PANKRATION
THE TRADITIONAL GREEK COMBAT SPORT AND MODERN MIXED MARTIAL ART

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THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN PANKRATION

In the process of development and improvement, many martial arts styles and derivations have evolved from the old. After years of intense training and investigation, the best carefully selected fighting techniques were extracted and modified into a single system. Added to this were modern training methodology and principles of kinesiology (body mechanics). But the concepts of the classic art remained the main ingredient, actually the thread that held this mix together. This, in essence, was the birth of modern pankration and μ (mu) τ (tau) or Greek martial art in the early 1970s. The Greek symbols, μτ, are an acronym for mahitiki tehni, the Greek term for martial art. Modern pankration is the sports component of μτ. The following elements make up its foundation.

FORMS OF MODERN PANKRATION

- Sport pankration (limited-rules combat competition)
- Spartan pankration (NHB combat geared to the street)

MODERN PANKRATION TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

- Punching, striking, and elbowing techniques
- Kicking and kneeing techniques
- Takedowns, throws, and sweeping techniques
- Submission holds and joint-locking techniques
- Submission chokes and strangulation techniques

MODERN PANKRATION TRAINING METHODOLOGY

- Endurance training
- Strength training
- Striking-tool development training
- Skills application training
- Sparring

MODERN PANKRATION CHARACTERISTICS

- Fluid readiness position. Emphasis is on a well-braced stance that allows for elusive motion and is adaptable to either boxing, kicking, or grappling techniques.
- Motion economy in defense and attack. There is no wasted time or movement. Offensive tools, parries, evasions, and blocks are executed with minimal effort and turn defense into instantaneous attack.
- Ranges of combat. There are three basic combat ranges: long (kicking), medium (punching), and infighting, where elbows, knees, and grappling techniques are employed. Offense is not limited by stylized preferences but is total. The practitioner is equally skillful as a boxer, kicker, or grappler. He poses a danger from any distance, unlike some stylists who favor hands over feet or prefer to fight at long range from their adversaries.
- No high kicks. Greek martial art emphasized low-line kicks for use on the battlefield and in the arena. These techniques are “safer” to execute than high kicks, which tend to leave you off balance and vulnerable to attack. Kicks to the face or head from an upright position are reserved more for training than for actual combat.
- Heavy use of training equipment. The palaistra offers striking shields, heavy bags, focus gloves, double-end speed bags, safety padding, and headgear because such equipment allows for more realistic practice, as well as bet-
ter power and speed development. This equipment enables practitioners of this fighting art to strike with full force against a moving target.

- **Focus on suddenly closing the gap.** One of the key elements in sport pankration is to spot an opening and immediately close the distance to make the transition to infighting range. From here a clinch ensues, followed by a takedown to force the action to the ground. In this position, pure “stand-up” fighters will be unfamiliar with the combat conditions because their punches and kicks are rendered useless.

- **Emphasis on grappling skills in close.** Although punches, kicks, and strikes have their place in combat, it is inevitable that fights often end up on the ground. This is the level where grappling techniques prove effective. It is our contention that punching and kicking skills are not enough for the conditions of the street.

- **Functional attack tools.** Combat techniques must be simple and efficient. There is no time for flashy, complicated moves, such as spinning kicks or flowery hand movements. Perfect form is secondary to causing maximum damage and resolving the conflict swiftly.

- **Reality training.** Street practicality is underscored in Greek martial art. Training is geared to simulate actual fight conditions as closely as possible. It does not waste time on unrealistic, prearranged patterns or forms (i.e., kata). Sparring with full contact and protective gear is the ultimate learning experience. Emphasis is on adaptability rather than memorized response to deal with the unpredictability of real combat.

- **Spartan conditioning.** Conditioning exercises to develop strength and endurance have long been stressed in the pankratiast’s development. Weight resistance training, rope jumping, and distance running are included to equip the practitioner with the physical attributes necessary to outlast and overcome the opposition.

Pankration is indeed Western martial arts. Unlike a conventional Asian style with its emphasis on prearranged drilling (e.g., kata, one-step sparring), a technique’s utility is determined ultimately through full-contact sparring, simulating realistic combat conditions. All of its teachings are geared to this end, free of the superfluous and the nonessentials, and streamlined into the purely functional. The pankratiast is one who never meets a situation according to a predicted pattern but reacts spontaneously, improvising his approach and tactics according to the uncertain actions presented by his opponent.

Although contemporary in many ways, modern pankration preserves the Greek tradition of athleticism. It emphasizes that a martial art is first and foremost an athletic endeavor and not some mystical experience that gives one devastating powers. Pankration also stresses the importance of realism in training. To learn fighting requires that you fight and become cognizant of all those aspects that make up a real fight. Admittedly, even a street fight cannot be completely duplicated in any martial art because of its unpredictability; Hellenic combat sport has always attempted to simulate it as closely as possible.

One must also learn to wage combat on the ground. This is certainly where many outcomes of real fights are decided, and the practitioner must be well versed in grappling to overcome his opponent from this position. Upright styles that emphasize kicking and punching are useless on the ground if they are not schooled in ground tactics. A proficient grappler can easily get inside a foe’s arms and legs and wrestle him down. This has been proven over and over again, from the ancient Panhellenic games to the limited-rules combat events of today.

Mu tau is a distinct art—the expression of oneself in combat. It is not a style: styles tend to dissect what was once whole into preferential parts. Some favor hands over feet, striking over grappling; and some are very spectacular. Yet none of these styles offers a complete fighting system in itself. The goal of mu tau, as inspired by the ancient Greeks, is to be well rounded. The pankratiast is trained to be effective in either an upright posture or on the ground, against single or multiple opponents, and in both unarmed and armed situations. In a one-on-one struggle, grappling and going to the ground might be the main strategy. However, against more than one opponent or in facing a weapon, the striking aspect and remaining on one’s feet may be favored. Everything depends on the circumstances, and the pankratiast adapts accordingly.

In summary, then, mu tau is a modern Greek martial art embracing pankration as its nucleus. It might be described as an exclusive combat system, a Westernized martial arts hybrid whose theme is total fighting freedom. Not merely a blending of techniques, this system preserves a history and philosophy of ancient Greek tradition. And while it may be physically very similar to other styles, it has a unique conceptual base in ancient Hellenic civilization, fusing skill, discipline, and Spartan honor to a way of life. For this reason alone, mu tau stands as the first modern form of Hellenic martial art of its kind.