lean body mass, which the medical doctor and writer Galen referred to in his writings.

The fact that size and strength mattered is indicated also by references to the large size of many successful pankratiasts. The most famous practitioner, and according to tradition the founder of the sport, was Hercules. A number of historical athletes were said to have had Herculean physiques. Lygdames of Syracuse, the first victor in pankration in 648 B.C., was said to have had a foot length of 18 inches. Given the statistical relationship between foot length and body height, that would imply that he was approximately 7 feet tall and could have weighed 400 pounds. Another famous pankratiast, Poulidamas of Skotousa, was considered by Pausanias to be the biggest man of his time. A three-time winner of the Olympic Games in pankration, Dorieus of Rhodes was so large and well built that when he was captured by the Athenians in a battle, he was released without being harmed, apparently because of his impressive physique.

One of the most renowned pankratiasts of antiquity was Theagenes from the island of Thasos, who must also have been impressive physically. Tradition has it that at age 9, while he was coming back from school, he removed the bronze statue of a god from the marketplace and carried it home because he liked it. He returned it



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A pankratiast is shown winning a match by submission using a punch and a kick. Note the protective hand wraps. Red figure amphora.

by himself when the angry people of the island demanded it. According to Aristotle, another pankratiast, Damagetos, was 4 *piches* tall—that is, between 6 feet 8 inches and 7 feet 10 inches. Athenaeus of Naukratis recounted that the pankratiast Astyanax of Miletus, a three-time winner at the Olympics, was of such proportions that when he was invited to dinner by the Persian satrap Ariobarzanes, he promised to eat all the food prepared for all the guests—and actually did so. And when the Persian asked Astyanax to perform a feat that would demonstrate his power, he took the bronze frame of the bed he'd been reclining on and straightened it with his bare hands.

However, it wasn't always the case that successful pankratiasts were men of titanic dimensions. Pindar praised Melissos, the winner of the Isthmian games: "He did not have the build of Orion and when you saw him, you did not see him as extraordinary, but he had profuse strength—a man of small stature but with undefeatable attitude." Moreover, the gigantic Poulidamas mentioned above was apparently defeated by Promachus, an athlete who was smaller in size and strength.

Philostratus discussed the appropriate physical characteristics for pankratiasts, which, according to him, were similar to those of wrestlers. However, he said that while men of average height and heavy musculature could be good wrestlers, they might not be successful in pankration because they lacked the striking range provided by long limbs. He argued, therefore, that pankratiasts should be taller than average. Philostratus pointed to the need for a strong and long neck, well-developed shoulder and arm muscles, a large and protruding chest, a flat and strong but not excessively small midsection, a well-developed back, a strong backside that isn't too narrow or wide, developed thigh muscles without bowleggedness, and strong and durable skin. Philostratus noted that the best pankratiasts were boxers who were "wrestler material," rather than boxers and wrestlers who were "boxing material."

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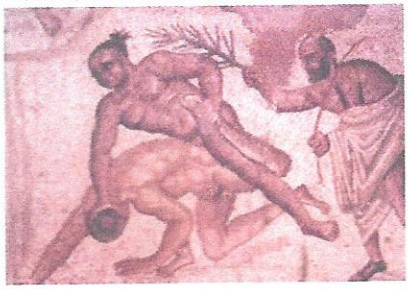

A pankratiast controls his opponent's head while he applies a reverse knee lock. Mosaic, Batten Zammour, Tunisia.

Psychology

In Lucian's writings, we read that the ancient Athenian legislator Solon discussed with his foreign guest Anacharses the admirable characteristics of the combat athletes of the Hellenic world. Solon included, among others, *arete* (superiority, perfection and prowess in male psychological characteristics), physical conditioning, knowledge and experience, power, daring, zeal, honor, attitude and a focus on victory. Pindar noted that the pankratiast Melissos had "courage similar to that of wild lions and intelligence and craftiness like that of the fox."

The qualities of toughness and perseverance were necessary to carry pankratiasts through grueling competitions, where they often had to fight at least four opponents. Moreover, because many also competed in wrestling or boxing on the same day, they needed extraordinary psychological reserves.

Greek combat athletes often combined toughness, perseverance and pride with the ability to mask weakness. The following example comes from boxing but would undoubtedly reflect the approach of successful pankratiasts: Euridamas won his boxing match, but in the course of the bout, his opponent struck him in the mouth and broke his teeth. Euridamas swallowed (instead of spitting out) the teeth so as not to show to his opponent that he'd been hurt.

That the sense of not giving up was highly developed in pankratiasts is evident from a letter a trainer sent to the mother of an athlete named Mandrogenes: "If you hear that your son died, believe it, but if you hear that he was defeated, don't." The statement illuminates the combative and competitive ethos of pankratiasts.

Along the same lines, the Greco-Jewish philosopher Philo noted: "I know many cases of wrestlers and pankratiasts so full of ambition and eagerness for victory that although their bodies have lost their strength, they renew their vigor and continue their athletic efforts with nothing to help them but the soul, which they have inured to despise terrors, and in this they persevere to their last gasp. ... Those who exercise their bodily vigor have surmounted the fear of death whether in the hope of victory or to avoid seeing themselves defeated. ... It is told of two athletes in a sacred contest how, possessed of equal strength, each

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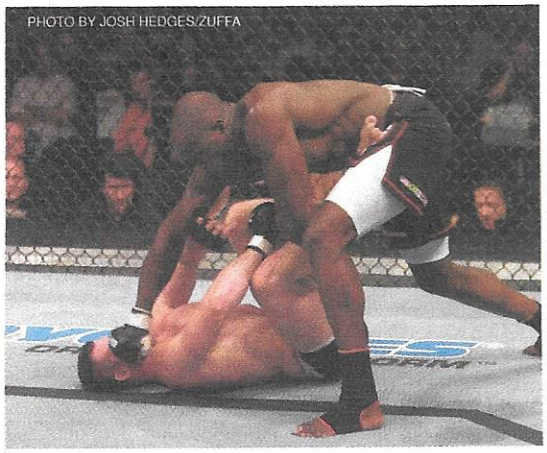

The martial artists who compete in the Ultimate Fighting Championship exemplify the qualities of Greek pankratiasts. Here, the heavily muscled Cheick Kongo (standing) and Mirko Filipovic wage war at the UFC 75. Each is known for his strength and knockout power. Like their ancient counterparts, they're required by their sport to do what wrestlers do and what boxers do.

offensive taken by the one [was] returned in equal measure by the other. They never flagged until both fell dead. ..."

Elsewhere, Philo recounted an incident that showed the optimal approach: "In a contest of the pankratiasts ... one of the combatants would strike blow after blow both with hands and feet, every one of them well aimed, and leave nothing undone that might secure his victory, and yet he finally quit the arena without a crown in a state of exhaustion and collapse, while the object of his attack, a mass of closely packed flesh, full of the wiriness of the true athlete, his sinews taut from end to end, firm as a piece of rock or iron, would yield not a whit to the blows, but by this stark and stubborn endurance will break down utterly the strength of his adversary and end by winning the complete victory."

Aristotle also found the boxer's—and, we can presume, the pankratiast's—ability to withstand great pain for the sake of victory extremely enlightening, as he thought it could teach a man even to sacrifice the life he enjoys for an important cause.

The willingness and capacity of pankratiasts to withstand the hardships of their sport were also conveyed realistically and somewhat grimly by the philosopher Epictetus in the first century when he enumerated the rigors of training and the restricted diet. He also wrote: "Then in the contest itself, he must face being gouged, sometimes dislocating a wrist or twisting an ankle, swallowing lots of sand, being flogged, and with all this very often being defeated."

Pankratiasts were ready to make sacrifices and exercise self-control to attain the high level of performance that was expected. Plato in his *Laws* noted: "Do we not know by report about Iccus of Tarentum, because of his contests at Olympia and elsewhere—how, spurred by ambition and skill, and possessing courage combined with temperance of his soul, during all the period of his training (as the story goes), he never touched a woman."

From the ancient testimonies, it's clear that while pankration was a violent sport, it required great dedication in developing the character and soul as well as the body of the fighter. This is reflected in the inscription on a monument erected to the pankratiast Kallikrates: "[He] has obtained with sweat and toil a glorious reputation and is renowned among all men throughout the world because of the perfect wisdom that was the object of his dedicated effort. ... He took care of his soul."

Along the same lines, we read of a group of athletes mourning the death of a man named Alfidius, "since it struck down the most potent example of both moderation and achievement ... for he was most amazing in regard to his inimitable moderation and gentleness, which he showed throughout his whole athletic career."

Finally, an inscription from Aphrodisias recorded praise for the pankratiast Aurellius Achilles, "who took up the training of his body and was most noble in contest and most pious in his manner of living and conduct, to such a point that he blended as much virtue of soul as of body."

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