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## Rider in the storm

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There aren't a lot of bats, balls or rackets in northern



**Mohammad Hasan Palwan has been Mazar's buzkashi champion 11 times -- four short of his father, who is regarded as the best rider ever.**

Afghanistan. There are goats, horses, men and dusty plains, and they have been there ever since Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde swept into the neighborhood in the 13th century. Their game, then, is simple. Men on horseback grab a goat from a chalk circle, carry it around a pole and drop it into another circle. No downs, innings, line judges or refs. Sometimes there are teams, and sometimes there aren't. Sometimes the field is 200 meters by 200 meters, and sometimes it isn't. And the goat? The goat might be a calf, but it's always dead, just lying there with its head and hooves cut off.

Grab the goat, bring it around the pole and put it in the circle. That's buzkashi.

The game sounds simple until you hang out with Mohammad Hasan Palwan. "Palwan" means strongman in Dari, the Persian language of Afghanistan. That's what people call him. The strongman. For a strongman, he's hardly big like American athletes, not like Ndamukong Suh or Blake Griffin. He's tall and wiry with brown-green eyes and a neat mustache. For an athlete at the top of his game, he's old -- maybe 42 or 43. He's not sure because he doesn't know his birthday. His hands, though, are giant and covered with a thousand small scars. His fingers are crooked, knobby and gnarled, like a pair of moving ginseng roots. Palwan has broken them all. And his ribs. And his arms. And his legs. And his jaw.

Palwan is one of buzkashi's great "chapandazan" -- the men who play Afghanistan's national sport, men who have been riding horses since they were boys, just like their fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers forever back in time. In Mazar-e Sharif, the sport's heartland located 200 miles north of Kabul, Palwan has been the champion 11 times -- four short of his father, who is regarded as the best chapandaz ever. Is Palwan the best in the country? It's hard to say. There is no Super Bowl or Stanley Cup that decides these things.



**In buzkashi, every rider is out for the same thing -- getting the goat carcass into the "circle of justice."**

Buzkashi is played on Friday afternoons from November through February or so. I saw my first match in December 2008 in a barren field on the edge of Mazar. Musicians in turbans wailed as hash wafted over a crowd of thousands of men watching from the sidelines. (Women do not attend.) There were no tickets or uniforms, and anybody could play. That day, more than 100 horsemen wearing Soviet-era tank helmets and hand-worked, knee-high leather boots fought leg to leg in a scrum of horseflesh and cracking whips to pick up a headless goat weighing 150 pounds from the backs of their 1,100-pound stallions. Horses reared, men whipped each other, and spectators fled when the action got too close. Horse owners in the audience offered prizes for the victors: It could be \$20; it could be \$3,000; it could be a horse or a car. Egos often take over, and the pots become enormous. Palwan remembers riding home from a match 20 years ago with \$17,000, earrings for his wife, two camels and five AK-47s.

The game is a microcosm of the country, a tangled web of patronage and allegiances, of great wealth, chaos and brutality. It is anything but simple.

"It is," says Palwan, "war."

And like all recent wars in Afghanistan, buzkashi is riding a wave of U.S. dollars. America has poured roughly \$100 billion per year into the country since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. That money has flowed through the land like water through a sieve, making a number of tribal big men rich in the process. It's fair to say that nothing happens in the regions they control without their collusion, knowledge or profit. And they've found more than a few ways to profit. Some of their money has come from legitimate enterprises -- providing U.S. military and NATO subcontractors protection through dangerous mountain passes, for instance, as documented in a 2010 Senate report -- but plenty more allegedly comes from drug-running and illegitimate kickbacks. While Afghanistan's national pastime receives no financial support from any official U.S. programs, the influx of so many billions of American dollars has indirectly pumped new energy into this medieval sport.

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What was originally a pickup game played at weddings and festivals has become a game of one-upmanship between rich big men getting richer and bigger every day. Who has the most horses? The most expensive horses, which can cost \$50,000 in a country where the average annual wage is \$370? The best stable of chapandazan? Players have always been sponsored -- given good horses to ride for the glory of the horse's owner and small profit for the rider -- but now a few have made themselves the world's first professional, full-time buzkashi players.

"The commanders, the members of parliament, people who have a lot of power, all want horses and to sponsor buzkashi players now," says Toryalai Kamgar, a former general whose family operates Afghanistan's first commercial private airline.

Some have dreams of organizing the sport, taming it, seeing it in the Olympics, the isolated nation and its ancient sport claiming a spot on the world stage. Others think that the country's power brokers are bending buzkashi's already hazy rules in their favor with money and threats of violence and that the sport is getting all screwed up, just like Afghanistan itself.

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You can follow the story of buzkashi through its horses. They used to be native, small but strong, quick and brave. Then in 1979, the Soviets invaded.

"The Russians shot everything," says Haji Rashid Dara, the head of the Buzkashi Federation in Kabul. "I hid my horse. He wouldn't eat or drink, and I could tell that he was crying. If I ever find the Russian who found and killed him, I'm going to cut his head off."

After the Russians came the Taliban. They didn't forbid buzkashi, but they took a lot of the high-strung buzkashi horses, rode them in the summer heat and killed them through neglect. By the time the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance drove out the Taliban after 9/11, few decent horses remained. But then the money, American money, began to flow in, and the tribal big men found themselves in the right place at the right time. Men like Mohammad Qasim Fahim, currently the country's first vice president, second in power to President Hamid Karzai. He commanded the Northern Alliance forces, and for his cooperation with the CIA, he reportedly received millions of dollars.



**Prized horses bring prestige to sponsors like Haji Ghulam Rasool.**

Flush with piles of greenbacks, Fahim spent heavily on buzkashi players and horses. Other tribal big men who profited, including Abdul Rashid Dostum, Karzai's chief of staff, did the same. And at that point the game became a display of power -- a game of its own.

Looking north, they imported horses from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. These steeds are bigger, stronger and faster, and they are changing the sport. A bigger horse means a bigger rider to control it and reach the ground. They can carry a bigger load, so the goats are bigger. At around \$20,000 a head, they're more expensive, which means having one -- or 35, as Fahim does -- makes a big man that much bigger. Suddenly, skilled buzkashi players were also in demand.

That was clear when I visited Aziz Ahmad, a legendary chapandaz who lives in Kabul. He invited me into the four-story house his sponsor, Fahim, is building for him. Ahmad is big, with thick, black eyebrows, a black beard and a scar on his temple, his hands crisscrossed with hatch marks from a lifetime of being whipped. As we sat on a red-and-gold carpet in the cool basement of his rising palace, he told me of growing up with little in the faraway district of Kunduz. Thanks to buzkashi, "now I have a car, a house and a full-time salary!" he says.

I ask Palwan about all this new wealth. "In the past," he says, "if you won it was for the province." The sponsors have changed the allegiances, the pride. Victory is no longer for your community. "Now it's for the man."

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The one hard and fast rule of buzkashi is that, during the searing summer months, the horses stay in their stables, allowed only to eat, drink and sleep, getting fat, full and happy. Which is why in July, Palwan and I are in a baked dirt field on the outskirts of Mazar with two cart horses borrowed from a nearby construction site. They're small and spindly compared with the high-performance beasts used in competition. Toyota Corollas instead of Ferraris. Palwan saddles them up, slides a sandaled foot in the heavy brass stirrup and swings a leg over. He rides at a quick gallop and makes a few tight turns. His horse rears up and paws the air.

A crowd of 30 people has gathered to watch us, many of them children. One of them throws a pillow on the ground. The goat. Palwan sticks the whip between his teeth, bends down, somehow reaching from the horse's back to the dirt, and scoops up the pillow. He looks at me, throws the pillow down and scoops it up again. My turn.

My horse may be short, but it feels high. I look at the pillow, put the whip between my teeth and am confronted with the fundamental challenge of buzkashi: how to stay in the saddle while reaching for the goat. It cannot be done, it seems. Finally, I clutch the saddle with both hands while a spectator holds the horse steady -- I am almost upside down -- and manage to grab it. Success! Until Palwan hammer-fists me in the thigh and sweeps the goat out of my hand with a grin.

I stand 5'9" and Palwan says, "For short people it is hard. You must know the techniques and be strong and powerful and smart."

Then there's the horse. A good horse is strong, quick, fearless and sneaky and knows the game as intuitively as its rider. It can nudge a man with its chest. It knows the goat and the circle. "I can make the horse come down," Palwan says, "not bend its knees, but spread its legs to bring me closer. The horse knows what I want him to do." Palwan teaches tricks to the horses. "I touch his ear and he kicks you!"

Horse and chapandaz take years to mature. Palwan, like almost all riders, watched his father play and was forbidden to ride. Too dangerous. He practiced bareback on donkeys and sneaked out to games. He didn't start playing until he was in his early 20s. Horses start being trained at 5 or 6 but don't reach their prime until they're 10 to 15. There is a saying: It takes man and horse half their playing life to get good.

When I can more or less pick up the pillow with regularity, Palwan takes me to the next level. We

fight over the pillow. He shows me how to tuck the goat under my leg to protect it and gallop with it. How to stand in the stirrups and lean back at a gallop. How to grab a man's foot by the heel to dislodge the goat from his grip. How to kick a man's toes to eject his foot from the stirrup and send him off his horse. How to sneak a rope from under my saddle to loop around the goat. Most of these tricks are fouls, but who cares. Only one man, the man who hits the circle, gets the bonus.

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Last year, three sponsors paid Palwan to ride, and he takes me around to visit them and other potential backers. Late in the afternoon, on the outskirts of Mazar, we visit the stables of Haji Ghulam Rasool. There is nothing but dried pancakes of mud as far as the eye can see -- heat, dust and flatness to infinity. Rasool is building a walled enclosure the size of three football fields. His 10 horses stand roped to their food in the gloam. Rasool imports carpets and has money, but he's also an old-school lover of horses and buzkashi. We sit on a carpet under a rising moon, and Palwan whips out a knife and slices into round watermelons that are deep red. "My father had only two or three horses," Rasool says, "and they were the most famous in the province. But nowadays it's hot, competitive."

In the new Afghanistan, what really sets a man apart isn't cars, women or a big house but those big stallions from the Stans. "You get 10 horses and the other guy gets 11, and then you gotta get 20," says Rasool, slurping on a watermelon chunk. "Twenty Land Cruisers don't make anyone like you, but if you have a good horse, that makes everyone like you."

Next we drop in on Kamgar, the former general. Another wall, manned by two camouflaged guards holding AKs. Kamgar is round with a crew cut and draped in flowing white robes along with huge, jangling gold and turquoise bracelets and rings. He's juggling two cellphones, and Palwan is uncharacteristically quiet in his presence. The general and his brother own an airline, Kam Air, and the chapandazan it sponsors are the first commercially backed players in history. "I spend \$100,000 a year on buzkashi," Kamgar says. He doesn't sponsor Palwan but rather his rival, Jaan Geer. Palwan would like to ride for him, but he wants more money than Kamgar is willing to pay.



**Toryalai Kamgar has won buzkashi trophies with his network of chapandazan.**

Kamgar lights a cigarette and says, "Let's go see the horses." We pile into his chauffeur-driven Land Cruiser to a sprawling industrial site of tumbledown warehouses with smashed windows and collapsed machinery. Armed guards whip open the doors. Inside the buildings are his 32 horses. Kamgar checks his phones, lights up again and cracks a pistachio from a plate of assorted nuts and hard candies waiting for us on a table. It's 100 degrees. The flies are thick.

"I used to pay my chapandazan \$4,000 a year, and now I have to pay them \$15,000," he says, "and I don't even know which ones will ride for me next year. Now the chapandazan all want to go to the one who pays them the most. It's hard for the old guys who just loved horses. In the past, only the people whose fathers were horse owners had horses. Now everyone is a sponsor."

Kamgar is getting worked up, agitated. He has good money, horses and power -- but he still feels that

he's at a disadvantage outside of Mazar, that the playing field isn't always level.

"If we play in Kabul and we pick up the goat and put the goat in the circle, suddenly they say, 'No! That's not the right spot,'" he says. "But when a powerful person's rider puts the goat a meter away from the circle, he wins. There shouldn't be politics in sport!"

There's an awkward silence. His frankness is unusual in this world of walls and whispers. Sensing the tension, Kamgar changes the subject. "That horse really likes me," he says, pointing toward a huge brown-and-black animal. "If he doesn't see me for a week, he kisses me. I give him chocolate."

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Mazar may be the traditional heart of buzkashi, but Kabul remains the capital, where the power resides. I meet with Rahees Khair Mohammad Bai, secretary general of Afghan buzkashi, and Dara, the buzkashi chief. These men preside over the sport just as the government presides over the country, trying to define and regulate a culture that defies regulation. Their positions don't translate to Western sports because they're more like informal advisers in a tribal land than official commissioners of an organized league. Mohammad sponsors six chapandazan and owns 50 horses. Dara also owns 50 horses but sponsors nobody. He has 14 children. "Why would I sponsor others when I have my sons?" he says.

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Sitting on carpets under Dara's grape arbor, surrounded by rice, bread, yogurt and mutton, Mohammad tells me his dream: He wants to "unite" buzkashi. He imagines rules, referees, formal teams, players and horses rotating in and out. Formal player contracts. A dedicated stadium. Uniforms. Maybe even an artificial goat so it will become acceptable in America.

"Everything should be like a football team," he says, referring to soccer.

Dara likes the idea of formalizing buzkashi too, but his rise to the top of the sport says it all. "I paid everyone," he says. "I gave gifts. I invited players to games and paid their ways. If you are generous, you become chief." This isn't politicking in the American sense but complex relations of money, patronage and power. The men's titles and dreams notwithstanding, Afghan buzkashi has a long way to go before it's organized and regulated enough to compete in an international arena where real rules apply.

It's easy to get swept up in the dream. Buzkashi in the Olympics. Palwan shilling Gatorade. Wilson Sporting Goods making artificial goats. But when you're out in the chaos of Kabul, you remember that it's a world of blocked-off streets and machine gunners. Just to get into the Kabul City Center, the shiny mall complex downtown, you have to go through multiple locked chambers of bulletproof glass and be frisked. They even have to check your head because you might have a bomb under your turban. The Afghan policeman at the traffic checkpoint might be getting paid by someone else, such

as the Taliban, and he might kidnap you or cut off your head. That's the way it's been for centuries -- and the way buzkashi has been for centuries too. It is war, just like Palwan said, and it cannot be set to rules. It is just a game among men who want to grab a goat, put it in the circle and feel the joy of victory.

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