

Sport in History

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Style, Stamina and Mobile Masculinities: The Reinvention of Savate in the Anglosphere

Abstract

The roots of Savate in France stretch back at least 200 years, and there is extensive interdisciplinary research in French showing changing interpretations of its meaning and purpose. Savate is now a globalised combat sports with potential to enter the Olympic Games. To help remedy the lacuna of English-language research, this paper considers: 1) Documentaries and rare instructional literature; 2) online videos and discussions of archival Savate footage; 3) contemporary documentation from the Great Britain Savate Federation; and, 4) ongoing fieldwork in one UK Savate school. Through our multimodal study of printed, televised, digital and physical action, we add to the discussions to the constant reinvention of Savate to a modern, seemingly inclusive combat sport. Using John Urry's framework of mobilities, we introduce the notion of 'mobile masculinities' underpinned by a European sense of relatively elite individualistic cosmopolitanism. Savate provides a rich case study of gender inclusivity in sport – how a previously male-dominated activity incorporates women in positions of power and responsibility and teaches men to acquire elegance in style and elite levels of stamina.

Keywords: Martial arts; mobilities; gender equality; elitism; governing body.

Documenting Savate in the French and English-speaking worlds

Quite understandably, the bulk of literature on the French martial art and combat sport of Savate comes from its native France and former French colonies such as Quebec. Loudcher's thesis [1] was one of the first contributors to its academic history, which charted the constant reinvention of the art from Chausson, the sailor's shared fighting system documented in the ports of Marseilles, to one for more individualistic travelling bourgeois gentleman learning the refined (and to redefine) art of Savate (literally, "old boot") to defend themselves against ruffians in the dangerous streets of Paris. Scholars have continued to study the reinvented modality of Savate as a combat sport, which, as Loudcher noted, developed from the pioneering efforts of the 'academic' approach taught in specific schools.

In contemporary France, the art is widely practised, with subsequent interest from sport scientists interested in enhancing competitive performance of elite fighters. Research has also extended to the pedagogical aspects of coaching Savate as a sport [2], the expertise of those trainers [3] and also to the strategies aiding the judgement of the judges at competition [4]. The athletes themselves have been the subject of much analysis [5], with individual physiological profiles revealing the great stamina required, as one study noted: 'To be successful in international competitions, Savate athletes must achieve excellent levels of fitness and physical conditions during training' [6]. Beyond the study of athletes, coaches and officials, scholars have begun to look at the relational aspect of the art, with studies on empathetic relationships [7] – even considering another reinvention of Savate as a potential form of therapy that enables the expression of emotions through body language [8].

However, there remains little attention from social scientists from around the world. The theme of reinvention highlighted by Elliot [9] might be a key theme for the exploration of such martial arts, which adapt to suit different social circumstances and shape individual lives and identities - through health, sport, self-defence and other meanings and modalities. With this starting point, what is apparent is the constant reinvention of the French fighting system

and its practitioners to suit the society in question: from a working-class kicking art in the ports of 18th century Marseilles to a 19th century upper-class gentleman's art to a contemporary international combat sport open to both men and women from different ethnicities and social backgrounds – something that many advocates wish to see in the Olympic Games. This expansion has slowly seeped into the Anglosphere, with eventual media and practitioner literature paying attention to the modern modalities of the art.

The English language academic literature on Savate is sparse, and started to emerge in the 2000s. We have drawn on the public-facing, global martial arts encyclopedia of Crudelli [10], along with the equivalent academic collection by Green and Svinth [11], with Loudcher's entry on Savate [12] and his detailed article on Savate in its native France (1823-1978) [13], which debates the mythical origins of the martial art and the politicised factions that developed it into different strands. This adds to the 1984 British practitioner-facing textbook by Reed and Muggeridge [14] and an early "how-to" text by Tegner from 1963 [15], which show an early male dominance in the art as illustrated by the male-only photographs. It is clear from these texts that Savate has a mythological history, which often locates it in Marseilles. This can be used to give it an imagined origin in Ancient Greece when Marseilles was a Greek colony, or an 'African' origin, arguing it was developed by North African sailors in the port. Loudcher [16] highlights these stories, noting that some Savate advocates believe sailors brought back the kicking techniques from the Far East. Another claim is that it developed all over France after the French Revolution, when elite men were no longer allowed to carry swords, and had to develop using their walking sticks or their legs and feet to defend themselves against muggers.

Regardless of the origin myths, the modern unarmed form of French kick boxing was later codified in the nineteenth century by combining the French kicks with English boxing (the upper class regulated Queensbury rules in the ABA form). Savate appeared as a demonstration sport in the Paris 1924 Olympics. Since the 1970s, it has become a recognised and state-supported activity in France, and has spread around the world, including Britain. Within its homeland, the 2024 Olympics in Paris are expected to give it greater status as many aspire for the combat sport to be featured as more than a demonstrative art for the opening ceremony, but as a fully-fledged Olympic sport like Karate.

Savate, as an increasingly international and diverse sport appealing to different individuals and their personal development (and reinvention), has four main varieties taught worldwide:

- 1) *Canne* (fencing with canes) – as a sport and for self-defence;
- 2) *Combat* (where you hurt people) code of French boxing (*boxe-française*) and *Assaut* (where you do *not* hurt people) code of French boxing;
- 3) *Defense*, a form of street self-defence;
- 4) *Forme*, a modern kickboxing fitness regime.

The presentation and organisation of Savate is complex, however, considering these four modalities and various lineages. In this article, we have focused on *Assaut*, which is the dominant form of Savate in Britain as represented by the national governing body, the Great Britain Savate Federation, and its self-selected national team that sends out fighters (known as *tireurs* or *savateurs*) to the (separate) bi-annual European and World Championships. *Assaut* is also a common feature of club-level competition in various European cities such as the recent 2019 Helsinki Open, while the *Canne* World Championships were held at the same time and place as the *Assaut* World Championships in 2016 and 2018. Being less dramatic and bloody, *Assaut* has yet to be documented through television series or explained in

technical books in English, as they tend to focus on the full-contact *Combat* and self-defence applications of the art. In UK Savate *Assaut*, there is a general inclusivity in terms of gender in its broadest sense (beyond masculinities). There are men and women teachers and *tireurs*, both sexes have won international medals, and the sexes train together, like in many martial arts. It is only in competitions where there is some degree of segregation; *tireurs* are divided into tight weight categories like boxing, which might restrict access to people with natural weights below or above these or engage in harmful rapid weight change practices [17] – a matter for a separate study in itself. Competitions, however, are single sex, and remain the only place where men and women are segregated within specific weight categories.

Mobile methodology

Our research design is a combination of traditional offline ethnography alongside the analysis of online and textual archival documents. It is a study of 1) the documentation of Savate in the English language, 2) the Great Britain Savate Federation (hereafter the GBSF) and 3) one case study school. B's observational study on [NAME]'s school is a traditional (offline) ethnography [18] begun in 2009 and has been used to illustrate how a conventional ethnography is done in B [19]. She has attended routine classes along with regional and national competitions, alongside grading events for the coloured gloves (the equivalent to coloured belt gradings seen in many Asian martial arts). As an observer, B sits and write notes in a reporter's notebook in a personal 'shorthand'. As soon as possible afterwards she writes up the brief notes taken *in situ* into a longer and more coherent account. That version is 'the data'.

B collaborates with the *tireur* [NAME], the only British gold medallist at a Savate World Championships. He remains a key informant and a gatekeeper, and they have begun to

publish together – starting with his pedagogical approach [20, 21]. Author B has detailed fieldnotes on 45 Savate lessons taught by [NAME], and on nine day-long competitions, covering a ten-year period (2009-2019). Author B's fieldwork in the official classes reveals an absence of the instructor or the students discussing masculinities in the observer's hearing. It is possible that masculinities were discussed in private conversations, for example in the men's changing room, but issues of *male* embodiment or performativity or ability to stand pain do not appear in the data. This differentiates Savate in the UK from Capoeira [22], boxing [23], Ju Jitsu in Israel [24] or Karate in Argentina [25], where discussions of masculinity, aggression, violence and gender are common.

A was able to utilise his experience with digital and online research to explore the British Savate scene. This use of digital ethnography and hypermedia research is conducive with ethnography [26]. A's role was to observe the content and identify themes in terms of what cannot be observed in person, and to discuss notable images, videos and texts with B, who is familiar with the GBSF community. For example, one image, the cover photo of the federation website [27], forms the basis of our analysis: showing young men having their kit inspected by women sitting on the judges' panel – one of them while breastfeeding her infant. Such images led to numerous meetings to discuss the data, the key members of GBSF and pioneers of the history of British Savate in general.

Following ethnographic conventions concerned with the privacy of individuals, B has adopted pseudonyms for the practitioners, learners and supporters of Savate she has observed and met. The online data available in hypermedia presented a challenge in maintaining this original intention. To avoid disclosing the identities and actions of particular people, we

focused on general rules, policies and trends in the online analysis. A's English-language sources included more public-facing information and forms of edutainment:

- 1) The GBSF website, including its archives and records of minutes [28];
- 2) The GBSF Facebook group [29];
- 3) The GBSF Twitter page [30];
- 4) The website and Facebook groups of the various schools associated to the GBSF (London, Oxford, Cambridge, Guildford, Brighton, Scotland and Northern Ireland) [see, for example, 31];
- 5) The Twitter pages and writings of Savate personalities;
- 6) DVD documentaries of Savate such as *The Deadly Arts* [32], *Human Weapon* [33] and *Fight Quest* [34];
- 7) Online archive videos of Savate on YouTube including user comments and debates;
- 8) Rare practitioner textbooks on Savate.

A's role since 2018 has thus been one of alternative theorising and the analysis of various online and offline documents, films and texts. Together, we worked as a veteran ethnographer schooled in anthropology and sociology and a martial arts practitioner-researcher experienced in a range of social scientific research methods. We continue direct observation and knowledge of the key members of the GBSF and their personal histories (through B's interactions with them) with a less familiar and critical perspective on the broader history of Savate (via A's online exploration of contemporary and archival material). We revealed how Savate has been reinvented in the decades following the 1960s through organisations connecting men and women with boys and girls together as a dynamic, gender

inclusive and ever-changing body culture originally design for men by men. This is what we term ‘mobile masculinities’ as studied by very mobile methods.

We bring together these data sets to assess the threads between them. As outlined before, the GBSF and its clubs appear to be highly gender inclusive, with no over masculinist or ‘macho’ masculine perspectives. On paper, Savate in the UK appears to be gender inclusive in terms of its: 1) Organisation; 2) regulations (as seen in its rules and charter); 3) media representation (as seen in its social media and websites), and 4) its competition (with equal numbers of weight categories).

Using an emergent theoretical design, we continued to consider ways of moving in the flesh, virtual movements and communications and intended and planned travel. Yet at the same time, the ironically static nature of the dissemination of Savate beyond its homelands within ‘The Golden Triangle’ (of Cambridge, London and Oxford). We began with an inductive analysis that started to generate themes and questions raised as hypotheses. Using such a grounded theory approach [35], we began to generate the notion of mobile masculinities and test it out in online and offline situations. We next present this theoretical framework before turning to our analysis separately and finishing with some conclusions on the social scientific implications of our findings, methods and theorisation.

Theoretical approach: Mobile masculinities

So far, it is apparent that Savate, like many martial arts has a long tradition of male dominance which is slowly being challenged [36]. It has a tradition of elite male dominance

from men who had the time and resources to learn the martial art from professional instructors. Savate in the UK and the GBSF do show a noticeable diversity in terms of gender, however. Yet in terms of ethnicity, education and social class, it remains a largely white British and white European organisation. Social class might be a more important factor than gender, as the GBSF is also composed of highly educated professional adults who hail from Oxbridge university backgrounds and now work in careers in the sciences and other areas. Some tireurs have started to document British Savate themselves, writing in up-market newspapers such as *The Guardian* [37], and our main informant, London-based [REAL NAME], a Cambridge alumni, is currently writing a book on existential philosophy applied to the psychology of ringcraft. This group is elite in terms of education and access to the martial art, which remains based in 'The Golden Triangle' of Cambridge, London and Oxford. There is no Savate in the less economically developed (and quite often deprived) regions of the South West or Wales, and none in the north of England. Yet the tireurs that B has observed and conversed with are mobile in terms of their careers and competition. For example, one Finnish research scientist at Oxford was teaching Savate there until a recent recall to Vienna for his post-doc. Meanwhile, the GB team regularly compete in his native Finland, with success in the Helsinki Open.

What does this scenario teach us about masculinities? From A's analysis of the social media in the UK, we have detected no public or performative sign of machismo, discrimination against women, sexualisation of female athletes or even the male privilege and media attention so common in sport. There are no jokes about female referees and judges and the actual representation in terms of text, images and videos on the Facebook and Twitter groups is extremely well balanced between men and women and also in terms of the new generation of boys and girls. In fact, women administer the social media sites and the federation website, and the President is a woman.

With this scenario in mind, the established theories of a stable and dominant hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding multiple (mainly submissive) masculinities [38], although valid for other social groups throughout history, does not totally explain the ways of being a man in contemporary British Savate. Instead, with the reinvention of Savate Assaut as a gender inclusive, ever-changing combat sport, we have embraced the overarching framework of Urry's [39, 40] mobilities paradigm to understand this sport in constant motion and its relatively elite practitioners on the move. For Urry, within contemporary globalised society, people are living increasingly mobile lives – more than ever before, with travel for work and leisure, mobile forms of communication and flexible careers. We are no longer so restricted in space and in terms of cultural and social identity, although this does have class connotations. The more fortunate members of society, especially the elite, can work remotely, use the latest telecommunications and travel to attractive destinations on a regular basis. This can be applied to Savate, with the strenuous, physically mobile nature of the martial art accompanied by its social organisation and dynamics as an international competitive sport for a select few moving between metropolises in the developed West and Global North.

Meanwhile, Anderson's [41] development of Inclusive Masculinity – adjusted in Anderson and McCormack [42] – is pertinent considering the white middle-class university-educated group of men that appear to be highly inclusive of women and men mingling and training together, and of men of different ethnicities (including a British Sikh man and the aforementioned Finn). Its findings also derive from studies on the English-speaking world including the United Kingdom. However, it was not based on analysis of data using a sample older professionals who readily move across European nations and cultures or examine physical cultures deriving from countries outside the Anglosphere, but a sample of less economically independent young people and university students.

Savate, however, remains a very European martial art with far less influence from the United States and the former British Empire. The UK tireurs who form the basis of this paper often travel between European cities for competitions and seminars, and many, such as [NAME], hold strong pro-European (and anti-Brexit) views. For that reason, we also turn to ideas on European cosmopolitanism [43] to unite ideas in internal inclusivity of men and women and boys of girls of different forms of masculinity and femininity with a sense of wider belonging to Europe (and respective inclusivity of their forms of masculinity). This differs from specific notions of inclusive masculinity as being concerned with the inclusion of homosexual men within previously heteronormative social spheres in the USA and the UK.

Taken together, the meta-theory of mobilities (as a research and methodological paradigm) encapsulates our union of inclusive masculinity and European cosmopolitanism to form what we term 'mobile masculinities.' This acknowledges three main factors: 1) changing nature of masculinity (through rapid changed through the decades); 2) individuals and groups that are constantly moving and shifting in concrete space (such as a boxing ring), and 3) the larger movements through travelling and returning and in continual flux as in Robinson and Hockey's [44] work on *Masculinities in Transition*. Mobile masculinities is not a term for a man who lives and works in the same town and factory all their lives (a more traditional or 'orthodox' form of masculinity in Anderson's [45] thesis) or a 'hegemonic masculinity' in Connell's terms [46]. Instead, it is a middle-class, elite and highly mobile masculinity aimed at finesse, fitness and fun: something that Savate is well equipped to offer. This threefold notion might be useful for scholars examining other sports and physical cultures, too.

Our rendering of mobile masculinities implies the sense of being a man that involves dynamic physical movement that is required in the martial art. It also considers the frequent travel for training, seminars, gatherings and competitions as tireurs. Yet it forms part of a broad sense of gender inclusivity towards men and women of different masculinities and

femininities. In British Savate, the use of the concept of mobile masculinities shows (mainly white) British / European men who are physically able, frequent travellers, socially active, highly educated and liberally minded – people able to train in a physically demanding martial art, self-fund their learning, travelling and competitions and feel at home in expensive cosmopolitan cities of the West. Our application of this concept differs to the recent work [47] employing the term within studies on non-European (chiefly African and Latin American) manual workers residing and labouring in metropolises like London: the base where Cambridge-educated James Southwood teaches and trains from.

Analysis

In the discussion that follows, we examine historical and contemporary sources on global and British Savate in the English language. This is understood in five distinct stages or periods as examined through specific data sets: 1) The clear elitism evident in the 1960s to 1980s textbooks; 2) the public critique of masculinity in archive footage on YouTube; 3) tensions surrounding gender and inclusivity in commercial documentaries of the 2000s; 4) the policy making of the 2000s, and 5) the legacy of elitism within a case study Savate school the 2010s. We argue that Savate has been reinvented in very short periods of time to suit the inclusion and development of specific male (and increasingly female) individuals who acquire the style and stamina for this demanding combat sport. We contend that the inclusivity in terms of gender still retains a degree of ableism and elitism in terms of movement: the ability for educated and elite individuals to travel, compete and train in a physically demanding activity.

Elitism in practitioner textbooks

Back in 1963, in a forward to Tegner's pioneering American text on Savate, Alice McGrath [48] warned readers of the difficulty in achieving proficiency in Savate, and any other martial art for that matter:

Like any specialty of the martial arts, Savate was never a practical form of self-defense which could be learned by anyone. As is true of the Asian traditional martial arts, Savate was geared to a high level of skill and students were expected to engage in strenuous training and be in peak physical condition. They were expected to continue to practise Savate to maintain a high level of skill.

A realistically practical form of self-defense must be available to those people who are not in peak physical condition, who are not athletically gifted, who cannot achieve a high level of skill and who have limited time for instruction and practice – in short, most people.

However, savate, like other specialties, can be enjoyed as a sport, can be practised for health and recreation, and like the other martial arts which have been modified to a true sport/recreation, can give the practitioner an excellent means of developing flexibility, coordination and resilience.

[49]

Society has of course changed since the 1960s, and much since the origins of Savate in the 1800s, and so has the dominant approach to being a man. It is no longer the exclusive fighting system for the upper-class French gentleman fighting off ruffians. However, it most certainly still required a dedicated lifestyle as a serious leisure activity (if not a profession) in order to move beyond the health and recreational benefits into levels of excellence. Furthermore, due to its physically-demanding nature (with high kicks and evasive strategies indicated in these this book), it is not a totally inclusive activity for people with disabilities, and because of its lack of state funding in most countries, remains elusive for people with few economic resources to travel for training, seminars and competition.

That said, however, British sources reveal a gradual sense of inclusivity between men and women. Back in 1984, in the first British text on the art, two of its founding members expressed this gender balance:

Comparison with English boxing is almost inevitable – contests to decide the merits of the two have occurred from time to time since the 19th century, though the value of any bout where the opponents compete by different rules must be questionable. Each has its adherents, but the two are not so much rivals as ‘variations of the same theme’, the individual choosing whichever may be most to his (or indeed her) taste. The participation of women and girls in French boxing tends to come as one of the biggest surprises to those only used to the English style, but there is no greater barrier to this than exists in karate. Physiological differences dictate that in women’s contests no actual contact is made, to avoid the dangers of injury from body blows particularly, but female fighters still benefit from the finesse, graceful poise and potentially useful skills to be gained for their own enjoyment and protection.

[50]

Despite this claim of physiological barriers and novelty, accounts of successful French female Savateurs fighting British women boxers is accounted for in historical records in the 1800s, which include girl fighters as young as 12 [51]. The 19th century viewpoints on the fragility of the female body continued to the 20th century, and are themselves tied to ideas of menstruation as a weakness and fears of damaging young women’s fertility [52].

Hailing from North-West Europe, Savate has expanded across the continent and across the Channel to Britain, as Reed and Muggeridge commented some decades ago. Here, they hailed a sense of European identity:

Since 1970 a European championship has been organised and representatives now come from Belgium, Italy, Germany and Holland. It would seem that in these countries at least French boxing is starting to find the place it deserves in modern sport as the leading European martial art.

[53]

Despite this steady expansion into Britain, there was relative silence from authors in the Anglosphere until producers became interested in featuring Savate in American and Canadian documentaries in the 2000s. We examine these next.

Critiquing Masculinity in Savate on YouTube

As a dynamic martial art ever in motion, one of the best ways to document Savate is via film, and we have added hyperlinks to some important videos at the end of this article. Footage of Savate stems all the way back to archives from 1891 [54], and a variety of silent films are present on YouTube. Outside the official media of British Savate, there are a variety of videos on YouTube. From archive footage of the noted Savate Professor Charles Charlemont [55] – a pioneer of teaching Savate to the general public in France – teaching and demonstrating the art in the 1920s to contemporary competitions. There were no videos explicitly about the topic of masculinity, manliness or femininity, but some comments from viewers revealed themes of anti-French jingoism and homophobia against the perceived weak French fighters in one demonstration fight in the 1920s. When the commentator explained ‘in France, where the men are men’, several commentators made use of the relatively privacy of the Internet comments to joke about how ‘gay’ they fought and how a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter would be able to defeat them instantly. They were compared to Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) stars such as Conor McGregor, while the fighting (and warlike) abilities of the French were contested around the exploits and eventual loss of Napoleon. Interestingly, this video seems to be taken off YouTube – potentially due to complaints about these comments – and is therefore not referenced here.

Elsewhere, similar anonymous masculinist comments emerged around archive footage from 1924, again showing Charles Charlemont demonstrating techniques in silent film [56]. Here,

within an online and relatively impersonal forum, YouTube viewers focused on the tight clothing and revealing nature of the costumes rather than the history and virtues of the martial art itself. The tight clothing revealed the shape of his (and other male practitioners') genitalia, and sexualising comments were also written about the beauty and figure of a female tireur, including her outfit deemed to be 'vintage cameltoe.' Apart from these two older videos from commentators in English (which British fans and practitioners of Savate might access), international viewers seem not to raise any doubts about modern Savate in the ring. However, in both of the cases, the comments were several years old – perhaps indicating the lessening overt written homophobia and homophobia on mainstream platforms such as YouTube [57], which can be reported and are more commonly retorted by fellow viewers, as in the case of these comments.

Mastering Savate: The Art of French Foot Fighting [58] is an early instructional video tape part of the Panther Productions series. Led by Salem Assli, a French instructor, it showcases his skills against a senior male student in action, thereby portraying Savate to be very active, male and mobile. Like the instructional books, it enables individuals to learn at a distance away from the traditional academies. But like many 'how-to' videos, there are no details on the history of the art. One film devoted to the history of Savate is still under production from USA Savate in which they are actively seeking funding to cover its editing, with US instructor Paul-Raymond Buitron III pleading: 'Help us preserve history' [59]. Another short, amateur interview with Nicolas Saignac offers a general oral history of the split between Chausson and Savate French boxing [60].

Gender tensions in commercial documentaries

Beyond some of the technical and short films on Savate, there are three main commercially successful English-language documentaries on the martial art of Savate: *The Deadly Arts* [61], *Human Weapon* [62] and *Fight Quest* [63], all produced in the noughties. They follow a similar formula and narrative – foreign martial artists come to France to discover that there is a deadly martial art born out of the turbulent period of the French Revolution. Through training in a variety of places under different coaches, these athletic practitioner-presenters are faced with a final dual with local Savateurs. The audience are left to admire the diversity of Savate and the toughness of its practitioners.

Of the three, *The Deadly Arts* [64] is the most historical, as it states its goal of understanding the origins of Savate. This is achieved through visiting key sites, interviewing surviving veterans and examining classical photographs of savateurs. The Canadian-French martial artist and presenter, Josette Normandeau, a woman in her forties, provides a detailed account of the development of the art, especially in its later development in Paris. Using re-enactments of training and self-defence scenarios between the bourgeois gentleman and Parisian thugs, she charts the changes in the art to the masses through various key figures. She also presents how Savate has been associated with gentleman's fashion (such as the La Canne fighting development from their walking sticks) to the sought-after specialists who make the leotards and other unique equipment. Normandeau comments, 'Unlike Thai and English boxing, it's not just how much you can take and dish out, but how elegantly you manoeuvre through a fight.' [65] Indeed, when asked to sum up Savate, her final trainer says: 'Finesse.' [66] This finesse, as well as the fitness, makes a Savateur require both style and stamina. The episode presents Savate as diverse in terms of ethnicity and also open to women training. However, in between training scenes, stereotypical images of French heterosexual romance are reinforced within 'the city of love' [67], with young couples kissing in public in

many scenes. The documentary then concludes with an image of the blonde Normandeau with her two coaches (white and black men in their forties) with her younger sparring partner, a woman of mixed heritage: ‘Once the martial art of aristocrats, Savate has survived a tumultuous history and has become a cultural institution open to everyone.’ [68]

In a more masculinist guise, both *Fight Quest* [69] and *Human Weapon* [70] are presented by two athletic American martial artists and friends. Presented by former American football player and wrestler Bill Duff and MMA pro Jason Chambers, *Human Weapon* [71] continued with some historical sensitivity and American masculinist insensitivity, stating from the outset: ‘You think of the toughest country in the world, and you probably don’t think of France.’ [72] Yet there is a lesson to be learned: ‘Savate was born in a society so violent that it sentenced its entire ruling class to death.’ [73] Under the tutelage of Frederic Baret, Savate trainer and historian, the duo chart its development from the potential techniques of Chausson using the ropes of a ship to enable kicks off the deck to the modern sport supported by the French state. The historical meanings behind bodily technique are revealed. Even the Savate salute is noted for representing a tribute to the art’s founders. The physical principle of balance remains clear in their exchanges in the ring, during sparring and with the elite members of RAID, France’s SWAT Team, ‘where anything goes’ [74] as in the street fighting system of *Défense dans la Rue*, portrayed as an older version of Savate. Beyond the people and ‘legends’ of the sport, the places are essential in this storytelling, with the port city of Marseilles (France’s oldest city) being their base for most of the episode, and other places are noted from their shift from a royal hunting ground to a Napoleonic military training facility to an elite French sporting centre, UNICAP. Paris is seen as the base of Savate, and notable figures like the pedagogue Casseux, who coined the term, is acknowledged as ‘the father of Savate’ [75] and Roger Lafond (also present in *The Deadly*

Arts [76]), whose post-Second World War schools ‘secured Savate’s survival.’ [76] Although the ethnic diversity of Savate is clear in contemporary France, women are only seen once in the background, and sensual images of several young local women are the focus of an interest in the ‘glitz and glamour of the French Riviera’ [78] that is in reality ‘at the boiling point’ [79].

In a tongue-in-cheek manner, *Fight Quest* [80] also reveals the tough exterior behind this glamorous façade. Close to the time of France’s condoning of the invasion of Iraq, American chauvinism is more apparent, with Iraq War veteran Doug Anderson expressing jokes about French masculinity, quipping: ‘There’s one promise I made before I left America: I told my brother there’s no way I’d get by ass kicked in France.’ [81] But later, he started to admit: ‘This a tough style’ [82] seen as a beautiful equation between a thinking man’s boxing and a brutal art, finally reflecting: ‘I didn’t get beaten up in France, but these guys were a lot tougher than I imagined.’ [83] While MMA fighter Jimmy Smith expressed the unease of a revealing European bathing suit, both laugh at the leotards they are given to change into, with Jimmy claiming he would be beaten up wearing something like that in his gym, adding ‘I’m lucky I’m thousands of miles away where it’s acceptable’ [84]. Both men found the training physical demanding, with the requirement of many kicks as punches in Savate, and potentially devastating liver shots. The martial artists began to admire the constant moving and kicking in the art, and Doug admitted feeling disgusted with himself at the beginning due to his lack of stamina, while Jimmy was injured due to a liver kick. With Jimmy losing his bout, Doug felt the necessity to ‘defence the honour of the good old USA’ [85]. He finishes the episode with a kiss on both cheeks for his coach, a tribute to the ‘Frenchness’ of his experience.

France still dominates world Savate, and the language of Savate is, quite naturally, French, but classes in the UK are taught in English. Learners are only expected to understand the basic commands of ‘*En Garde*’!, ‘*Allez*’ and the names of kicks such as ‘*fouetté*’, but are not expected to develop fluency in French or travel to France as a form of martial arts pilgrimage or tourism. This differs from *Capoeiristas* (*Capoeira* practitioners) in countries such as Canada, where enthusiasts travel, plan to travel and imagine travelling to the heartland of Brazil, and often start learning Portuguese to embed themselves within the culture [86]. Movements and mobilities extend beyond the home nation, as we explain next.

Official inclusivity in the GBSF

The GBSF is a marked contrast in terms of its official politically correct discourse and inclusive policies. From a detailed examination of the official website, Facebook and Twitter channels, there is no evidence of sexism and specific forms of hegemonic, white heteronormative masculinity that excludes (rather than includes) gay men, women and ethnic minorities. Men were not writing about being strong, resilient, tough, fit and toned even if they evidently were from their physiques (visible in photographs) and physical capacity (prominent in videos of training and competition). It does show a focus on competition and cosmopolitanism through the build-up to European competitions and travel in and around affluent European cities (and occasionally towns). This commitment to travel is evident in images showing flight paths from London to Northern Ireland for a competition, and shots of the mixed-gender team upon their arrival to a continental city. Bodies (and particularly male bodies) are rarely revealed beyond the official team uniforms and training gear – save for the

slightly short, frilly dresses of the female members of the team in one official photo. Only one image shows a group of men together in towels outside a Finnish sauna, in which British and German men and men of other European origins are sitting together, smiling and relaxed. Within this public-facing material, there were no “men’s talk” [87] including jokes about bodies, sexual innuendo or even nationalist taunts and British jingoism overtly displayed in some other young men’s sporting cultures. Fellow competitors can sit and eat together, and share a common sense of being European practitioners of a distinctly European martial art: one in which there is little funding, and often more self-funding than anything else.

Following decades of research, Hargreaves lamented the continued gender bias in sports leadership and media professionals across the world [88] and the struggle for a new world order that avoids the glorification of male achievements over those of females [89]. UK Savate seems to be a rarity in modern sport, and this extends to the international federation (FISav), which has signed the Brighton Declaration for gender inclusivity. Its chair is a woman (one of eight international governing bodies in the world) and it has 20% female board members [90]. More specifically, within the GBSF official website [91], there are rules and regulations that encourage gender balance. The GBSF includes five notable female members who act as a Founding Member, its President, General Secretary, Ordinary Member and Coach, Anti-Doping Officer and also the Facebook officer.

The group’s apparent commitment to writing and legislation promotes equality and limits any form of discrimination and bullying – at least in policy. Objective no. 3 [92] shows a policy of inclusivity of people from all ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities and social backgrounds. Their statement of anti-discrimination reads:

To encourage, respect and develop ethical and friendly sporting relations between members and others through the practice of these disciplines, and to ensure a duty of care to all members of the GBSF. Consequently, no

distinction or discrimination against a person, for reasons of race, sex, religion or political affiliation, can be practised within the GBSF. [93]

While objective 5 has similar idealistic aspirations:

To promote mutual respect in relations between members and ensure the mutual acceptance of sanctions and possible suspensions imposed by the GBSF. [94]

The Constitution has little to note on masculinities and power apart from considering the factor of age, as the sport is open to children as well as adults:

All concerns, allegations or reports of poor practice/abuse relating to the welfare of children and young people will be recorded and responded to swiftly and appropriately in accordance with the GBSF child protection policy and procedures. The GBSF Welfare Officer is the lead contact for all members in the event of any child protection concerns. [95]

Further, the Code of Conduct point 8. 'Respect for others,' notes:

The GBSF comes into contact with other Federations from around the world. You are expected to treat people with tolerance, impartiality and act with integrity at all times. You should promote equality by not discriminating against any person, and by treating people with respect, regardless of their race, age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

All colleagues have a right to be treated with dignity and respect. Interactions with other committee members, GBSF members and members of the public must be polite and respectful at all times and must be free from harassment or bullying, including but not limited to behaviour on internet forums, social media, private messages and spoken conversation. [96]

Again, on paper, at the pinnacle of the sport, competition also appears equal, allowing men and women to compete across a broad range of categories [97]:

- Men: -56kg, 56-60kg, 60-65kg, 65-70kg, 70-75kg, 75-80kg, 80-85kg, 85kg+

- Women: -48kg, 48-52kg, 52-56kg, 56-60kg, 60-65kg, 65-70kg, 70-75kg, 75kg+

The equality of opportunity is typically accompanied with equality of outcome, with medallists from both the men and women regularly appearing at regional, national, European and international championships. One school driving this focus on competition in Assaut is the school in London where A conducted her ethnography. We turn next to this established Savate school next in order to explore how the objectives and policies might be enacted on the ground and in the ring, with bodies on the move and in development for these international and chiefly European competitions.

Style and stamina in the ring

Observing Savate classes and competitions, there is constant talk about improving the body, mastering skills, acquiring knowledge both tacit and explicit, and improving ring craft and style, but it is not gendered or related to the gender of the tireur at all. The characterisation of the two desirable features of an elite male tireur, presented below, have been distilled from the ethnography, but are nowhere explicitly stated in the data. [NAME], when shown fieldnotes, endorsed them as ‘fascinating and accurate’.

The two physical aspects of Savate are clothing and the body itself. Clothing is the most visible performative embodiment of masculinity in Savate displayed in competition, as opposed to regular classes. In regular classes, students wear whatever they find comfortable. The proper shoes are worn (which do not damage the floor or fellow students) but otherwise the lower body can be covered by shorts, leggings, and track suit bottoms with a box and shin guards (and usually ankle or knee supports). The upper body coverage for women includes a

chest protector, but for men, a T-shirt, singlet, sports top or sweatshirt is fine. Hands are bandaged under the boxing gloves, a gum shield is required, and jewellery has to be removed. Regular students in the Earlschaze club taught by NAME include men who wear a Barcelona football shirt, a T-shirt proclaimed membership of Equity (the actors' trade union), and the 'half-blue' uniform running top of the Cambridge University cross country team. The men who train and clearly enjoy that, but do not fight at events in the UK or abroad (and keen competitors go overseas two or three times a year whether in a formal team or just as competitors at an 'open' event) are not our focus here. What follows is a proposition about how masculinity is performed by those who not only train but also compete in public.

Performing as a *tireur* involves choosing specific embodied display. The elite men, the teachers and their students, display their fighting masculinity in the *tenue intégrale*. This is a one-piece ankle to shoulder garment in lycra which clings to the body. There is a singlet top, and the torso and lower body are 'visible' through the fabric: the outlines of the box and the underwear are noticeable. Such garments can be bought online from French suppliers and some people own *intégrales* in colours they have chosen that have no club or national 'significance' and choose to train in them and fight in them at competitions. These can be emblazoned with a national identity (Croatian Team: 2015) or a club logo and name (Société de Savate de Nantes). Fighting in a club or national *intégrale* displays the male body in an unforgiving way, as ballet tights do. An 'imperfect' male body is very obvious in the *intégrale*.

Related to the male body in the *intégrale* is the nature of the fitness it displays. The individual man has to balance making the weight with being strong enough to fight, so men do not look gaunt and 'too thin'. As Savate *tireurs* fight in weight categories (*e.g.* under 70kg), the body has to be fit and fine-tuned. As well as training in Savate, the *tireur*'s body in the *intégrale* displays that time has been spent lifting weights, running, using machines in a

gym, skipping, eating carefully and not drinking excessively. A beer gut, or excess fat from a diet of high calorie fast food is very visible. The stamina Edward Kinvett advocated to the young man (who left Savate soon after that competition) becomes visible during the 3 rounds of the fight, and because *Assaut* is not about injuring the opponent, the fights routinely last for all 3 rounds. It is not possible to end a fight quickly by a knockout. In short, the serious body work, the stamina, and the embodiment are visible in the leotard. This is physical masculinity for the Savate *tireur* expressed in two terms: style and stamina. This theme emerged in B's field notes some years ago:

In 2012 at the UK championships in Alcester I watched the oldest and most experienced British man who still fights regularly, Edward Kinvett, fight a bout against a 17-year-old man (a young member of the same club). Edward Kinvett won, and I later heard him tell the teenager that his 'style was good, but he 'needed to work harder to build up his stamina'. That was true, in that even I could see the young man had found the third round of the bout exhausting and performed very poorly in it. What Edward Kinvett did not say in his debriefing was that the young man also lacked guile and ringcraft. Edward is regarded by all the men in UK Savate as hard to defeat because he is 'tricky': a label he regards as a great compliment. He and his brother were in the original club in Alcester founded over 30 years ago, and are pictured in the only British book on Savate (Reed and Muggeridge 1984).

There are four tacit skills that successful Savate *tireurs* of both sexes in the UK have to learn: style, ringcraft, authenticity and the self-control necessary to keep your temper in the ring. Style, ringcraft, and authenticity are important for both sexes. Good style is valued and successful *tireurs* are able to 'out think' their opponents. The issue of authenticity needs a little explanation. One aspect of UK Savate that its initiates treasure is a belief that 'we' in Great Britain and Northern Ireland do *Assaut* as the French intended, obeying the rules, and 'we' officiate 'properly', whereas some other countries produce fighters who are too violent,

do *Assaut* as if it were *Combat*, and produce referees and judges who do not enforce the rules (especially not stopping violent fouls) properly. The aspect of the tacit skills which the fieldwork regularly shows as central to being viewed as a masculine ‘success’ is all about rigorous self-control akin to the gentlemanly conduct seen in boxing training [98]. For men, doing *Assaut* authentically is closely related to self-control in fights, especially fights that are poorly refereed. A loss of self-control can lead to disqualification. So a male *tireur* has to have a high degree of self-control. From observations and informal discussions, B has learned that if an opponent fouls repeatedly, or the referee and judges give ‘bizarre’, ‘unfair’ decisions, it is vital that the competitor shows no emotion, does not object or retaliate, and does not dissent or begin to fight too aggressively and get disqualified.

To be a ‘proper’ man in *Savate Assaut*, the well-tuned body in its leotard is subjected to firm self-control. Neither the physical body, nor the emotions, are undisciplined. Like all pedagogies, this involves a long-term process of change that helped develop the gender inclusive organisation that is the GBSF today. As seen within the earlier field note extract, the GBSF is an intergenerational organisation. This means that it involves older male members of a generation in which homophobia and homophobia is still rife [99]. B has not detected any signs of homophobia in her fieldwork, although there are different generational approaches to masculinity. She noted that certain older (male) members have resisted the changes to become bureaucratic and politically correct. One core member, a taxi driver, expressed resistance to the formal minutes and meetings, and prefers the more impromptu gatherings and an experiential approach to Savate that he experienced as a younger man. So it is important to examine these interactions and viewpoints beyond what is presented in meeting reports and policies. Yet the public face of GB Savate on social media gives a different ‘take’ on gender in the martial art.

Discussion and conclusion: Masculinities and the mobile elite

The balanced offline and online methodology utilised in this study can also be balanced with different concerns and viewpoints – noticing ideals masculinity and inclusivity online, up close and in official discourse. In a positive light, British Savate seems a rarity in the world of sport. It is a mixed gender organisation in terms of pedagogy, media representation and governance – at least in terms of the binary male/female divide. GBSF's residing President is a woman, Dr. Julie Gabriel, who is a veteran Savate practitioner who has received the very rare honorary golden gloves for her lifetime contribution to the sport. She is an example of an older sportswoman in the public gaze, that like Edward seen in the fieldnotes, shatters the master ageing narrative [100]. Meanwhile, within this intergenerational organisation, the Team GB coach is a woman in her twenties, Dr. Sian-Marie Frosini, who even coaches one of her old instructors (James Southwood) when they compete internationally. Rachel Shore is the third notable female instructors in the well-established Guildford school (of the nine schools in total in the UK). Moreover, up-and-coming female fighters are well represented in the media, and are given their own voice through writing articles and commentaries for newspapers and magazines. GBSF is therefore open to women in power (in symbolic, official and physical terms), and females appear as judges and with scorecards. They make decisions and are seen as fighters, the next generations of *tireurs* and also as mothers, as Rachel Shore is seen on GBSF's main website breastfeeding while sitting on a judges' panel. Furthermore, the Facebook group is managed by a sole female administration officer, and this depicts a strong balance of photographs and videos of males and females in training and in competition.

Could other emerging sports learn from the organisation and representation that GBSF has to offer? As an affiliated recreational, officially amateur and, unfortunately, self-funded organisation, GBSF provides a framework with which to study (and emulate) gender equality not only in competitive fighting, coaching and judging, but in all aspects of the martial arts community: the virtual, the pedagogical and the journalistic. So, unlike sports like netball and rhythmic gymnastics, which were (re)created to appear appropriate for females, Savate is an example of a sport originally developed by (and largely for) men fighting against men that is now widely practised, led and written about by women.

On a more cautionary note, with the history of Savate for affluent and mobile gentleman in the elite salons of Paris, there remains an element of elitism. There is a stable base of power among the highly educated members in the Golden Triangle (London, Cambridge, Oxford and Guildford) will slow diffusion to less affluent parts of the UK. Self-funded travel of the competitors, coaches and practitioners mean that Savate is for people with sufficient leisure time and disposable income. Beyond historically-situated factors of location, education and travel, the physical nature of Savate should be considered. Physicality and lifestyle dictate one's success in a martial art. Savate, and in particular, *Assaut*, is about the crucial balance between style and stamina for visibly fit, toned, able-bodied devotees. One has to fight with restraint and flair in order to succeed in the ring, and needs the resistance to continue the rigours of training over the course of a career (and often beyond as a lifelong practitioner). Yet this requires a highly dedicated and disciplined lifestyle that remains difficult for many men (and women).

The analysis of earlier English-language texts and contemporary documentaries alongside online comments demonstrate a tradition of orthodox masculine views on martial arts

expressing jingoism and homophobia. Some sexism and sexualisation can still exist within the sport itself, however. Although ring girls hardly exist in the sport and are not present in the British national championships, there are also dancing girls (for male fights) and dancing boys (for female fights) in international fights in countries such as France, which demonstrates continued gender ideologies in such combat sports at an elite level. Now, in the twenty-first century, women can compete in *combat*, and some contact can be made in sparring. The finesse, poise and skills are equally beneficial for both men and women wishing to gain the style of Savate.

With our focus on qualitative methods and the recent documentation of British and English-language Savate, numerous questions remain unaddressed, however. There are few statistics that offer a historical comparison across the years in terms of gendered participation, social class, ethnicity and other factors that can help us further in our exploration of masculinity in this French martial art. Why does contemporary British Savate seem so inclusive in the sense that gender and commonly perceived gender differences are not an important issue? For those with access, what happens behind the scenes in changing rooms and male-exclusive spaces? Some critics might suggest that the public image of inclusivity is a ploy to gain a place in the Olympic Games to join the other combat sports of boxing, Taekwondo, wrestling and now Karate. Some of these activities have been included and excluded from the Games themselves, and women remain restricted in boxing. Savate might be inclusive in terms of gender in Britain and Europe, but is this the case worldwide? Are men in other countries comfortable wearing the tight and revealing leotards? Is there room for men of different ethnicities and sexualities? Do they fear being called gay or feminine? These kinds of questions are ripe for a more international analysis of the martial art beyond the geopolitics limits of (mainly Western) Europe. At the time of Brexit and competing forms of British and

regional nationalism, the GBSF is still largely an English-led association the preserve of the educated Oxbridge elite in England, and has only expanded to Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Midlands in recent years, with one club in Northern England from around 1998 to 2000.

Our findings illustrate how an often inaccessible French art can be seen for its inclusive sense of men and women albeit those with physically able bodies living within and traveling between affluent cosmopolitan cities in Europe. With the 2024 Paris Olympic Games looming, there is now an international petition to return Savate as a demonstration sport 100 years since its featured as such in the 1924 Paris Olympics [101] and some of our informants overtly expressing their ambitions to compete and showcase the martial artistry within them.

With the links between past and future, we hope our analysis has been useful for sport historians and sport sociologists alike. Savate is an notable example of a physical culture quite literally concerned with the form and movement of the body and its inevitable connection with politics and power relations in wider society [102]. This focus on movement can form the basis of research on mobile masculinities built from empirical research in other physical cultures.

There are multiple ways of being a man in society – hence the plural form masculinities – and mobile masculinities are one form in which there is a distinct stress on movement and mobility in terms of: 1) acknowledging and moving with the changing nature of masculinity (through rapid changes through the decades); 2) individuals and groups that are constantly moving and shifting in concrete space (such as a boxing ring) through specific techniques of the body, and 3) the larger movements through travelling and returning and in continual flux.

Mobile masculinities might be useful for researchers looking at men's mobilities in and around the sport, and previously male-dominated, elitist and physically demanding activities are now accessible to women and those from less select backgrounds. This notion could

explore rapid historical changes in light of inclusivity and cosmopolitanism while examining the dynamic body in confined sporting space alongside frequent virtual communications and actual long-distance travel. Finally, in terms of methods, our multimodal collaborative project draws on historical document analysis with contemporary ethnographic and netnographic strategies, and we believe this approach of blending the historical with the contemporary and the online with the offline make sense in an increasingly globalised and mobile world.

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