



History of the Sport Mixed Martial Arts



Origins of mixed martial arts

- For most people, the modern version of mixed martial arts began in 1993 with the Ultimate Fighting Challenge (UFC), but 'pankration' contests in ancient Greece were a very close match.
- Meaning 'all powers' in Greek, pankration came into being around 650 BC and soon became a regular part of the ancient Olympiad. It featured a combination of brutal wrestling, punching and kicking, with athletes shifting to limb locks and chokes once contests hit ground level.
- During the Han Dynasty, Chinese military training involved a similar combat system called *shuai jiao*, which combined wrestling and traditional *kung fu*, while in Japan the traditional combat arts of jiu-jitsu, and later judo, are also crucial elements in the development of what was to become mixed martial arts.
- Modern mixed martial arts (MMA) began its rise in popularity almost simultaneously in Japan, the home of jiu-jitsu and judo, and Brazil, which embraced the sport as it evolved into what is known as Brazilian jiu-jitsu.
- In 1985 a fighting system called 'Shooto' was first promoted by Satoru Sayama, a Japanese wrestler known as 'Tiger Mask'. By 1989 it had started being known as MMA.
- In the 1990s, brothers Royce and Rickson GRACIE (BRA) from a famous Brazilian jiu-jitsu family, wanted to show the world the effectiveness of their sport. They challenged athletes from all combat sports to try to beat them by launching the Ultimate Fighting Challenge (UFC) promotion in the USA.
- Royce GRACIE dominated every fighter the UFC put up against him, and between UFC 1 (1993) and UFC 5 (1995) won 11 fights in the first round.

Mixed martial arts today

- MMA developed a staunch following in the early days of UFC, but also faced high-profile opposition as the only illegal moves were eye pokes, groin strikes and biting, and competition was open to allcomers, no matter what size.
- When the late John MCCAIN, a USA senator, called the sport 'human cockfighting' in 1996, MMA became banned in nearly every USA state.
- To 'soften' the image of the sport, the UFC introduced MMA judges, weight divisions, a boxing-style 10-point scoring system and limits to times and rounds, which is something the Shooto movement had done much earlier in Japan.
- By 2009 a document called the Unified Rules of MMA was ratified in the USA, and in 2012 the International MMA Federation (IMMAF) was founded in Sweden, before relocating to Switzerland.
- The styles of modern MMA fighters continue to evolve, with athletes continually incorporating skills from striking combat sports such as taekwondo, karate, kick boxing, sambo and muay thai to build on MMA's core grappling, wrestling and Brazilian jiu-jitsu techniques.
- At the 2025 MMA senior world championships, England won four gold medals and eight in total to be the most successful nation, while Kazakhstan claimed 12 medals overall (2G, 1S, 9B).
- As of early September 2026, Kazakhstan led the IMMAF senior team rankings, with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also in the top ten.



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Mixed martial arts at the Asian Games

- MMA will be making its Asian Games debut at Aichi-Nagoya 2026.

Mixed martial arts in Japan

- With so many different martial arts having originated in Japan, it is no surprise that many MMA promotional movements have emerged in the country as well. Shooto, Pride Fighting Championships, Rizin Fighting Federation, Deep, and Pancrase are among the most well-known.
- NAKAI Yuki is considered one of Japan's MMA pioneers in the early days of Shooto and Japanese grappling. NAKAI also tutored star fighter AOKI Shinya who earned the nickname *tobikan judan* ('grand master of flying submissions').
- One of Japan's best known MMA fighters is SAKURABA Kazushi, who was known as the 'Gracie Hunter' for winning several contests against various members of the vaunted Gracie family.