

# THE CONTROVERSIES OVER THE SPORTIFICATION PROCESS OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS IN FRANCE

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Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) are the result of technical and regulatory developments of no holds barred fighting, which take place in various countries, particularly Brazil (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006 ; Poupeau, 2009). This extreme fights were popularized through the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the beginning of the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the match promoters endowed the fights with some slightly less tolerant regulations in order to avoid facing a ban (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). This study focuses on the process of sportification of this discipline in France. The ambition of MMA promoters to « sportify » their practices faces two major difficulties. First, MMA is the subject of a rejection by authorities because of the violent image it carries. Secondly, the organization of MMA is split between competing institutions. The investigations consisted of interviews, observations, and analysis of an heterogeneous corpus composed of institutional texts, journal articles and press released published by the different groups which manage MMA in France.

## 1. Debates around MMA regulation. Sport or ultra-violent activity?

MMA is frequently described by its detractors as an extremely violent practice, a violence connected to the permissiveness of the competitions. Granting a fighter in an upper position the possibility to strike his opponent if he is on the ground is often considered as unbearable, and absolutely contrary to the elementary principles of sports ethics. This is the major criticism from the public authorities. The fighting area is a second element which is criticized. Some organizations use an enclosure surrounded by flexible wire netting. This area, the “cage”, is considered as degrading by the authorities in charge of sports.

Technical and security arguments are used to contradict this position. The idea that the freedom granted to fighters makes fighting more dangerous is demolished by the advocates of MMA. For example, they often underline that striking an opponent on the ground is less dangerous than striking from a standing position, which is allowed in boxing. Furthermore, they put forward a technical and security argument around the matter of the cage. It would allow a wider technical range than the traditional boxing ring, while constituting a safer space because a boxing ring presents significant risks for the fighters in case of fall between the ropes.

These arguments have not convinced the authorities. They do not see MMA as a sport. While there is no legislation on this subject, they ban MMA events if the rules are considered to be too permissive.

## 2. Institutional drifting of French MMA

In the 1990s, a grouping developed around a practice called “pancrace”, in reference to the antique sport. The people in charge of pancrace have joined a state-approved federation (the French Federation of Contact Sports) and, to be accepted, they have revised the most criticized points of the regulations: ground striking has been prohibited and fighting has to take place on a boxing ring. This is not the only institution participating in the organization of the mixed fight practice. Other groupings claim a more authentic MMA practice. This is the case of the Comité National de MMA. There was also a recent initiative from the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles to develop an amateur practice, but the French Ministry of Sport demanded that this practice be abandoned. Lastly, some competitions are organized by private societies. Most of these competitions take up the regulations set for pancrace, to avoid being banned.

In the end, this is a sort of institutional drifting which characterizes French MMA, torn between various groupings which conduct rival initiatives to claim their legitimacy in managing this practice. Even if they agree on the necessity of the institutionalization of MMA, the form of this institutionalization is a point of contention.

## Conclusion

In France, MMA is looking for adjustments to its original regulations. These adjustments result from a compromise between a will to follow the MMA model and the constraints imposed by public authorities. No grouping or federation has managed to legitimize and organize competitions such as practiced at the international level. Furthermore, French MMA is a fragmented practice at the institutional level.

To conclude and to open the discussion, it seems doubtful that the MMA international system, which is under the control of companies like the UFC, can be compatible with the French sport system, under the state control through sports federations.

## References

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