The Pankration

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Pankration was an ancient sport introduced in the Greek Olympic games in 648 BC. Many historians believe that, although Pankration was not one of the first Olympic sports, it was likely the most popular. Some also argue it to be the first all-encompassing fighting system in human history. This is a strongly debated issue in the academic community.

Etymology

The term comes from the Ancient Greek words "pan" (meaning "all") and "kratos" (meaning "strength" or "power") or in other words, no holds barred. The term is also used to describe the sport's modern varieties.

Origins

In Greek mythology it was said that the heroes Hercules and Theseus invented the pankration as a result of using both wrestling and boxing, were the two co-founders of panmahia, unarmed combat. The term "panmahia" would later become disused in favor of the term pankration. The ropolo (club) and lion skin armor would also become symbolic among Hellenic warriors due to the famed feats of Hercules. It had numerous forms such as kato pankration, in which the athletes could fall to the ground and continue the match, and ano pankration, in which athletes had to remain standing throughout the match. The competitors could use moves like the gastrizein, (stomach trick), which was a kick to the gut, as well as the apopternizein, (heel trick), where a foot was grabbed to throw an opponent off balance. Also one opponent could hold another and punch him during a match. Pankration was more than just an Olympic event, it formed the basis for all combat training for Greek soldiers - including the famous Spartan Hoplite warriors and Alexander The Great's Macedonian Phalanxes. The techniques varied just as in the oriental martial arts according to ‘style’. Pankration systems were taught within families and many times from master teachers (Thaskalos) to students (Pankratist). The features found were common with the oriental arts such as: Forms or Katas were known as Pyrrics and single blow challenges as Klimax; internal energy was developed through breathing exercises, the equivalent of ‘Chi’ in Chinese arts, were known as Pneuma. Pneuma primarily denotes the wind (derived from the Greek word pneo which means to breathe, blow); also 'breath'; then, especially the spirit. They also used punching bags and wooded posts for striking and the hardening of the body and limbs, through striking and herbal medicines.

Elements

Pankration, as practiced in the ancient world, combined elements of both boxing (pygme/pygmachia) and wrestling (pale) to create broad fighting sport similar to today's mixed martial arts. A match was won by submission of the opponent or if the opponent was incapacitated. A contestant could signal submission by raising his hand, but sometimes the only form of submission was unconsciousness or death. Joint locks and choke holds were common techniques of accomplishing this. In fact, there were only two rules: contestants were not allowed to gouge eyes or to bite. Grave, even permanent injuries were common, as an accepted means of disabling the adversary: mainly breaking limbs, fingers or even the neck. Pankration bouts were quite brutal and sometimes life-threatening to the competitors. There were no weight divisions and no time limits. The fighting arena or "ring" was no more than twelve to fourteen-feet square to encourage close-quarter action. Referees were armed with stout rods or switches to enforce the rules against biting and gouging. The rules, however, were often broken by some participants who, realizing they were outclassed by a heavier and stronger foe, would resort to such measures to escape being seriously maimed. The contest itself continued uninterrupted until one of the combatants either surrendered, suffered unconsciousness, or, of course, was killed. Although knockouts were common, most pankration battles were decided on the ground where both striking and submission techniques would freely come into play. Pankratiasts were highly-skilled grapplers and were extremely effective in applying a variety of takedowns, chokes, and punishing joint locks. Strangulation was most feared during ground combat, and was the leading cause of death in matches. A fighter would immediately raise his arm in defeat once his opponent's forearm had secured a firm grip across the windpipe or carotid artery (though there are stories of fighters who chose to die rather than surrender.)

If there was no winner by sunset, the judges would declare Climax and the fighters would start taking alternating undefended blows until one was defeated.

Ancient sculptures and pottery paintings depicting naked pankration fighters show blade-like hands and crouches reminiscent of modern fighting systems.

The feats of the ancient pankratiasts became legendary in the annals of Greek athletics. Stories abound of past champions and masters who were considered invincible beings. Arrichion, Dioxippus and Polydamas are among the most highly-recognized names, their accomplish- ments defying the odds by besting multiple armed opponents in life-and-death combat.Among pankration fighters, Dioxippus was the most famous. He won several Olympic games as no one dared challenge him, became friends with Alexander the Great and was challenged by one of Alexander's soldiers named Coragus who fought with weapons and full armour, but was still defeated by the almost unarmed Dioxippus, whose only weapon was a club. Later, the ashamed Macedonians framed Dioxippus for theft, after having introduced a golden cup under his pillow, which led him to commit suicide.

In the lead-up to the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, a modern version of pankration (not naked, usually wearing only shorts or a type of loin cloth, sometimes also T-shirts) was tipped as being a new sport in the Olympiad, especially due to its being an event in the ancient games. However, its application (along with that of inline skating) was not approved. Rumours were that it was rejected due to its inherently violent nature, even though the modern version is significantly less violent than the original, and like boxing and wrestling also ancient Olympic sports, there is an international set of humane rules governing the modern sport.

Influence

Because of Alexander the Great's impact on the Middle East and India, there is belief by some that cultural exchange may have occurred in these civilizations. It has been suggested that the fighting systems of India were influenced by the invasions of Alexander, but this has not been substantiated by firm scientific evidence. It is still unknown what cultural influence he may have had on India. A thorough anthropological study of this history would be required.

Pankration's influence on modern culture is still debatable as the modern version of Pankration is not the original form as practiced by the ancient Greeks. The original ancient Greek form of Pankration was not fully transmitted to later generations due to the fall of the Greek and Roman civilizations and the subsequent Dark Ages of western Europe. Most modern versions of Pankration are influenced by western boxing, catch and freestyle wrestling, ancient Greek artifacts (i.e. pottery, vases, sculptures, writings), as well as East Asian martial arts like karate, kung-fu, jujitsu, and muay thai.Advocates for the sport have formed a US Pankration Team, and it is possible that a modern version of the sport could be re-introduced into the Olympics in the future.