

The development of polo in Iran

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the role of polo in the history of Iran as well as to explore the role of polo in the society. Further aims are to show the important for the Iranian and the importance and meaning of this sport in historical periods.

The ancient Iranian people have been engage in some sport horseback riding, shooting and the game of polo. The game invented by Iranian people between the sixth century B.C. and the first century A.D. The game of Polo can be played in two ways: either on foot or by horseback riding. The children play the game on foot, while the adults manage the game through horseback riding. Certainly it is the Persian literature and art, which give us the richest accounts of polo in antiquity. The game of polo has had significant impact in the history, culture and literature of mankind. Ferdowsi, the most famous of Iran's poet-historian, give a number of accounts of royal polo tournament in this 9th century epic, Shahnameh (the epic of kings). Presently, the game of polo is enjoyed by the young people as well as adults in various parts of the world.

Keywords: Polo sports, ancient Iran, history.

Introduction:

Polo is a team sport played on horseback in which the objective is to score goals against an opposing team. Riders score by driving a ball into the opposing team's goal using a long-handled mallet.

Polo is refereed as "Chupgan" or "Chubgan" or "chougan" in Farsi Pahlavi. The Arabic term "Suljan" and French word "Chicane" are derived from Farsi. Polo is defined as: a long handled mallet to hit the ball. This mallet is wooden (7).

Transformation and development of polo in Iran

Polo is considered one of the oldest games in the world. Polo originated in Persia between the sixth century B.C. and the first century A.D. The sport spread to Arabia, China, Japan, and Tibet, where it got its name—the ball is made of willow wood, and pulu is the Tibetan word for willow. About 700 years ago, it arrived in India. The first Europeans to play polo were British tea planters in Assam, who founded a polo club in 1859. Then the sport was discovered by British Army officers, who in 1863 organized three clubs. Shortly afterward polo was brought to England by returning officers (1).

History tells that Alexander the Great, who conquered the Persian empire around 331 B.C., was an accomplished player. His rival and later defeated enemy Darius of Persia sent him a mallet and a ball for him to practice before declaring war. Alexander answered: "I am the mallet and the ball is the world. Be alert".

Basic aim from game of polo wasn't only amusement in ancient Iran, but this sport accomplished for fitness of the military.

Ferdowsi, the most famous of Iran's poet-historian, gives a number of accounts of royal polo tournaments in his 9th century epic, *Shâhnâmeh* (the Epic of Kings). Some believe that the Chinese (the Mongols) were the first to try their hands at the game, but in the earliest account, Ferdowsi romanticizes an international match between Turanian force and the followers of Syavoush, a legendary Persian prince from the earliest centuries of the Empire. The poet is eloquent in his praise of Siyâvash's skills on the polo field. Ferdowsi also tells of Emperor Sâpour-II of Sasanian dynasty of the 4th Century CE, who learn to play polo when he was only seven years old.

Another 9th century historian, Dinvari, describes polo and its general rules and gives some instructions to players including such advice as 'polo requires a great deal of exercise', 'if polo stick breaks during a game it is a sign of inefficiency' and 'a player should strictly avoid using strong language and should be patient and temperate'. During the 10th century the Iranian King Qâbus of Ziyarid (Ziyârîân) dynasty, also set down some general rules of polo and especially mentioned the risks and dangers of the game. The best-known references to polo in Persian poetry are from the *Rubâiyât*s of Omar/Umar Khayyâm. He uses polo to illustrate philosophical points. Also there are many of the Persian manuscripts in which these references appear are beautifully illustrated with miniatures depicting royalty and their best horsemen playing polo.

The first references to the game in Persian literature date to 600 BC. But the best known are contained in the 11th-century *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, who used polo as a metaphor for God's dominion over the apparent chaos of life:

In the cosmic game of polo you are the ball

The mallet's left and right becomes your call

He who causes your movements, your rise and fall

He is the one, the only one, who knows it all.

The history of women playing polo in Iran dates back to at least the 4th century AD, with many accounts of polo matches played between princesses in particular. In fact, Iranian poet Nezâmi (1126-1180 CE) described polo matches between the Iranian Shah, Khosrow Parvis, and his court against the Armenian princess, Shireen, and her court.



Fig. 1a. A folio of Persian manuscript of *Mathnavi of Guy-va-Chogan (Khalnameh)* by Tahmaseb Mirza (Click to enlarge)

Many indications point to the fact that polo was perhaps even more popular amongst the men during this era (3).

Towards the end of the 16th century, the capital of the Safavid Empire was moved to Esfahân from Qazvin, and Shah Abbâs the Great decided to redesign the city to make it the most beautiful in the world. He planned his city around a vast, central square, the or Naqsh-e Jahân. The maydân, which served as the royal polo ground, was about 500 yards long and 150 yards wide and at each end were stone goal posts eight yards apart, which is today the regulation width of a polo gal. At approximately midfield the Shah built a seven-story palace, Âli-Qâpu. In present polo is played on a grass field, 300 yards (274 meters) long and 160 yards (146 meters) wide. An additional 30 yards (27.4 meters) are added at each end as a safety zone.



As the central feature of the palace his architects designed a towering royal gallery, its roof supported by 18 graceful, wooden columns. At the south end of the field just beyond the goal posts Shah Abbas constructed the magnificent Masjed-Shah, whose mosaic domes and minarets make it one of the most beautiful in the World. Beyond the northern goal is the elaborately decorated Qaysariya Gateway leading to the Royal Bazaar. The stone goal posts, as well as the palace, the mosque and the bazaar can still be seen today, although ornamental pools and gardens have replaced the field where ponies galloped and mallets flayed centuries ago. The Bazaar in Esfahan offers, in addition to the normal wares of an Eastern market, an astonishing variety of souvenirs decorated with old polo scenes copied from Persian miniatures.

One can note at sites like Esfahan and in ancient art and literature certain differences in polo of past centuries and the game as we know it today. The fields were often longer and narrower. Teams were frequently much larger than the four-a-side standard of today. The game was sometimes started with the ball placed at midfield and the two teams charging one another from opposite ends; sometimes the ball was thrown into the air and hit towards goal to start a match. Mallets were of shapes, which would appear curious to the players of today. In Japan and in Byzantium, the sticks carried racquet heads rather than mallet heads and a leather-covered ball was used.(2).

Polo has become popular among other nations such as Chinese, as was the royal pastime for many centuries. Chinese most probably having learned the game from the Iranians nobilities who seek refuge in Chinese courts after the invasion of Iranian Empire by the Arabs, or possibly by some Indian tribes who were taught by the Iranians. The polo stick appears on Chinese royal coats of arms and the game was part of the court life in the golden age of Chinese classical culture under Ming-Hung, the Radiant Emperor, who as an enthusiastic patron of equestrian activities.

The Japanese learnt polo from the Chinese, while across the Continent the game spread as far West as Egypt, with the Arab conquests of the Iran beginning in the 7th century. The game occupied an exalted place in Islamic court life, Harun-al-Rashid being the first of the Abbasid Caliphs to play. The polo stick was an important motif in Islamic, as well as Chinese, heraldry, and the Jukandar Polo Master, was a well-known official in the Caliphs's entourage.

century, the Emperor Babur had established it in India. (It had already long been played in China and Japan, but had died out by the time the West came in contact with those countries). In the 1850s, British tea planters discovered the game in Manipur (Munipoor) and Assam on the Burmese border with India. They founded the world's first polo club at Silchar, west of Manipur. Other clubs followed and today the oldest in the world is the Calcutta Club which founded in 1862.

Malta followed in 1868 because soldiers and naval officers stopped off there on their way home from India. In 1869, Edward "Chicken" Hartopp, of the 10th Hussars, read an account of the game in *The Field* magazine while stationed at Aldershot and, with fellow officers, organised the first game. Then known as "hockey on horseback," it was played on a hastily-rolled Hounslow Heath where a shortlist of about 10 rules was also hastily assembled.

The sport was introduced into England in 1869, and seven years later sportsman James Gordon Bennett imported it to the United States. After 1886, English and American teams occasionally met for the International Polo Challenge Cup.

But, it was John Watson (1856-1908), of the 13th Hussars, who formulated the first real rules of the game in India in the 1870s. He later formed the celebrated Freebooters team who won the first Westchester Cup match in 1886. He was a key player at the All Ireland Polo Club which was founded in 1872 by Horace Rochfort of Clogrenane, County Carlow.

The first polo club in England was Monmouth shire, founded in 1872 by Captain Francis "Tip" Herbert (1845- 1922), of the 7th Lancers, at his brother's estate at Clytha Park, near Abergavenny. Others, including Hurlingham, followed quickly. Handicaps were introduced by the USA in 1888 and by England and India in 1910. The first official match in Argentina took place on 3rd September 1875. The game had been taken there by English and Irish engineers and ranchers.

Polo was on several Olympic games schedules, but was last an Olympic sport in 1936. Polo is also now popular in Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand, but the relative number of polo players remains small (5).

Execution method of polo game

In ancient Persia, polo races was different from today's races. Some hors backed with light and hard mallets, entered a vast field and played a ball. They overran across the field and hit the ball until someone took the ball and scaped the field. Ferdowsi offered a valuable hint to polo game in the Siavash story. The Iranian epic poets statements shows that the method and rules of polo game in that era was different from Islamic era from view point of players number and form of game. According to Ferdowsi, in ancient times each team had seven players. The game was started by playing drum and trumpet. Servant put the first ball in front of the highest rank among personalities regarding his honor. He hit the ball severely as was customary. Then other horse riders started to hit that ball by their sticks and throw it up agarn.the arm power and profession were very effective in this game. The team who hit the ball more continuously or hit the ball so severely that the ball was disappeared, was the winner (8).

According to Qabus name, each team had four players, on was goalkeeper. In Safavid era the players became six once again and the aim was to put the ball in the goal. Some servants carried the balls and mallets for players. They also had some ready and equipped horses for changing them, beside the field. Sir Antuwan sherly who visited Iran in the first shah Abbas clearly states that, "The king entered the field while trumpets' and drums were playing. 12 people who accompanied him divided in two groups and formed two 6-people teams. They horse-backed and had wooden Mallets in their hands. The head of mallet was like hummer and hit the ball by them to pass it through the goals (9).

Polo today

Polo is a game played on horseback by two teams of three or four players. The players use long-handled mallets to drive a small ball downfield, trying to hit it through the opponent's goal posts. Polo can be played both outdoors and indoors.

Outdoor polo

The field and equipment. Outdoor polo is played on a 10-acre (4-hectare) grass field, 300 yards (274 meters) long and 160 yards (146 meters) wide. An additional 30 yards (27.4 meters) are added at each end as a safety zone. Two goal posts are set 8 yards (7 meters) apart at either end of the field.

The polo mallet is at least 4 feet (1.22 meters) long, depending on the height of the horse. The mallet is made of cane with a hardwood head. The ball, once made of wood, is now made of plastic. It is about 3 to 3 1/2 inches (7.6 to 8.9 centimeters) in diameter and weighs 3 1/2 to 4 1/2 ounces (99 to 128 grams).

Players wear high boots, knee guards, and a helmet of their own choice, sometimes with a face protector. Traditionally, teams are designated by the color of their jerseys. Players wear white breeches in tournaments.

The horses. Polo horses, also called polo ponies, are normally thoroughbreds. They must be extremely athletic animals, able to sprint, stop and turn, and accelerate. A

player's success is based on the agility and athletic ability of his or her horse. The horse's lower legs are protected by leg wraps.

The game. A polo match consists of six periods called chukkers, each seven minutes long, with a four-minute interval between chukkers. During the interval, the players change horses because of the demands the game places on the riders and animals. As a result, a team sometimes has a minimum of 24 horses available for a match.

For outdoor polo, a team is made up of four players, each wearing a jersey with one of the numbers 1 through 4. These numbers correspond to the players' positions. Number 1 is the leading offensive player, who concentrates on opportunities to score. Number 4 is the defensive player primarily responsible for defending his or her team's goal. Usually, the most experienced and highly rated players are at positions number 2 and 3, with the key player wearing number 3. The number 2 player serves as the playmaker. The number 3 player coordinates the offense, passing the ball upfield to teammates as they ride toward the opponent's goal, or coordinates the defense. Each player is assigned an opponent to cover on defense and must be prepared to shift quickly between offense and defense.

Two mounted umpires, assisted by a referee on the sidelines, officiate the game. At the beginning of the first chukker and after a goal is scored, each team lines up in the center of the field in two parallel rows. An umpire throws the ball between the teams, who then compete for possession. Teams change ends of the field after a goal is scored.

Handicaps. Most matches are played on the handicap level. Each polo player is assigned an individual handicap, from lowest to highest being C (-2), B (-1), and A (0), and 1 through 10. The handicap reflects the player's ability and value to the team. The higher the handicap, the better the player. The team handicap is the combined handicap of the four players.

The team with the lesser handicap is granted the difference in goals before the match starts. For example, if team A has a combined handicap of 20 and team B has a handicap of 17, the game starts with the score 3-0 in favor of team B. Player handicaps are evaluated and revised annually by the governing bodies of the sport in each country. The handicap is based on the individual's riding skill, game sense, hitting ability, and overall value to the team.

Indoor polo

Indoor polo, also called arena polo, is played on an enclosed field with special footing for the welfare of the horses. Each team consists of three players. There is no rule for the size of an indoor field, but the ideal playing area is 100 yards (91 meters) long and 50 yards (46 meters) wide. The playing area usually is enclosed by solid board walls and gates. Goal posts are 10 feet (3 meters) wide. The game consists of four chukkers, each 7 1/2 minutes in length. An indoor/outdoor version of arena polo has won increased popularity. It is played outdoors but uses arena rules. Arena polo can be played in almost any climate (6).

Modern polo is played between two teams of four, on a field 300 yards by 160 yards, with posts on either end delineating a goal that is eight yards wide. The winner is the team that scores the most goals in a six-period game. Each period, also known as a chukker, is seven minutes long. No time-outs are allowed except for penalties, or in the event a player or horse is injured, and no substitutions are allowed unless a player has to be replaced. Each of the four players is given a zone of responsibility, from the player on offense in front to the player on defense, in the back. The numbers worn on the jerseys, the "Polo Shirts" indicate that zone – number 1 is the most forward, and number 4 the most defensive. By custom, number 3 is the on-field captain, and usually the highest-rated player on the team.

Typically, each player uses a different horse in each of the six chukkers. And although the horses are traditionally called ponies, among present-day players the two terms are used interchangeably, much as "game" and "match" are used to mean the same thing. If a horse appears to be tiring before the end of a chukker, the player may switch horses. But, as time-outs are not given on request, the player who wants to change his pony must pick a time when there is a lull in the action, make it to the sidelines, change horse, and make it back on to the field before play resumes.

Horses are credited with being at least 80 percent of the player's effectiveness. Occasionally an exceptional pony will be played in two chukkers with one or more chukkers in between to rest. Polo ponies are usually in such good physical condition that they are able to play at least two periods or more.

Goals are switched after each score to equalize the conditions of weather, terrain and lighting.

With a game as hard and fast and intense as polo, danger rides along with the players; safety is of utmost concern. The control of the game rest in the hands of two mounted umpires and a referee stationed on an elevated platform at midfield. The so-called line of the ball, the line described by the ball's path, and its interpretation by players, umpire and referee, determines many of the issues of safe and unsafe play.

Defensive maneuvers include interfering with an opponent's swing using the mallet to block the shot, and riding the opponent off the ball using the horse's weight, known as a ride-off.

If a foul is called, the fouled team is awarded a penalty shot. The severity of the foul will determine the distance the hit is taken from the goal, and whether or not the goal is guarded.

The game begins when one of the umpires throws the ball in at mid-field between the two teams lined up in columns. A throw-in from mid-field will also follow each goal. From then on, the action is fast and furious. There are few, if any, pre-determined plays so that it is paramount to be able to act and react quickly in the excitement and controlled pandemonium of charging and spinning horses, and the shouts of players (4).

Today, upwards of 80 countries play polo. It was an Olympic sport from 1900 to 1936 and has now been recognized again by the International Olympic Committee (4).

Polo is, however, played professionally in only a few countries, notably Argentina, England, Pakistan, India, Australia, and the United States. Polo is unique among team sports in that amateur players, often the team patrons, routinely hire and play alongside the sport's top professionals. The Iranian polo Federation was created in the year 1998 A.D with the aim of promoting polo and encouraging men and female players. at

present, polo play by young men and women in different teams such as “ghaser firozeh, kanon chougan, nayroi zamini, nesf jahan, ghargosh dareh and other than. Important club that active in game of polo consist of nayroi zamini, shohada, navrozabad and kanon chougan clubs.

Conclusion:

Game of polo played on horseback between two teams of four players each who use mallets with long, flexible handles to drive a wooden ball down a grass field and between two goal posts. It is the oldest of equestrian sports.

The sport of Polo is without doubt the oldest ball game in the world. A game of Central Asian origin, polo was first played in Persia (Iran) at dates given from the 6th century BC to the 1st century AD. Polo was at first a training game for cavalry units, usually the king's guard or other elite troops. In time polo became a Persian national sport played extensively by the nobility. Women as well as men played the game, as indicated by references to the queen and her ladies engaging King Khosrow II Parviz and his courtiers in the 6th century AD.

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