



August 13 - 29
Day:
17

Athens Forecast:
30° C
Sunny

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Ancient Greek pottery depicts the sport of pankration. (Detail. Courtesy the Toledo Museum of Art)

Ancient Greek martial art stages comeback

The original Olympic sport of Pankration, which many believe is a precursor to the Asian martial arts, is again taking hold in modern athletics.

By Li Robbins, Special to CBC Sports Online | June 17, 2004

When the Olympic flame makes its stop in Montreal on June 20, the Canadian Pankration Academy will be there to greet it. Modern-day practitioners of the ancient Greek art of fighting, members of the academy will showcase the traditions and their skills at two stops along the flame's route.

Pankration, as it is called in northern Greece (it's known as *pangration* in the south), was described by the Greek author Philostratos as "the most important preparation for warriors." Indeed, it was good enough for the greatest Greek warrior of all.

The martial training used by Greek armies, *pankraton* was introduced to Asia in 325 BC by Alexander the Great, when he conquered India. In fact, some believe *pankraton* to be the predecessor of the Asian martial arts.

In its original form, *pankraton* was a blend of Hellenic wrestling, boxing, strangulation, kicking, striking and joint locks. The word itself is usually translated as "all powers," or "all skills."

Sound fierce? It was. The only forbidden activities were biting, gouging, or scratching - anything else was legal. Serious injuries, and even the occasional death, were just part of the reality of *pankraton*.

"That new and terrible contest of all holds"

The modern-day version of *pankraton* is a somewhat less brutal than the martial art that the poet Xenophanes described as "that new and terrible contest of all holds."

INDEPTH

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Contemporary *pankration* is still very intense but considered by participants and viewers to be safe. Men, women and children participate in appropriate weight classes, combining kicks, strikes and submission grappling. But chokes are forbidden at the international level, and this ban is "closely monitored and enforced," according to John Townsley, Director of Team U.S.A. Pankration.

Townsley points out that *pankration*, like other martial arts, is really about "struggling, failing, and learning to try again. Pankration is what life is all about: developing the will to win, self control, discipline and character."

Aris Makris, a pankratist, teacher and the official representative for the World Pankration Athlima Federation in Canada agrees. He believes his sport poses no greater risk of injury than most other sports.

"There's more violence in boxing," says Makris. "*Pankration* is very strategic – you can slip underneath punches and grab your opponent, for example. It's not about being constantly hit on the head. It's also not according to one person's blueprint. You become aware of your own kinesiology and your own movements, instead of trying to match some Asian master's form."

Although *pankration* is not yet a household word in the way that karate or judo are, that could be about to change, in part because of the upcoming Athens Olympics and the interest that's reviving in the original Games. *Pankration's* connection to the Olympics is ancient and venerable – it was first introduced to the original Games in 648 B.C., and it remained an Olympic staple for the next 1,042 years.

But Makris says a quiet resurrection of the sport was already brewing before the run-up to the games.

"Really, there's been a resurgence for about 30 or 40 years, with both Greeks and non-Greeks taking interest. But in the mid-1990s, the WPAF revived the administrative aspect of it, and began organizing.

"They hoped to get it into [the Athens Olympics], of course, but didn't quite make the criteria, since you need to have 75 countries around the world to become a new Olympic sport. But it's complicated because there have to date been a couple of *pankration* organizations involved – we're still in the process of organizing."

Kick more, grapple less

Given that women's freestyle wrestling is the only new sport to be adopted for the 2004 Games, *pankration* has plenty of company in the outside-looking-in department. And while it seemed to be a shoe-in for the Olympic Youth Festival, that event never got off the ground. Regardless, interest and participation in *pankration* is clearly on the rise.

"It's going like a brushfire," says Makris. "There are delegates around the world taking down the karate and judo signs, and putting up *pankration*."

Pankration is still evolving. As recently as the 2003 WPAF Congress in Greece, rules were modified to make the stress on kicking and striking equal to the sport's emphasis on grappling. As Team U.S.A.'s John Townsley puts it, "Spectators have said unlimited periods of grappling make for a boring match."

Whether *pankration* earns a spot in the Olympic slate of sports, it will be anything but boring to watch as it moves into 21st century.

When combatants engage each other in the ring, (called the *palestra*, traditionally in trademark Greek blue), spectators are treated to a martial art that blends athleticism, strength and agility. Because in its essence, *pankration* is both sport and art, skill counts for more than brute force.

No wonder Makris' excitement is so palpable.

"Participating in *pankration* is transformative," says Makris. "It will stimulate you for life. And I do believe it's going to make it to the Olympics by 2012. So many people around the world want to see it in the history books again. It's the ancient sport of sports."

About this photo: Detail of The Kleophrades Painter (Greek, Attic) Panathenaic Amphora (Profile, Side B: Pankration Contestants and Referee). Earthenware, about 490 B.C. **Toledo Museum of Art**, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1961.24.

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