

Afghan Riders Saddle Up for Buzkashi Season

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The traditional rough-riding sport is as strong as ever, and there are even plans to make it international. Springtime in northern Afghanistan brings the sound of hundreds of horses thundering over the dusty ground near the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. This is the season for “buzkashi”, a wild sport in which troops of horsemen fight to seize control of a dead calf and land its carcass in a circle marked out as the goal.

Buzkashi is popular in other parts of Afghanistan, but riders regard Mazar-e-Sharif as the true home of the sport.

Peak season is in the spring, especially around April 20-21, the traditional Afghan new year or “Nauruz”, when thousands of people flock to this northern city for celebrations that last 40 days. The visitors form the bulk of the spectators at the matches, which are usually held on Thursdays and Fridays.

The buzkashi grounds at Dasht-e-Shadian, a desert area ten kilometers south of the city, are a focus for matches which begin in January and reach their height in April, when hundreds of “chapandaz” or horsemen from other parts of Afghanistan congregate here.

This IWPR contributor went to one match between the local Balkh province team and their rivals from Kunduz to the east.

Haji Jamil Bay, who heads the Buzkashi Federation in Mazar-e-Sharif, was in the saddle leading the local riders.

After dismounting to give an interview, he told IWPR, “This year it’s been fantastic because hundreds of chapandaz have come here for the buzkashi match.”

Jamil Bay outlined his hopes for internationalising the sport, at least in the region.

“This game is held every year. But from now on, we’re going to try to make this national sport famous around the world,” he said, adding that the Mazar-e-Sharif federation was trying to contact its counterparts in the neighbouring Central Asian states to see whether international matches could be arranged.

Jamil Bay, himself an experienced rider, says buzkashi is one of the toughest sports in the world.

He explained how competitors try to grab the dead calf, which weighs in at around 100 kilograms, gallop away and drop it into the opposing goal – the “daire-ye halal or “forbidden circle” marked out on the ground, in the face of stiff opposition from the other team, who wield their riding-whips with abandon.

The goal-scorer can win cash prizes of up to 1,000 US dollars, which are funded by government officials,

the buzkashi federation and local businessmen.

Key to success in this sport – and for real aficionados its main interest – are the horses themselves, short and stocky but extremely agile and specially trained to compete in the melee.

Keeping horses for no other purpose than sport is a costly business, and it is generally businessmen or local militia commanders who can afford to maintain a string of animals and either hire riders for the competitions, or retain them on staff.

The satisfaction comes from seeing one's horse win after months of pampering and careful training.

"I own five horses and I spend more than 5,000 US dollars on each one every year. I also pay monthly wages to my riders." said Hussein Bay, whose animals were taking part in the match that IWPR observed.

"The best point in my life is when my horse and rider win a match. It is the ultimate form of happiness in my life," said Hussein Bay.

Another cost is paying professional trainers to feed the horses and prepare them to compete.

"They are experienced veterans who know which fodder needs to be given to the horses in any given season of the year, and when to start the training," explained Hussein Bay, adding that without the trainers, the horses would be unfit to compete and the sport would be meaningless.

Having a star rider also helps. As Hussein Bay put it, "Although buzkashi is a team game, the team needs one player who's able to snatch the calf off the ground; then the other riders will give him back-up and block the rival horsemen."

Hussein Bay has just such a man in the field in this match, riding one of his string of mounts.

Halim Pahlawan, 35, rides for the Balkh squad and is famous as a matchwinner across northern Afghanistan.

IWPR spoke to him as he left the field – mobbed by crowds of people – after scoring the winning point in the game against Kunduz.

"I always think of victory when I come onto the field," he said. "I've played a lot of buzkashi and I know how to win a game."

He explained how it was all about grit and mental focus, "When I grab the calf, I might get hit over a hundred times by my rivals' whips, but the only thing I'm thinking about is the distance between me and the circle, and how I'm going to pick my way through hundreds of horses and get the calf into the circle. I don't think about the pain."

As the spectators sat on the new-grown grass and watched the game progress, local singers performed in a variety of Afghan languages to drive the horsemen on to greater feats.

The spectators become very animated – yelling as if this might get the horses to change direction. When goal is scored, a singer pipes up to sing the rider’s praises, accompanied by applause from the crowd.

Nazar Mohammad, 73, has come all the way from Kunduz province for the match, and says he never watches other sports, as buzkashi is such a fine game.

"It is our traditional, ancient game. We are used to horses; our forefathers used to defeat our enemies on horseback. That’s why I love buzkashi," he said. "I come to all the major buzkashi fixtures every year. It doesn’t matter where the match is being held, we’ll spend the money to go and watch it."

Like Jamil Bay, Nazar Mohammad thinks buzkashi should expand its horizons.

"We must encourage this game. Businessmen should spend money to get it to take off. Western countries spend millions of dollars on their sports and they’ve made them famous all around the globe," he said. "We have our sport, buzkashi, and we need to expand it as it really is spectacular and interesting."

For all the drama and fury of buzkashi, the people IWPR interviewed kept coming back to its roots in the cultural value of horses and the importance of maintaining old traditions even in hard times.

"It’s true that we use buzkashi as a sport, but the most important thing to us is training the horse.... it’s a tradition that we respect greatly," said Jamil Bay.

"We carried on training horses even under the Taleban regime, which regarded this as un-Islamic, because we did not want the tradition of our forefathers to go to ruin."

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