

Buzkashi – biffy Afghani style

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"To make a colt into a horse, a man must make himself into a dog" **Buzkashi rule #**

The goat has been submersed up to its neck in water for several days. Not that it is uncomfortable – it doesn't have a head. And its legs had been hacked off at the middle joint. The final indignity is that its innards are sitting off in another part of the house. Some of it might be cooked and eaten, the rest maybe given to the dogs, but the aim of this piece of butchery isn't primarily culinary. The main aim is to transform the animal into a huge, hairy, waterlogged football – hard to grab, heavy to hold. Weighing in at between 40 to 50 kilos, it will soon take pride of place in one of the oldest most aggressive games in the world. Not that the critter would in any stretch of the imagination be a star. It will finish the game a well-pummeled shadow of its former self.

Following the customary lame directions we leave the famous blue mosque and slither through the mud to the south side of town till we come to what they ambitiously described as a "soccer stadium". Visually closer to a bullfighting ring, it is a desultory wood encrusted dustbowl. Two young boys bleakly kick a ball around while crows wheel overhead.

We keep going until we come to the road that defines the perimeter of the town; the one that houses the hulking UN compound and the equally large and colourful cemetery. Across the road sits a vast area of flat and well-trammeled land the colour of camels, ringed by wheat silos on one side and an uninterrupted view of the Balkh mountains on the other. The plains inbetween are littered with gutted personnel carriers, tanks and other detritus of war. And just beyond all of this a motherlode of well-entrenched heavy artillery keeps blundering around in a bloody stalemate.

A small jittery crowd slowly swells as it is fed by ant-like lines from the city. An exotic gumbo of different tribes and lineages mix uneasily around the edge of the field – Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazara Shiites and Ismaelis all live here in a state of tense acceptance. I ask a small pinched-face man, “Is this Buzkashi?” and he looks at me like I’ve just said “Allah be praised! I haven’t fisted a goat in weeks”. I move on into the crowd.

Mazar-i-Sharif is a frontier town in the true sense of the word. A pimple on the arse-end of the world near the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It’s an extreme place; tough, cold and punishing to everyone who lives there. The kind of place where men are men and the sheep have run away in terror. The kind of place where they play Buzkashi. The first tentative icy bursts of snow have melted on the ground leaving a muddy slurry as a calling card to the hard winter ahead.

The ground vibrates and shudders with an uneven rumble. Usually around here that means tanks and, inevitably, gunfire. But the sweaty grunts and uneven panting of a sea of horses seem to signal something different. At the front of this hormonally-packed entourage is a small Soviet-version of the ubiquitous jeep. The horses – a mix of Arabian stallions and local breeds most valued at up to \$US10,000 a pop – wheel off onto the field while the jeep comes to a handbrake stop on the ridge that surrounds it.

Two bodyguards armed with Kalashnikovs jump out scanning the crowd and hissing at the local children who come too close. One of them drags a glorious blood-red carpet from the car and splays it on the ground ready for the dude inside. A chunky faced short guy shrouded in a turban, a hefty moustache and a lifetime of spoil-brat attitude sashays out onto the rug eyeing his domain. He looks suspiciously like Abdul Malik Pahlawan – local warlord, ally of Dostum (head northern warlord), betrayer of Dostum, ally of the Taliban and ultimately friend of nobody. One month later, he will end up mowing 2,000 Taliban prisoners into graves with tanks.

He barks orders at some of the crowd and when they don’t move fast enough whips them at head-height with his Buzkashi whip (gamchin). Proving the feudal system is alive and well here, they are soon scurrying around the field picking up rocks and rubbish.

The sign of him plonking his overfed butt onto the carpet is the signal for the game to begin. A small guy standing in front of the warlord who is obviously the ref (Rais) coughs out commands and the riders fall into a rough cacophany of order. There are basically two forms of Buzkashi – Tudabara (every man for himself, get the goat and ride anywhere like the clappers) and Qarajai (played in teams, the rules are more complex).

There are two teams today so the game will obviously be Qarajai. Well, 'teams' is an ambitious term for the two unruly camps who jostle and careen off each other like overcharged bucks at a piss-up. And the team names are equally mysterious to us. The words here get easily scrambled on our pampered Westernised tongues. Any conversation in the local guttural dialect sounds somewhat like a heavy smoker hacking up yesterday's pack of unfiltered twenty-fives. And so for our own ease the team in grey we've christened "The Warlord's Eleven". They are competing today with an army-green brigade under our monicker of "The Mazar Monsters".

The bruised and water-bloated goat's body is dragged out into the goat circle and the horses' nostrils flare in anticipation as they sense the riders' stiffen above them. This being first game of the season, the stakes aren't particularly high, but it's always approached with incredible seriousness.

Handed down from the times of Genghis Khan, Buzkashi is rich with history and accumulated honour. Originally it was played with the body of a prisoner of war and used to celebrate victory as well as developing horsemanship and burning off aggression during the colder months. But Buzkashi also helps to enhance skills and tactics that are useful in battle. Surprisingly, given how boofy and chaotic the game is, there are subtle strategies that need a deft hand to make them work. Younger, inexperienced players will sacrifice their chances at glory in order for the more skilled riders (chapandaz) to get a better go at grabbing the goat. Blocking opposing players, ramming them out of the way, even crashing their horses into the enemies are all commonplace moves.

Abdul Malik raises a forearm the size of a ham hock and brings his whip down on the ref's right shoulder. The ref yelps (maybe it's mixed in pain) and the crowd whoops

along dementedly. You take the rough translation to be 'Go, you fuckers!' because the teams boot into horse bellies and start scrumming around in one massive bang-on.

A Monster is first to come up out of the scramble with the clump of doom hanging from his fist. Now he's grabbed the goat off the ground from his horse, he must get out of the circle while a melee of men tries to do the same. For a few moments the dust churning up off the ground smothers sight of the whips and hooves that cut through the air like a hellish fan. The Monster heaves the goat up higher under his groin, grunts like Dean Lucan with a chubby, then piss-bolts out of there with 15 Warlords screaming down his dust.

This is the time when an understanding between the man and horse comes in. His whip is firmly gripped between his teeth, his hands tightly grasp the carcass and only his legs are free to steer the horse. Not that it needs a lot of guidance, years of training have drilled into the animal a clear understanding of what is required.

But concentration is the key here – just because the goat has lost its head doesn't mean that the player has to lose theirs. And they can. They die in this game. A body can get broken in the back or the neck. While for extra edginess the teams usually tackle it out alongside a river. The aim: beat the guy with the goat by running him into and under the water – end of his game.

The Monster now must make it to the other end of the field complete an arcing loop and return to the circle replacing the furball for the next bunfight. Several times the goat is nearly snatched from him by the opposition. He eventually succeeds through spirited support from a phalanx of teammates who chase the Warlords down and beat them off with some cracks to their chests and faces (unwritten rule #35: no hitting hands allowed).

A Warlord is the next to raise the goat out of the scrum and go off. He's at a slight disadvantage because the Warlord's top guy has got his leg busted in the biff. He pulls himself off his horse but the game doesn't stop. A guy on a donkey gallops over and rags up the Warlord's limb, then the Warlord somehow hoiks himself back in his saddle. A Buzkashi horse is trained to wait for his rider if he falls off or is hurt during

the game. A bit like a good woman they wait breathlessly panting for their man to get back in the saddle.

The game proceeds like this for about an hour until the dust swirls around the field like a storm has blown in off the mountains. The smell of sweat, leather and tobacco smoke intermingles with the grit to concoct a throat-catching mist that hangs in the air along with the screams and grunts. Horses crash into each other, men whip and tear at the clothes of their opponents all the time cursing and spitting. The crowd adds to the hysteria, chanting out the names of favourite players and generally carrying on like sports fans the world over (minus the Esky of course).

As the light starts to fade, the exhausted riders intensify their efforts at the chance of having their heroic deeds sung from village to village. But at the end of the day there are only a few real stars. As darkness approaches, the signal is given to end the game and the score is Mazar Monsters 10 goat dumps to Warlords Eleven's six.

The horses are quickly dried off and led away before the rapidly cooling night air can affect them. In fact, the horses seem a hell of a lot more pampered than the riders, many of whom walk back into town while their mounts are led back by handlers to warm and comfortable lodgings.

The crowd slips away still chattering about the game and within minutes there is no sound except the wind whipping down from Uzbekistan and the occasional rumble of gunfire from the south. But, still, the triumphant Mazar Monsters are in the mood for celebration - it will be goat giblets for dinner tonight.

The end