

History & Traditions

La Boxe Francaise – Savate or French Boxing, is a French fighting system and sport using the feet and fists with force, finesse, and precision. Based upon the teachings of Joseph Charlemont more than 150 years ago, La Boxe Francaise has developed into the sport that it is today. Today Boxe Francaise Savate is the name most widely used to describe French Kick Boxing.



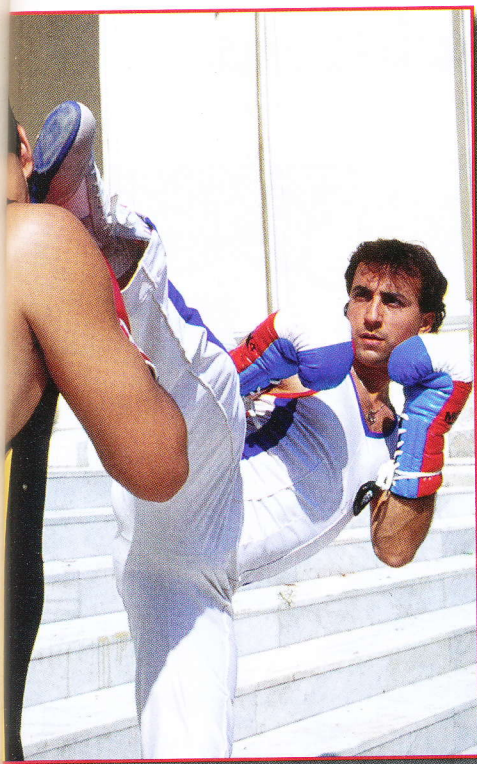
Of course, we still do not know who threw the first punch or the first kick, but what we know for certain is that every civilization had some kind of martial art. Some went centuries with few changes, while some others disappeared. Europe was naturally rich in martial art legacy. The English perfected boxing, while the French perfected kicking. The contests and rivalries between the French and the English as to which style was best lasted almost as long as the 100 Years War between the same two countries. It actually lasted until the famous “Fight of the Century” in 1899 between Charlemont’s son Charles and Jerry Driscoll. But before that, they were many other teachers of Savate. One of the most interesting was Charles Lecour.

Charles Lecour will always be remembered as the creator of Boxe Francaise. Born in 1808, Lecour was the best student of Michel Casseux. He was a great technician and a superb teacher. He was truly the first one to select his students and to have people of the High Society starting to take his classes; thus, he “civilized” savate. Lecour also was very intelligent. He not only transformed savate in a social point of view, but he also technically made a radical change. Alexander Dumas Jr., son of the author of the same name who wrote the “Three Musketeers,” a reputed author himself who also was a student of Boxe Francaise Savate under Joseph Charlemont, wrote about

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Lecour: “Charles Lecour started by teaching Savate...Nights and days he dreamed to perfect this art...He heard about boxing...Boxing is the savate of the English. In savate, the Parisian did of the leg and the foot, the main weapons, considering the hands only for defense. Charles Lecour dreamed of this great enterprise...this wonderful utopia, this supreme perfection of mixing together boxing and savate.”

The reality, however, was a little bit less poetic. Even so, Lecour was very strong in savate. He did not train and sparred the same way as the London Prize rules fighters of England. He wasn't like Leboucher, another famous savate teacher and a street fighter, who loved to experience on the streets all his new tricks. Therefore, when Lecour was challenged by Owen Swift (the famous English boxer who later found exile in France for killing two persons in two bare-knuckle fights), he wasn't ready—and got beaten. Far from being discouraged, he decided to learn English boxing and added it to savate. That's how he came to create La Boxe Francaise. Chausson and Boxe Fran-

caise came from Savate the same way that judo came from jiu-jitsu, or boxing from Pancrace.

Joseph Charlemont wrote two books about the art. The first one was completed in 1877 while he was in exile in Brussels. Charlemont was on the side of the Communards during the civil war in Paris in 1871. He found refuge in Belgium where he stayed to escape the retaliation of the Versaillais. His exile lasted until 1879, when he was pardoned by the French government. However, he returned secretly to Paris three months after his exile, to assist in the funeral of his master, Louis Vignerou—“Cannon Man—who was accidentally killed during one of his famous performances. Charlemont's

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first book contained 65 drawings and was inspired by a book written by Leboucher in 1844. It contained only 16 drawings, and very detailed text. Charlemont's other book, written in 1899 in France, is illustrated with many photos of his son Charles demonstrating Boxe Francaise the way he codified it.

Meanwhile, for many years, England and France already were fighting for pugilistic supremacy. Victor Casteres a student of Joseph Charlemont, fought several times against English boxers. His most amazing fight was in London in 1898. For that fight, the referee was the Marquis of Queensberry himself. Casteres displayed all his talents: amaz-

ing spinning reverse kicks, powerful chasses croises, combined with powerful punches. According to the media of that time, the Marquis was dumbfounded. Despite the now frequent victories of the French versus the English, it would take one more fight to definitely decide which art is the most complete.

On November 3, 1899, the encounter took place “secretly” in Paris before 250 selected persons and journalists from different countries, carefully selected since the police forbade the fight. It would be France against England—the young Charlemont as the ambassador of Boxe Francaise, and Jerry Driscoll, the Marine champion, as the representative from Boxing. The combat was of a rare violence; Charlemont had difficulty throwing his high kicks since the floor was covered with sawdust, so he used many chasse bas and coup de pied bas, to try to stop his opponent from always marching toward him. Driscoll's technique seemed very efficient; Charlemont, because of the floor's condi-



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tion, lacked precision. During the third round, he finally succeeded in placing one of his favorite kicks—a powerful fouette—which seriously shattered the Englishman's face. Both fighters bled from their faces, and Driscoll had bleeding shins. At the seventh round, Charlemont, maybe fortified by the lemon juice, found his strength again. Taking advantage of a moment when Driscoll was relaxing, he threw a powerful kick to his midsection. Driscoll fell to the ground and had to be evacuated on a stretcher. A classic toe kick to the body for some; a little to low for others. However, the Frenchman was declared the winner.

Later on, Driscoll admitted the victory of Charlemont by asking for a return fight. Despite his victory, Charlemont decided to devote his time to interesting students. He wanted to forget that fight, which, according to him, didn't actually prove anything. Charles Charlemont liked esthetics, even in a

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fight. Joseph Charlemont not only took on many challenges in savate but also in fencing. He liked to fight. His system of fighting relied mostly on speed and precision. His son, who was praised as an incomparable technician, was more of a teacher, and refused the other challenges that came right after his victory



over Driscoll. The concrete floor was covered with sawdust, making him unable to express himself the way he was used to. To him, the fight was more a brawl than a beautiful fight.

Joseph Charlemont's original teachings have been and still are subject to modification. This can be accomplished only through the direction of the French and International Federation of Boxe Française Savate and Related Disciplines (FFBFS et DA) executive committee, the governing body for savate in France and the rest of the world.

In French Boxing, movements called “hits” are given according to rules that are based upon specific principles. Each movement of B. F. Savate is designed for maximum efficiency. Savate is the art of personal defense, using arms and legs, feet and fists as powerful weapons, according to Charlemont's original definition. The use of La Canne, and Grand Baton, kicks, punches, grappling, and wrestling were all part of

Boxe Française Savate. Today B. F. Savate, Parisian Fighting, and the weaponry are taught separately.

Boxe Française Savate is an extremely graceful and beautiful, yet highly effective, method of self-defense. It might be compared to fencing, but uses the hands and feet instead of a sword as a weapon. Savateurs or tireurs (names given to the practitioners) wear shoes while they practice their art. The shoe is the primary weapon in savate and it can become a deadly weapon in a street fight. Every method of striking with the shoe has been carefully studied, with the best methods retained in the modern art of savate.

All strikes are delivered according to different principles. Each opportunity gives the option of an offensive strike or a defensive counter. Possible combinations are nearly endless; yet, all techniques are the result of scientific study and more than a century and a half of experience. Boxe Française Savate is strong on traditions; however,

it is continually evolving, and is a living method of constant progress and refinement. A type of fencing using natural weapons, savate appears to be a "conversation" between the two participants. With its unlimited combinations, a savate match reminds one of a spontaneous and graceful ballet that challenges the mind and the body.

Boxe Francaise Savate competitions now are held under two sets of rules, Assault and Total Combat. The participants in Assault may wear protective gear while sparring, such as headgear and shin guard. Total Combat is the full contact ring experience. It is similar to the sport of English boxing; knockout blows and strikes are allowed. Assault and Total Combat are basically the same in form, but in Assault, the risk of injury is diminished.

Fighting with the fists, in Boxe Francaise Savate, is done according to the techniques of English Boxing and



Portrait of Charles Charlemont.

utilizes the four basics punches—jabs, crosses, hooks, and uppercuts—plus the swings. There are four categories of kicks—les coups de pieds bas (low shin kicks), les coups de pieds chasses (side kicks), les coups de pieds fouettes (round kicks), and les coups de pieds en

revers (reverse kicks). The combination of those four basic punches, added to the four basic kicks, offers endless possibilities of combinations in low, medium, and high lines. There are numerous variations of those kicks—lead leg, rear leg, with a spin, with a jump, etc. The kicks can strike the legs, the body, and the head. One of the savateur's favorite techniques remains the chasse bas, followed by a fouette to the body...with the point of the shoe—a devastating kick that knocked down more than one kickboxer, even experienced ones, but unfamiliar with savate. In B. F. Savate, the kicks can strike the opponent's back. However, punching the back is forbidden. But, why is that possible, since a kick in the back is more devastating? The answer lies in the history of Boxe Francaise. In savate, there are no rules; everything is allowed. But when Lecour adopted the techniques of English Boxing, he took it with the

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rules of the Marquis of Queensberry. Therefore, no punches are allowed in the back. But Boxe Francaise kept the principles of savate and authorized kicks to the back of the opponent.

What makes the difference between savate and other kicking arts is that we wear "savates" (the slang word for shoes). In the early days of savate, it was flannel pants tight at the ankles and a baggie shirt. The success of savate added color to the uniform. Much later on, toward the decline of Boxe Francaise after the two World Wars, the uniform consisted of austere black tights and a gray shirt. After the conflict in the seventies between the partisans of savate and those of Boxe Francaise, the uniform took a radical change. It consisted of a one-piece uniform, without sleeves, on which the ranking patch must be sewn on the left side of the chest. Over

time, each school had its own colors and logos. When a student joins an affiliated school, he or she must proceed to an individual affiliation, by taking a license that contains the record of the student's progress. It validates his examinations and ranks and makes them official. The same thing applies here in the U.S., since the California Association of Boxe Francaise Savate is recognized by the French Federation.

Originally, La B. F. Savate covered all ranges of combat, from stick and staff fighting, to punching and kicking, to grappling and throwing. Today, with the exception of Boxe Francaise (the ring sport), which uses only percussive movements (punching and kicking), all other ranges are taught separately.

The late martial artist, Bruce Lee, seriously investigated the sport of savate and his attention was caught by an

article he read in the 60s. Bruce, who believed strongly in full contact training, became very attracted by this style and studied it from videos given to him by Ed Parker.

Today, the two most famous kickboxing systems are savate and Muay Thai, and it is not rare that the stylists of either system train in the other, to get what they are missing in theirs. Savate, with its elusive and graceful yet powerful kicks delivered in three lines, and its sophisticated hand techniques complemented by awesome footwork, is considered one of the most efficient fighting systems in the world, both as a ring sport or as a system of self-defense. 