Traditional Wrestling in Provence:
Folkloric Heritage of Rural Masculinity

Introduction

In the sun-drenched villages of Provence, local festivals, or roumavages, have long been special occasions for community cohesion, centred around religious processions, folk dances and ancestral games. Among these practices, traditional wrestling, commonly known as Provençal wrestling or loucho, occupied a central place. These physical confrontations, mainly practised by the young men of the village, transcended simple entertainment to embody essential values such as virile strength, competitive spirit and social cohesion. A legacy of Frankish customs dating back to the 6th century, this folk tradition gradually died out in the 19th century as a result of modernisation, but it remains an eloquent testimony to the Provençal spirit, where the body in motion reflected the harmony between the individual and the community.

Historical Origins of Provençal Wrestling

Provençal wrestling has its roots in the Greco-Roman and Frankish traditions introduced to Provence during the Greek, Roman, Merovingian and Carolingian periods. From the 6th century onwards, under Charlemagne's Carolingian Empire (742-814), these games of strength were commonly practised by the inhabitants of the Midi, a region that became a Protestant stronghold of the French Huguenots. Influenced by Burgundian wrestling, it favoured techniques of grappling, ground fighting and throws. Unlike other contemporary styles, the use of the legs to hook or trip the opponent remained minimal, as ‘true wrestling’ was perceived as a duel of pure strength relying on the hands, arms, hips and back.

Archaeological and artistic remains corroborate this ancient history. Romanesque sculptures dating from the 9th to 13th centuries, such as those in the Church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption in Anzy-le-Duc or the Abbey of La Grande-Sauve, depict wrestlers locked in intense hand-to-hand combat. In the 13th century, Villard de Honnecourt's sketches illustrate these same physical dynamics. In the 16th century, texts such as Simon Goulart's Lichamelicke Sterckte (1600) described wrestling as a merciless confrontation. Provence, a land of Protestant reform, even exported these techniques to England and Germany in the 16th and 17th centuries, influencing Lancashire catch-as-catch-can wrestling.

In the 19th century, the evolution of Provençal wrestling was marked by societal modernisation. From the 1830s onwards, Jean Dupuis codified ‘Greco-Roman standing’ rules, prohibiting ground wrestling and leg holds. Around 1860, it was supplanted by modern Greco-Roman wrestling (flat-handed wrestling), although professional variants persisted until the 1870s, sometimes degenerating into brutal fights involving punches and kicks. This transition reflects a broader shift towards a rationalisation of physical practices, in line with the hygienist and nationalist ideals of the time.

Styles and Rules of Provençal Wrestling

Provençal wrestling was structured around two main categories, determined by the strength of the participants.

Lucho dis ome (men's wrestling) was reserved for exceptionally robust individuals and was practised exclusively standing up, with holds above the waist (upper belt wrestling), including neck holds and flying throws. The objective was to achieve a fall on the back (where both shoulders touch the ground simultaneously) or three throws. No ground wrestling or use of the legs was allowed, giving this style the character of a test of brute strength.

Lucho de miechome (half-men's wrestling), on the other hand, was aimed at young adults and adolescents of moderate strength, adopting a more playful and accessible tone.

Other variations enriched this repertoire:

Lucho Libro (free wrestling), a format allowing all body holds and fair throws, sometimes prolonged on the ground; and Brancace (pankration style), which allowed strikes and allowed the fight to continue once the wrestlers were on the ground, until total submission or surrender.

Apart from minor infringements, the rules were negotiated in advance for each match, strictly prohibiting blows, tripping and brutal acts. The combatants stripped to the waist, and victory was achieved by knocking the opponent onto their back, immobilising them (knee on the chest for a few seconds) or forcing them to submit. In the event of a draw, the fight resumed. Matches generally lasted fifteen minutes and were rewarded with trophies such as silver cups or embroidered velvet breeches. Legendary champions such as Peyroou de Meyrargues and Garrinet de Pertuis – who fought an epic three-hour duel in Marseille in 1821, ending in a draw – and Jésette de Maillane, undefeated against opponents such as Quéquine and Meissonnier l'Avignonnais, left a lasting mark on this history.

Wrestling in Provençal Village Festivals

The roumavages, popular and religious festivals linked to patron saints or agricultural cycles, provided the ideal setting for these contests. Processions, dances and physical games were intertwined, with wrestling taking the form of individual challenges or elimination tournaments involving not only the young people of the village, but sometimes rival communities. Accompanied by the sound of drums on the communal meadows, they attracted poets, musicians and curious onlookers, transforming public spaces into improvised arenas.

A prime example is the feast of Saint Agatha in Maillane (Bouches-du-Rhône), celebrated on the first Sunday after 5 February since 1282. Frédéric Mistral, in his Mémoires et récits (1906), evokes these days of jubilation when ‘the poets’ gathered for three days. The fights took place in the mill field: a call rang out – ‘Whoever wants to fight, come forward!’ – and the combatants, naked to the waist, grappled with each other with their legs stretched out. Jésette, the vigilant referee, ensured that the rules were followed, prohibiting biting and tearing flesh. Mistral himself, nicknamed ‘le Petit Maillanais’ or ‘le Flexible’, took part without ever being knocked down.

Elsewhere, during the votive festivals of the 19th century, the fights were accompanied by races, jumps and games of skill, as recounted in the Almanach Provençal of 1855. Claude-François Achard describes these events as a mixture of religious ritual and pagan exuberance: after the procession, the young people engaged in joyful hand-to-hand combat, strengthening community ties. In the Var and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence

departments, these practices persisted until the early 20th century, integrated into patron saint festivals.

Violent Variants: La Brancaille

While standard Provençal wrestling imposed uncompromising fair play, banning blows to safeguard honour, certain variants dared to be more visceral, verging on pure violence. La Brancace – literally “Pancrace” in Provençal – is a perfect example: inspired by ancient pankration, this ruthless combination of wrestling and boxing allowed the fight to continue on the ground until physical or verbal submission (knockout or surrender), testing endurance and resilience far beyond a simple fall.

Although treacherous blows – bites, low attacks – remained prohibited, these hybrid forms incorporated, by mutual agreement, punches, elbows, knees and even headbutts, evoking a catch-as-catch-can of primal brutality. Limited to 15-20 minutes and closely refereed (by legendary figures such as Jésette), Brancace took place on grassy fields to the haunting beat of a drum, transforming the fight into a spectacular ritual. But in the case of a duel fuelled by fierce rivalry, the clashes, with no time limit, took place away from prying eyes, in an extremely savage and clandestine manner.

Its very name, echoing ‘brancaï’ (lame in Provençal), betrays the lasting scars it inflicted, practised bare-chested during festivals in the Var, Bouches-du-Rhône and Alpes-de-Haute-Provence regions.

Its roots lie in the Greco-Roman heritage of Provence: founded 2,650 years ago by the Greeks (Béziers, then Marseille and Nice from the 7th century BC), the region absorbed ancient pankration, which was Romanised in this Latin province until the 5th century AD, before evolving under Frankish and Carolingian influences (6th-13th centuries). To Christianise this pagan practice, which was despised by the Church, it was renamed after Saint Pancras – San Brancaï – a young martyr from the 4th century who was invoked against spring frosts, protector of harvests and patron saint of Corsican bandits.
Its Greek etymology, “the most powerful”, sealed this agrarian rite. Ritualised in this way, Brancace survived among peasants and shepherds until the early 20th century, integrated into roumavages to channel youthful energy; tolerated in the countryside despite being strictly prohibited in towns (where it fuelled illegal betting and commercial practices), it disappeared completely from the Provençal countryside after the Second World War, overwhelmed by industrialisation and the codification of sports, then by the introduction of martial arts and oriental combat sports. Nevertheless, it survived in the same way as other forms of wrestling and pugilistic and martial arts in Provence – the bâton, the couteau and the chausson marseillais – by being taught in Marseille and the surrounding region until 1990. This legacy was first passed on by Ernest Banon, a disciple of Gian Rossi, then by his students Régis Renault and Jean-Paul Jimenez. Today, Ghjuvanni Tramoni continues this tradition in the shadows, faithful to its discreet heritage.

Literary and Historical Accounts

Although Frédéric Mistral idealises the fights in his Mémoires et récits (1906) as honourable duels with rules (no tearing of flesh, no treacherous blows), other 19th-century authors describe harsher forms, where the line between technique and brutality is blurred. Henri Rolland, in Le Lutteur (1841, Les Français peints par eux-mêmes), depicts extreme trials during roumavages, with matches in Lucho de la centuro (high belt), headlocks and flying falls, bordering on street fighting despite formal prohibitions.

Jean Brunet, in the Revue des Langues Romanes (1882), lists Lutte Libre (Lucha a touto lucha) as leading to ‘rough and tumultuous’ fights, where blows were sometimes allowed in professional versions, incorporating strikes and ground immobilisations.

Christophe de Villeneuve-Bargemon, in his Statistique générale de la France (1821-1826, vol. 3), recounts the 1821 duel between Peyroou and Garrinet as an intense clinch with blows to the legs and knees, continuing on the ground, suggesting extreme physical violence.

These accounts capture a social ritual tradition that turned violent during unregulated matches, contrasting with Mistral's poetic nostalgia.

Cultural Significance and Decline

Beyond spectacle, Provençal wrestling embodied honour, endurance and camaraderie, channelling youthful energy, resolving rivalries and perpetuating oral folklore through the epic tales of troubadours. A rite of passage in rural society, it often pitted bachelors against newlyweds, symbolising the transition to adulthood. The brancaille accentuated this joyful virility, mixed with folkloric respect, where the earth impartially judged the ‘duels of giants’ (Mistral).

Industrialisation and the codification of sport in the 19th century marked their decline: supplanted by pétanque and rugby, they disappeared around 1870, surviving in literary memories or modern re-enactments (festivals in Arles or Saint-Rémy-de-Provence). The Christianised and marginalised brancaille illustrates this decline into clandestinity after 1945.

Conclusion

The traditional fights of Provence, these passionate duels of the roumavages, pulsated to the rhythm of a vibrant and physical culture. Behind the olive trees and lavender fields beat the hearts of joyful warriors. Although they are now a thing of the past, they still inspire us: in a sedentary world, their spirit of defiance and sharing deserves to be revived, perhaps during a future roumavage. Exploring Provençal calendars could bring the echo of Jésette back to the meadows.

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