The Ghosts of Provençal Wrestling
In the Forgotten Arena of the Roumavages

The setting sun gilds the rolling olive groves in gold; the air is thick with the scent of thyme and warm earth. In the heart of Maillane, a small village in the Bouches-du-Rhône, the drum thunders like a frantic heartbeat.

“Who will wrestle? Let him come forward to the meadow by the mill!”

The call rings out, and suddenly a massive figure emerges from the crowd – bare-chested, muscles gleaming with sweat, calves taut as drawn bows. Facing him, a young, wild-eyed ephebe. They seize each other in a bear hug that cracks bones, and the ground shakes beneath their throws.This is not a scene from a Hollywood film, but an echo from the past: Provençal wrestling, those ancestral duels that once set the roumavages alight – village festivals where all of Provence pulsed to the rhythm of raw strength and collective joy.

Once ubiquitous in every village, these wrestling matches have almost vanished.Yet their breath still lingers: follow me, from the dusty pages of archives to the meadows where a few ephemeral arenas are still improvised.

A heritage forged in Frankish blood and sweat

Let us trace time back to the 6th century, when the Franks, those Germanic warriors, swept across Merovingian Provence. Under Charlemagne (742–814), these tests of strength took root in the Midi, a Huguenot stronghold where the Reformation infused a rebellious spirit. Influenced by the rugged Burgundian style, Provençal wrestling – loucho, body-to-body combat – became a ritual: not mere grappling, but a ballet of power where hands, arms, hips, and back clashed in catch-hold fashion. Forget treacherous leg hooks; here the “true wrestling” was a pure, minimalist duel in the use of legs, maximalist in the embrace – a rib-crushing Bear Hug, a Crotch Hold under the armpits that unbalanced like an earthquake.The evidence is carved in stone:

- Romanesque sculptures from the 9th century beneath the vaults of Notre-Dame-de-l’Assomption in Anzy-le-Duc.
- 13th-century bas-reliefs at the abbey of La Grande-Sauve.
- The sketches of medieval architect Villard de Honnecourt: two giants rolling in the dust, a foretaste of the ancient pankration imported by the Phocaeans 2,500 years ago.

In the 16th century, Simon Goulart (Lichamelicke Sterckte, 1600) described it as a “merciless confrontation”, exported by Provençal Protestants to England and Germany – seeds of the future Lancastrian catch-as-catch-can.But the 19th century rang the death knell. Industrialisation nibbled away at the meadows. As early as 1830, Jean Dupuis imposed “standing Greco-Roman” rules: goodbye to ground work and legs, hello to flat-hand wrestling. By around 1860, the modern version triumphed, relegating professional variants – sometimes theatrical, with punches and kicks – to fairground booths.*“It was the end of an era,”* a local historian tells me over coffee in Arles, *“when the body was not an*

athlete, but a storyteller."

The village arenas: styles and champions, between honour and challenge

At the heart of the roumavages – hybrid festivals blending piety and paganism, tied to a patron saint or the harvest – wrestling was divided like a Provençal family:

- Lucho dis ome ("strong men's wrestling"): standing, high belt, tight collars, flying throws. Objective: back fall (back to the ground) or three imperfect foils. No ground work, no legs. 15 minutes maximum.
- Lucho de miechome ("half-men"): adolescents and young adults, a playful learning version.
- Lucho Libro: free as the mistral, everything allowed except betrayal.
- Lucho a terro ("ground wrestling"): once on the mat, the fight rolled until verbal submission – *"I yield!"* Keys, chokes, knee on chest. Bare torsos on fresh grass, to the beat of the drum.

And the heroes?

- 1821, Marseille: Peyrou de Meyrargues vs Garrinet de Pertuis – three hours of clinch, epic draw.
- Jésette de Maillane, "the Flexible", unbeaten against Quéquine or Meissonnier the Avignonese. *"He slipped like a snake; no one could throw him, not even the wind,"* a descendant still recounts during an evening gathering.

Under the drum of the roumavages: joy, rivalries, and echoes of MistralPlunge into a roumavage: procession to the saints, farandole, then the call.At Sainte-Agathe in Maillane (since 1282, the first Sunday after 5 February), it was the climax. Frédéric Mistral, in his Memoirs (1906):

"The poets arrived like bohemians for three days of revelry. In the meadow by the mill, bare-chested, calves taut, they seized each other. Jésette kept watch: no torn flesh!" Mistral himself took part, never once falling – nicknamed "the Little Maillanais".

The Almanach Provençal of 1855 lists races, jumps, and games of skill. Claude-François Achard saw it as a "ritual and pagan mixture": after Mass, the young men charged, body against body, weaving bonds and rivalries. In the Var or Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, it lasted into the 20th century.

The violent shadow: brancaille, Provence's pancrace

Yet beneath this joy lay a darker face: brancaille, the savage offshoot of Loucho Libro. Brutal "all-in": fists, slaps, feet, elbows, knees, headbutts, ground strikes, chokes. Submission or immobilisation. No weapons or bites, but many limped away – hence brancaï, the limper.

A Phocaean legacy of pankration, Romanised, Christianised through Saint Pancrace (San Brancaï), the juvenile 4th-century martyr invoked as protector against late frosts – a "saint of the ice" whose Greek name means "the all-powerful".Peasants and shepherds practised it at festivals until it went underground after 1945, supplanted by rugby and pétanque.Witnesses:

- Henri Rolland (1841): roumavages as gladiatorial arenas.
- Jean Brunet (1882): “rough and tumultuous”.
- Christophe de Villeneuve-Bargemon (1826): le duel Peyrou-Garrinet, « frontière effacée » entre lutte et combat de rue.

An echo in 1986: reawakening the giants?

In 1986, when the tambours resound once more in the meadows of Le Beaucet or Fontvieille, these are no longer merely children’s games or folkloric demonstrations.They are the memory of a time when Provence settled its scores with bare hands under the sun, when strength was not a spectacle, but a language.And sometimes, in the shade of the olive trees, one can still hear the ancestral cry:

“Who will wrestle?”

By Cinthia Alvarez – October 1986