The Brancaille: An Ancestral Provençal Combat Sport

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Introduction

The *brancaille*, also known as *brancaï*, *brancace*, *brancaziu* or Provençal *pancrace*, is a traditional combat sport from southeastern France that blends kickboxing-type striking with wrestling. In the archives of Provençal martial arts, this discipline—sometimes called *loucho brancaille*—emerges as an enigmatic figure, standing at the intersection of folk wrestling and no-holds-barred dueling. Often overshadowed by more refined or regulated practices, this adult variant of *loucho libre* embodies a darker facet of the sporting heritage of southern France. Through the fragmented testimonies available, one glimpses a harsh discipline marked by a sulphurous reputation—yet one that inspired the revival of modern *pancrace*.

The Greco-Roman Heritage

According to tradition, pankration appeared roughly 2,500 years ago with the arrival of the Greeks on the Provençal coast during the founding of Massalia (Marseille) and Nikaia (Nice). As a direct heir to the ancient Greek discipline, this practice was introduced—or reinforced—by the Romans, whose presence is reflected even in the name "Provence," derived from *provincia*, designating this former Roman province. This hybrid of wrestling and striking evokes the ancient combats where brute strength and refined technique melded in intense confrontations.

Pancrace (Latin *pancratium*) was an ancient Greek sport adopted by the Romans that combined *pugilat* (boxing) and wrestling (standing and on the ground), with very few rules: everything was permitted except biting and eye-gouging. The *kato pankration* explicitly allowed ground techniques such as submissions and throws, making this mixed combat similar to a form of ancient MMA.

Practice in Roman Gaul

Gaul, conquered by Rome in the first century BCE, incorporated the athletic festivals inspired by Greek traditions, held during public or private games in amphitheaters and *palestrae*. Although epigraphic evidence is rarer in Gaul than in Italy or North Africa, archaeological artifacts confirm the practice of pankration in several regions.

In *Gallia Lugdunensis* (central France, around Lyon and Autun), a bronze statuette representing a *pancratiaste* was discovered in Augustodunum (Autun). Dated to the first century CE, it shows an athlete in a ground-fighting posture, attesting to local familiarity with this mixed-combat discipline. Lamps and mosaics from the 1st–2nd centuries found in Vienne (Isère) and Orange (Vaucluse) also depict pankratiasts in action. These sources date to the 1st–3rd centuries CE—over 1,000 years before the Provençal archives of 1351.

Christianization and Medieval Disguise

The ban on pankration by Emperor Theodosius I in 393 CE targeted primarily the Olympic Games and violent public spectacles, within the broader context of the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Seen as excessively brutal, pankration was labeled pagan and contrary to Christian doctrine. After 404, it vanished from public records in the West.

Originally named *pancràci* (or *pancrace*), the Provençal discipline would have been adapted in the Middle Ages by peasants and shepherds to conceal its pagan roots, which were disapproved of by Catholic clergy. Renamed in honor of Saint Pancras—known in Provençal as *San Brancaille*—it acquired a facade of Christian religiosity, allowing the continuation of an ancestral cultural tradition.

The name *brancaï* carries an ironic echo in Provençal etymology: it literally means "the limping one," a nod to a sport whose fighters rarely left the ring unscathed. Saint Pancras himself, a 14-year-old Roman martyr decapitated in 304 under Emperor Diocletian, became in Provence a symbolic patron for wrestlers, transforming a pagan ritual into a "blessed" practice.

Byzantine and Cypriot Persistence

Unlike the Western Roman Empire, where pankration disappeared quickly, the Byzantine East preserved traces of the practice during the early centuries (4th–5th centuries), albeit in a more marginal and militarized form.

Pankration was incorporated into Byzantine martial arts focused on battlefield efficiency rather than spectacle. In the late 9th century, Emperor Basil I gained the favor of Michael III by defeating a Bulgarian wrestler in a competitive match. His successor, Leo VI the Wise, codified these practices in his treatise *Tactica*, evidencing a hybridization of pankration with Byzantine military tactics.

Pankration persisted longest in Cyprus, surviving in evolved forms until the late 19th century. These Cypriot variants—*pammahos* (5th century), *klotsata* (Late Middle Ages), *patsos-klotsos* (after the 15th century)—represent the most documented continuation before being repressed under British occupation (from 1878 onward).

Clandestine Continuation and Medieval Practices

Between the end of the Roman era (5th century) and the Late Middle Ages (14th century), sources documenting mixed-combat practices combining strikes and ground fighting remain scarce. This gap stems from the fall of the Roman Empire, Germanic invasions, Christian condemnation of violent pagan spectacles, and the prevalence of armed combat in a feudal context.

Although direct historical evidence is extremely rare, forms of mixed combat inspired by pankration may have survived clandestinely in Western Europe. The lack of documentation results from clerical suppression of pagan customs, the illiteracy of the social classes practicing them, and aristocratic disdain for such activities. Archives preserved in monasteries may have been hidden, destroyed, or deliberately omitted—much like many texts of pagan traditions.

By the mid-11th century, wrestling became integrated into martial training for war. It was taught to pages and squires from ages 7–8, combined with fencing and unarmed combat including strikes and throws. In tournaments and duels, fights often transitioned to unarmed exchanges: throws, chokes, and ground strikes. Among peasants and townsfolk, festivals featured folk wrestling bouts that sometimes devolved into "rough and tumble" brawls.

According to Günter Ascherson in *Traditional European Fighting and Boxing Arts*, the pankration practiced in Provence adopted the Occitan name *brancaï* in the Middle Ages before evolving into *brancaille*. At this time, Catholic fanaticism reached its peak—provoking the clergy risked the stake.

Earliest Historical Mentions (14th Century)

The oldest sources mentioning wrestling in Provence date to 1351. The consular archives of Nîmes document public competitions held annually on September 8 (Nativity of the Virgin). These events took place in public spaces such as the amphitheater of Nîmes, awarding prizes like fabric pieces or

sheep, and involved wrestlers from rival villages. Similar mentions appear in the records of 1373, 1399, and 1483, confirming regular practice during religious and folk festivities.

These sources describe a Provençal wrestling (*lucho*) with two main styles:
– *loucho de la centuro en aut* (standing wrestling above the belt, without leg hooking),
– *loucho libro* (free wrestling allowing ground techniques).

Influences and Historiographical Debates

While Greek and Roman origins are central, scholars debate additional influences. For martial-arts researcher Alberto Conti, *brancaille* was influenced by *abrazare*, an Italian street-fighting style from Lombardy dating to the Renaissance and rooted in gladiatorial and pankration traditions. The similarity is striking when comparing brancaille street techniques to illustrations from Fiore dei Liberi. Yet brancaille's striking and grappling are far more developed than those of *abrazare*.

According to Conti, brancaille appeared in France starting in the early 18th century, following the Treaty of Versailles (1768–1769) that ceded Corsica to France. The Corsican community, prominent in Marseille, would have spread the *brancaziu*, which then evolved into the brancaille.

This theory is disputed because brancaille also resembles older European combat systems predating *abrazare*. Like other European fighting traditions, brancaille developed locally while being influenced by various immigrant or colonial populations—not solely Italians—without diminishing the role of the Romans in disseminating Greek combat disciplines.

In *Gargantua*, François Rabelais describes wrestling techniques combined with strikes and close-quarters combat, including bare-knuckle punches. This depiction draws on popular and ancient mixed-combat traditions lacking strict rules, confirming the existence of hybrid fighting styles in 16th-century France.

Rules and Techniques: Ritualized Brutality

Similar to *loucho libro*—a free wrestling form akin to catch wrestling—brancaille differed in that strikes were systematically allowed, with tacit agreement between fighters. Practiced during votive festivals, this rapid and violent discipline permitted punches, kicks, elbows, knees, headbutts, chokes, joint locks, and ground strikes. Unlike the more peaceful peasant wrestling styles, brancaille tolerated everything: throws, pinches, bites, with no rounds or pauses, continuing until submission or referee intervention.

Fighters adopted an unusual guard, similar to "southpaw" in boxing, to destabilize opponents and facilitate lightning-fast clinches. Tough, pain-resistant, and ambidextrous, they relied on speed and technique rather than brute strength. With bandages or gloves prohibited, experienced fighters often struck with open hands to protect their knuckles. Compared to modern MMA, brancaille favored slimmer, more agile profiles, giving matches a swift and ritualized aesthetic reminiscent of *vale tudo* mixed with kickboxing, in an atmosphere closer to King of the Streets than the UFC.

Duality of Practice

Régis Renault, in his book *Luttes et arts pugilistiques de Provence*, describes *loucho des miche ome* as a practice once reserved for adolescents, allowing strikes and throws but forbidding ground fighting. Brancaille, in his view, was merely its adult extension with added ground techniques.

Pascal Andreoti offers a different interpretation. For him, the adult form of *loucho libre*—equivalent to brancaille—was more akin to an ancestral duel used for settling disputes. Rules were almost nonexistent, encouraging raw violence. Referees intervened only as a last resort, when death or severe injury seemed imminent. This duality—between festive entertainment and lethal confrontation—illustrates the complexity of Provençal traditions.

Historical Clandestinity

Before the 19th century, clandestine combat practices such as *savate* or *pugilat* were considered street fights or illegal duels, punishable under Ancien Régime police ordinances or, after the French Revolution, under anti-dueling laws (prohibited in 1790). Born in the 18th century among sailors and working-class populations, notably in Marseille and Paris, these practices remained confined to marginal environments.

A decisive turning point came with the 1856 decree under the Second Empire, which explicitly banned combat sports. This law targeted *savate* (French boxing) and remained in effect until abolished in 1860. During this period, *savate* survived only as a non-opposed gymnastic exercise called "French Dexterity."

After 1860, combat sports gradually reorganized, though often remaining clandestine or semi-legal until the late 19th century. Only at the turn of the 20th century, with the rise of federations, were boxing and savate formally regulated. Brancaille, less structured, continued to exist in the shadows.

The Modern Era: Marseille and the 1950s

In the 1950s, as professional wrestling (catch) boomed in France, many brancaille practitioners shifted to it for financial survival. Others moved into illegal fights concentrated in Marseille's historic Panier district. These underground tournaments, steeped in a raw and unforgiving atmosphere, attracted sailors, thugs, and traveling boxers. Brancaille thus became a favored tool among local underworld enforcers, reinforcing its infamous "thug sport" reputation.

Yet this type of mixed combat was not exclusive to Provence. Guy Jaouen, in *Les Luttes celtiques de Bretagne et du Cornwall*, describes an emblematic case: in the early 1920s, a "mixed" bout pitted boxer Robur against wrestler Jos Bec in Brittany. These fairground booths hosting boxing-grappling challenges survived there until the 1960s.

Vichy-Era Control

Contrary to Jean-Pierre Morel's 1977 article on clandestine fights, the Vichy regime did not invent the ban on brancaille; its prohibition dates back to much earlier police ordinances. Vichy merely amplified the pre-existing state control.

The Sports Charter of December 20, 1940 reorganized French sports under the authority of the General Commissariat for Physical Education and Sports, requiring prior approval for all associations. Any unauthorized practice was therefore prohibited. In this context, Vichy's approach was paradoxically nuanced: it did not formally ban organized boxing or savate, which were integrated into some physical-education programs—including the Armistice Army—while marginalizing anarchic forms such as brancaille.

Brancaille and Secret Societies: Myths and Realities

According to Étienne Giordano, a mafia-like brotherhood resembling the medieval *Coquillards* once existed in Marseille, gathering *brancaillaires* willing to perform criminal services. Yet this assertion lacks evidence and is likely a myth.

For historian Noémie Jourdan, the fantasy of secret societies stems from the failed republican insurrection of March 23, 1841 in Marseille during the July Monarchy. The reformed Vauclusian Carbonari and the *Montagne* movement in Marseille formed an effective network. After police dismantled the plot, 260 arrests and 51 convictions for "communist conspiracy" ensued.

Unlike strictly political secret societies, fraternities traditionally united individuals sharing a professional or religious background. The existence of a brancaille fraternity—similar to modern

sports clubs—remains possible. The illegal nature of the practice may have encouraged the formation of a clandestine group, though no concrete proof exists.

Attempts at Modern Revival

In the late 1970s, Ernest Banon sought to rekindle interest in Provençal wrestling, an ancient art struggling to attract younger generations. In 1971, he founded the Federation of Traditional Provençal Wrestling, determined to restore the discipline's former glory. But the rise of Asian martial arts soon overshadowed his efforts.

Banon's recruitment method was, to say the least, radical. From their first visit to the club, beginners were thrust into harsh, demanding bouts. The frail quickly dropped out; Banon called this the "natural selection." Those who endured were divided into two groups: an "alimentaire" section of less-combative but financially supportive members, and a competitive elite reserved for seasoned fighters capable of upholding tradition.

In 1989, weakened by illness, Banon passed leadership to his disciple Régis Renault. Preferring to focus on *pancrace*, Renault delegated responsibility to Jean-Paul Jimenez, who devoted himself entirely to brancaille, perpetuating Banon's strict yet fascinating legacy.

The French Pancrace Association (1990)

Institutional momentum gathered in 1990 in Carpentras with the creation of the first Pancrace Association, officially registered in the *Journal Officiel* on August 5, 1992. Led by Régis Renault, the group included a multidisciplinary team: Francisco Policarpo, Olivier Sauvayre, Pierre Mourmes, Frédéric Durand, Ange Giovanetti, and Patrick Cascales.

At the time, before the explosion of the UFC, French martial-arts magazines scorned mixed styles. This media hostility confined such practices to the underground. Fortunately, the rise of laser printing and affordable photocopiers in the early 1990s unleashed a vibrant counterculture. Self-published books and fanzines proliferated: *Lutcho*, *Arena Superfight*, *Vince*, *Navaja*, *Pancrace Infos*, *Outlaw*, *La Cogne*, *Massilia Nervis*…

Renault aimed to resurrect pankration in its ancient form, organizing competitions in Roman arenas of southern France with athletes wearing period costumes. This bold vision provoked mockery and rejection. Confronted with administrative inertia, Renault rebranded the discipline as "pancrace" in 1990, founding the French Pancrace Association and the International Union of Pancrace.

Facing regulatory incompatibilities, he conceded several compromises: a sanitized "modern pancrace"—without ground strikes—and a "traditional pancrace" truer to the original spirit, restricted to competitions abroad. Critics nonetheless accused Renault of disguising a "street sport" under a cultural varnish.

Renault's Telling Silence

What is striking in this saga is Régis Renault's silence on brancaille itself. A former president of the wrestling federation, heir to Banon, and collaborator of Jimenez, he was ideally positioned to reveal its secrets. Instead, he chose discretion, echoing the *brancaillaires*—guardians of a hidden tradition.

This enforced discretion recalls how mafiosi deny the mafia's existence. Brancaillaires behave similarly, claiming brancaille never existed or has completely disappeared. Of course, there is no intention of equating the two groups; it is simply easy to understand their reticence regarding such a sensitive subject. Lacking any ministerial approval in France, brancaille remains illegal, confining its teaching and competitions to strict secrecy.

In 2010, an attempted interview yielded a categorical refusal. Through his former students, the contacts of David Blanchard (Marseille) and Louis Ferrand (Aix-en-Provence) were obtained. Their

testimonies illuminated brancaille's hidden face: a toxic aura linked to practitioners flirting with the Marseille underworld. Unlike boxing or wrestling, which have official federations, brancaille remained a clandestine stronghold.

It was likely to exorcise this poisonous image that Renault shaped his new pancrace. Inspired by the Indian *Vajramushti Yuddha* and the original brancaille, he blended contributions from judo, jujitsu, sambo, and kickboxing, forging a novel but softened synthesis.

Decline and Enduring Flame

In 2003, weary of the government's refusal to legitimize pancrace as an official discipline, Renault withdrew. He embraced anonymity, passing the torch to Francisco Policarpo, who soon abandoned the endeavor due to other responsibilities. Pancrace was overtaken by Brazilian jiu-jitsu and contemporary MMA.

The original pancrace reverted once more into brancaille, sinking back into obscurity. In 2010, the sudden death of Jean-Paul Jimenez prompted Renault to appoint Ghjuvanni Tramoni as successor. Though pancrace vanished from public view, brancaille refused to die: Tramoni continues to teach it discreetly. Clubs, closed to the public, fiercely guard this millennia-old heritage.

Persistent rumors circulating on the Darknet speak of monthly competitions held in hidden locations, culminating in a major tournament in May on Saint Pancras Day. Reserved for a carefully chosen elite, these events forbid smartphones and cameras. The rules allow male, female, and mixed fights, inspired by underground Russian and Eastern-European circuits. Tramoni and his peers remain silent on these claims, urging extreme caution.

Modern Appropriation and Contested Heritage

Today, brancaille attracts MMA promoters eager for sensational content. This commercial appropriation—often far removed from its authentic roots—stretches from France to the international scene.

Abroad, Andrei Diaconu in Romania incorporates it into his events; descendants of French *savate* practitioners open "brancaille" clubs with commercial motives. From Brazil to the United States to India, MMA academies multiply seminars and themed classes.

In France, innovators such as David Taïeb (Krav Maga self-defense) or Sébastien Coste (MMA-brancaille hybrid) revitalize the landscape. Yet these ventures, however inventive, stray from the authentic brancaille of 19th-century streets. To preserve its soul, it is essential to distinguish cultural heritage from modern bricolage, avoiding commercial dilution of its rebellious essence.

Conclusion

Brancaille teaches us that the history of combat sports is not linear: it winds through visceral rusticity and imposed modernity, between the brightness of rings and the darkness of underground chambers. Marginalized though it is, brancaille still illuminates the pulsating veins of an indomitable Provence, far from the limelight. To enthusiasts, it issues a challenge: dig through yellowed archives and the silent minds of masters—there, the heart of an erased art still beats.