

Buzkashi: the rules of the game

By James Merriman

Three rows ahead, a man prowled the congested stands, hunting for a seat. Finding none, he pulled back his coat to reveal the AK-47 hanging at his side. Instantly, a space opened.

Hundreds of men stood shoulder to shoulder inside the Mazar-e-Sharif stadium. Long before the first contest began, the terraces were already overflowing. We handed forty Afghanis, roughly fifty pence, to two local boys selling tickets before a referee ushered us into the VIP area. More than 100 horses already circled the bare dirt pitch while riders shifted in their saddles, waiting for the signal to begin.

The manager stalked the sidelines, barking commands through a megaphone. Thick wads of banknotes moved rapidly between spectators, despite betting being officially illegal in Afghanistan. Older men with henna-dyed beards argued furiously over the odds before pressing folded notes into waiting hands. Nobody appeared especially concerned about hiding it. Behind the wire-mesh fence, teenagers climbed onto the roofs of parked cars. They wanted a better view. The entire stadium vibrated with aggressive energy.



Hundreds of men and hundreds of horses

The horses bunched around a crisp white circle. The riders waited. Nothing happened. Nobody had brought the 'goat'. The modern version is a sack stuffed with mud and hay, but even that was missing.

The riders grew restless. Some wheeled their horses away from the scrum for another lap of the field, while others shouted towards the organisers. Hundreds of riders, horses, and spectators had assembled for Afghanistan's national sport, only for someone to forget the most important piece of equipment.





*Above: The Holy Shrine (mausoleum) of Hazrat Ali, in Mazar-i-Sharif
Below: Sancharaki roundabout in central Mazar-i-Sharif*

The match started the moment the sack hit the ground. Hooves tore up the dry earth, throwing a thick wall of dust into the air. Leather whips cracked against heavy flanks. Fifty horses collided. The sound resembled a collapsing roof. Men shouted in Pashto and Dari. They violently whipped their own mounts and the animals beside them. The smell of hot horse sweat mixed instantly with the choking dirt. A distorted tannoy blared over the shouting crowd.

A rider in a red cap finally burst free from the scrum. Dragging the heavy leather weight behind him, he rounded the green flag before forcing his horse back through the brawl and dropping the sack into the chalked circle. He rode straight up to our section to collect his winnings of 1,000 Afghani, roughly twelve pounds.

As the circle was repainted, the horses clashed again. Dust thickened in the air. Soon, only silhouettes of rearing horses remained. Alliances developed within the brawl. A rider in a green cap with a heavy monobrow burst clear on a white horse. Three others protected him from the charging pack. He scored, paid his defenders and pocketed his winnings.

Beyond the stands, men crammed onto the flat roofs of nearby shops. They watched the carnage through the choking dust. A horse threw its rider into the dirt. The crowd offered no sympathy. They just laughed as the man narrowly avoided a fresh pile of manure.

My throat was coated in dry earth and my ears rang from the tannoy. Down on the pitch, another sack hit the dirt and the horses collided all over again. There was no final whistle. We simply left while the game carried on behind us, the shouting fading only as the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif swallowed the noise.

