Ever since its creation in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, who usurped power through a military coup d’état from his Persian ruler Nadir Shah, Afghanistan has been a Buzkashi field for outside powers. The country and its people have resembled the headless carcass of the calf frayed under the hooves of horses where the superpowers dragged it for vying influence in the region. It has been the epicenter of the Great Game, Cold War power-politics arena, Al Qaeda hideout and now the so-called “War on Terror”.

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Source: Accueil
Located in the foothills of Shadyan Mountain south of Mazar city is the *Buzkashi* field of Balkh province. Although it is the size of approximately five football pitches or even more, every year in the autumn season, this open field fills up with horses from all over the country to compete in the game of *Buzkashi*. Rich and influential figures from both, the government as well as business communities sponsor the game showcasing their wealth, stallions, and of course, social status.

*Buzkashi*, synonymous with Afghanistan, literally meaning “goat dragging” or “goat grabbing” in Persian is a traditional sport played in Northern Afghanistan, particularly in Mazar-e-Sharif, the provincial capital of Balkh province bordering present-day Uzbekistan, for centuries now. While this present national sport is considered a tradition and pride of the north, it also has its enthusiasts in Kabul – thanks to the late vice president, Marshal Fahim’s interest in horses. He used to host lavish *Buzkashi* games either in Kabul or in his native Panjshir valley.

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Historically, the game of *Buzkashi* was said to have first been introduced by Genghis Khan in Central Asia and subsequently brought to Afghanistan. Anecdotal beliefs indicate that Genghis Khan’s hordes of raiding forces used it as a training exercise. However, some historians believe it dates back to more than 2000 years ago, during Alexander the Great’s conquest of Afghanistan when his cavalry forces used it as a recreational sport amongst themselves. Later, the locals adopted it as a game celebrating an occasion. So, the origin of this seemingly gruesome and barbaric *Buzkashi*, to outsiders, is still a disputed issue. As a reflection of its war-ridden inception, the horses have to be stallions - strong, aggressive and with unbridled testosterone to withstand the battlefield that is the *maidan-e-buzkashi* and to keep up with their riders’ strategies. It is a game of power and showmanship. Most expatriates consider this game savage and inhumane where horse riders rabidly drag a frayed calf carcass from one side of the field to the other.
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The role of engagement is as sophisticated as any other game in the world. Firstly, the word *Buzkashi* only exists in theory. It is a pseudo usage. In practice, it is not a goat rather a calf. The night before the game, the sponsor slaughters a one-year old calf, which normally weighs around 40 to 50 kilos. After degutting and removing the hooves, it is soaked in water to make it even heavier. Just before the start of the game, the bedraggled carcass is taken to the arena and dropped in the chalk marked circle called *Daira Halal* “circle of justice” in Persian. The horde of horseback riders commonly known as *Chopandaz*, have to bend down, lift up the heavy carcass with one hand while maintaining their weight on the horseback, hold it tight under one leg and whip the horse with the other hand, do a lap of the arena at a full gallop and drop it in the lime-marked circle. However, it is easier said than done. Completing this process is a daunting and arduous task. Any *Chopandaz* who manages to complete the procedure will be considered winner of the prize.

Source: Accueil
The second rule of the game is for the horses to be well-nourished, well-trained and well-groomed during the off season. Every horse has its own trainer and groomer who looks after it round the clock and closely monitors every movement and gesture of the horse. As the Buzkashi season approaches, which normally starts from mid-November and ends sometime in March, horses are put on a strict diet or Qantar to lose fat and get fit for the game ahead. During the summer months, which is considered as the resting period, horses are fed and fattened to reach their peak in terms of weight and wellbeing. However, two months before the start of the game, the assigned trainers begin exercising their steeds for up to four hours a day, mostly early in the morning, to give them the necessary strength and stamina. After the exercise these steeds are made Qantar – no food and water for up to two hours. Two hours later, they are fed to their heart’s content – 7 kg of barley, between 10 to 15 beaten eggs, depending on the size of the horse, mixed with a glass of sesame oil and a dozen of bananas. This is their late breakfast, which is not followed by lunch. The same amount and type of food is repeated in the evening.

Finally, Chopandaz or horse riders must enjoy a similar level of luxury throughout the year. Similar to the Japanese sumo wrestlers, these riders eat the most protein-rich foods day in and day out, in order to become bulky and capable of lifting a 50 kg calf carcass off the ground with ease. Like the horses, the riders also start training and make themselves ready for the game of strength and power. It is due to the latter that they are also called Pahlawan or wrestlers.
Buzkashi is more than a mere game of horseback riders dragging the headless carcass from one end of the arena to the other. It is a display of wealth, power, pride and taking the forefather’s culture and way of life to the next generation. Ordinary people cannot afford to own these extraordinary expensive stallions with one costing up to US$100,000. Most of these steeds are imported from Central Asia and beyond. Maintaining these beasts and their trainers is another costly undertaking. Thus, every rich man has a number of well-groomed stallions and trainers with a mission objective to participate in the upcoming Buzkashi and win the game in order to bring pride and fame to the owner. Each colt is trained for up to seven years, which then competes for the next 20 years. Cost and reputation of each steed is determined by its breed. The chestnut is considered to be more intelligent while black is famous for being the fastest hence the most expensive.

Furthermore, Buzkashi matches generally take place for recreation, mostly on Fridays and for celebrating occasions such as weddings. Matches for recreational purposes do not embody expensive prizes. It is to warm up horses and their riders.
There are prizes but not very expensive. However, matches held to celebrate the wedding of powerful figures or their kin typically come with astonishingly expensive gifts and prizes such as cars, houses and hefty sums of money in US dollars. I can remember as a young boy, when General Dostum and his powerful right-hand man General Rasol hosted *Buzkashi* near our village, prizes were lavishly expensive. The smallest prizes started from US$20,000 and reached up to a million dollar if one had to calculate the value of houses and cars.

In the west, golf is considered a sport of the politicians where leaders make political deals and informal negotiations. In Afghanistan, especially in Mazar-e-Sharif, *Buzkashi* is considered as game of wealth, power and fame. It also depicts the authority and influence of the sponsor. This element is ascertained not by the number of spectators, but the number of expensive and well-groomed horses. The larger the number of horses, the greater the amount of wealth and power.

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Putting politics and power aside, *Buzkashi* is also a game that brings people together to have fun and relax. Most people may not get the chance to meet friends during business days. However, this game makes it a lot possible for friends to have a meet up. It is also a game that brings happiness and joy to thousands of people who take time out to watch the game.