

NAADAM FESTIVAL or THREE MANLY GAMES (图)

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Naadam (naa-dm) that is how Mongols call one of two largest national holidays. The name of the festival means competition, sports. In deed, it is a true test of manhood in such traditional games as horse racing, archery and wrestling. The wrestling enjoys special popularity comparable to that of baseball in the United States or sumo wrestling in Japan. The festival usually takes place in mid-summer, during a brief period between spring and autumn seasonal jobs.

HISTORY

The origins of the Naadam Festival go long way back into times primordial when horse was domesticated and first hunters learned how to ride them. Though the historical evidence is not available, the festival roots can be traced in the culture to such Central Asian nomadic tribes as Huns, Scythians and Turks.

As early as 3,000 year B.C. the holiday become a regular national event when all the nomad tribes would come together to show the best of their physical strength, riding and shooting skills, qualities vital for the survival of nomad herders and hunters.

This tradition of annual festival survived throughout the centuries of turbulent history of Central Asian nomads.

After 1921, the Naadam Festival became an official celebration of the National Revolution's victory. On June 11 the revolutionaries mounted a successful attack on Urgoo, the capital city, and expelled Chinese military garrison.

Nowadays, it is simply the Naadam Festival.

The festival begins with a ceremonious ride by medieval warriors bearing the Nine Banners of Chinggis Khaan. It has replaced the seven decades long tradition of military parades and demonstrations praising the Communist party.

WRESTLING

The wrestling tournament is the focal point of the festival. Altogether 1024 wrestlers step out onto the arena at the start of the wrestling tournament. Wrestlers slowly come up waving their hands imitating the flight of a mythical Phoenix bird.

Wrestlers then divide into two groups on two sides of the arena. One by one, secondants sing a long praise for the wrestler's qualities, the rank and past victories. Then they call out the name of the wrestler contender.

Once wrestlers know who will face whom, after a signal they converge in a fierce battle. After half an hour the weakest ones are knocked out and the winners of the first round emerge, proudly waving their hands imitating an eagle's flight.

Winners then they again split into two groups and start to call out their next contenders.

The tournament lasts for two days and after eight matches only the strongest ones remain to wrestle for the title of a Titan, the highest rank.

The rules of wrestling are rather simple-- anybody who touches the ground first is defeated. The rules also are demanding ones as neither wrestlers' weight nor height is accounted for.

The match time is not limited either and sometimes wrestlers become stalled like a pair of bulls, waiting for one another to make a fatal mistake. Only the angry shouts by fans may force them to try their last and favorite trick. Therefore, such qualities as ability to withstand on feet, masterful command of every possible reception, dodges are vital for winning.

Each Mongolian wrestler has a title of his own: Lion, Elephant, Falcon, - a sophisticated hierarchy of ranks bestowed depending on the wrestler's past performance. Such definitions as Steady, Mighty and Strong are usually added to wrestler rank, to reflect their specific wrestling style or quality. The champion of the tournament is awarded the title of The Titan.

B. Bat Erdene, winner of the Naadam Festival wrestling for 11 times. For this achievement he was awarded such praises as Glorious and Unbeatable Titan. On the international level he is more known as the silver medal winner in judo and bronze medal from Asian Sumo Wrestling. He is now 34-year-old, married and has two children.

ARCHERY SHOOTING

Mongols are almost born with the archery skills, an integral part of nomads lifestyle. From the very childhood such qualities as perfect eyesight, measurement, patience and strength are nourished to develop a good archer.

Mongolian bows are very tight ones, so that it requires a pure strength to stretch it out.



As a rule, several teams of archers compete. Each team of 5-7 archers should hit 33 leather cylinders from a distance of 75 meters. The team, beating out first all cylinders qualifies for the next round with the number of targets sharply reduced. The last round involves only three cylinders.

During the tournament, judges stand in two sides next to the target. Each time, an archer prepares for a shot, they would start slowly the so called Uukhai song. As soon as the arrow hits the target, the song's melody changes and an experienced archer immediately learns about how many cylinders were hit.

This song is very old one. Until recently the shooting range was three times as long or about 200 meters. Therefore it was easier to convey information through a song rather than dispatching a messenger to inform about the result.

Traditionally, women did not practice archery, but in the last two decades they made a steady progress. On the picture - four times winner of the Naadam Archery Tournament Ch. Munkh Tsetseg. She received her first title while she was a young girl in 1982 and now her title is Unparalleled One.

HORSE RACING

It is impossible to imagine Mongols without a horse. As thousands years ago, horses remain the most reliable mean of transportation. Therefore any festive is not complete without horse racing.

Reflecting this reverence for horses, awards and prestige goes not to the horse rider or owner, but to the horse.

A peculiarity of the Naadam horse racing that strikes foreigners most, is that jockey usually are children aged 4 to 10. It is believed that lightweight jockeys allow horses to demonstrate their best.

The racing start is a spectacular event as hundreds of horses shoot out amidst clouds of dust and accompanied by wild shouts of jockeys and cheering spectators.

Three centuries ago a horse owned by a poor herder named Bonkhor Donid won the Naadam horse race leaving other horses well behind. To mark this exceptional victory a special song, "Ahead of Ten Thousand Horses," was composed. Eventually, it became the main theme song of the Naadam Festival.

Mongolian horses look more like ponies, but are well reputed for their stamina and strength. They stay outside, on open pastures, year round grazing whatever grass available. Despite their size they can run for hours without tiring. One stallion from Uvs province, named Elden Zeerd once covered 250 kilometers in 14 hours.

During the Vietnam War the Mongolian Government donated to the Vietnamese fighters livestock, including horses. After one year, a stallion managed to return home crossing thousands of kilometers across thick jungles, big rivers and the Gobi Desert. When the fact became known, the government officials ordered to hide this "embarrassing" fact. Nevertheless, Mr. Chimbol, by then the Ulaanbaatar City Mayor, instructed to set him free instead of sending to a slaughtering house. The stallion lived peacefully until death at the Bogd Mountain, a natural reserve near the capital city.

To prepare a horse for racing requires patience, thorough knowledge of horses. Uyachi or trainers of horses are natural veterinarians, selectors commanding deep respect among the all connoisseurs of horses.

Ghiin-go-o-o-oo!!! Young jockeys encourage their horses with a wild Gingo-oo shouting. For young children a horse race amidst clouds of dust, intense competition becomes a ritual of passage. Many of them are too young to figure out the way out of a crowd at the start. More than 70 children fell during the 1997 horse racing, with 12 teenagers receiving serious injuries.

For three days the entire nation enjoys the best show of strength and skills accompanied by lingering ancient melodies of Naadam Festival.

And on festive evenings people would have a lavish meal, sing ancient songs, tell legends and stories about great horses, strong men and their deeds. A lively discussion of the Naadam Festival will go on throughout the year, until the next Naadam.

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