FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

THREE MANLY SPORTS
(National Festival Naadam)

The most important celebration for the Mongolian people since ancient times was and is the traditional three manly sports (naadam). During this important celebration there is wrestling among men, which tests men’s strength and wit. Archery tests the skills of marksmanship. The horse race tests the racers’ swiftness and hardness. They are performed according to the customary rules.

The Three Manly Sports combine folk art with sportiveness. Therefore, the wrestlers are garbed in sporting uniform. The archers are garbed in specific dress. The manes and tails of racing horses are fastened together with strips as decorations. There is a certain number of ceremonial movements. Every sportive feat is eulogized. These are rooted in very ancient traditions. Every winner in wrestling, archery, and horse-racing has titles and epithets. This national festival has been developed for many centuries, but its form and content are almost intact.

There are no special requirements for participants who want to take a part in wrestling, archery and horse racing. The participation is free of choice. This demonstrates its democratic nature and the aspiration of the Mongolian population.

Even though there are various social functions of the Three Manly Sports, including ceremonies, symbolism, merry-making, and sports, the main aim of this competition is to test the prowess of men and to make all people merry, and to manifest the power of nation and state. Thus, this festival has a national significance. This festival was called the ulsish naadam (festival of statehood) or danshig (festival of firm existence). This is sometimes called delger düüren gurvan züülin naadam (festival of three objects of immeasurable fullness). There are small community festivals of horse racing, wrestling and archery when the mountain and its cairn worship rituals are performed, along with the celebration of rituals for the new ger, birthdays and so on.

The Three Manly Sports were performed during mountain and river worship rituals, weddings, periods of war, and period of the ascendancy of the moon. But the Three Manly Sports are celebrated in summer when the land is verdant, the animals are fatty, the milk products are abundant, and all the people are calm.

The Victory Day of the People’s Revolution has been celebrated on every July 11th of each year since 1921. It became an annual nationwide celebration. As a national event, it fits the mood of the populace of Mongolia. This is the enrichment of the national festival and enhancement of the political ceremony.

The tenor of the Three Manly Sports is the same, but it is enriched with the traditional sport of archery with ankle-bones and other competitions as well as diverse events of modern sports, including exhibitions and shows of national costumes, demonstrations of Mongolian ger construction, and others.
WRESTLING

Wrestling is the essential part of the national festival of Mongolia. The functions and rules of Mongolian wrestling are not only meant to test the pair of wrestlers’ strength and prowess, but to link it with national elements of other traditional arts and customs. There are certain physical movements that are performed before and after each wrestling bout as rule.

These functions have been elaborated and developed for many centuries. Everything has deep meaning. One of the peculiarities of Mongolian wrestling is the costume. The epic Erïn saïn khan kharanguï (the best man Khan Kharangui) speaks about a wrestler’s jacket made out of a stallion camel’s hide and briefs made of bull’s hide. The wrestler’s jacket and briefs are the signs of strength. Later on, the costume of wrestlers became more elegant.

At present wrestling costumes consists of a hat, zedog (jacket), shuudag (briefs), boots, stockings and boots’ bindings. The jacket and briefs afford a wrestler the ability to hold his opponent during the wrestling bout. The well-tailored jacket and briefs adapt themselves to the shape of wrestler’s brawny body. This tight costume affords a wrestler’s comfort to move.

The wrestler wears an ancient hero’s helmet-shaped hat. It attests to the fact that the wrestling of Mongolia originated from among strong men who tested the brave deeds of ancient Mongolian warriors. Mongolian wrestlers wear high-boots which keep their footing firmly and prevent their legs from slipping when wrestlers trick each other with their legs. They wear felt stockings which play a role in protecting their legs from injury; the stockings are stitched with auspicious ornaments, which add grace to the wrestler. The bindings of the wrestler’s boots are also kind of a grace to the wrestler.
Mongolian wrestling has no differences of weight and age; if a wrestler's limb (an elbow, knee, head or other body part) touches the ground, it is considered a defeat.

At the national wrestling competition, 256, 512, or 1024 wrestlers compete. At the local level 32, 64, 128 or 256 wrestlers compete. There are two wrestling sets. One wrestling set consists of eight wrestlers. Another consists of eight wrestlers. There are two lines of wrestlers. One wing is arranged to the eastern side of a wrestler's ring. Another one is arranged to the western side. 16 wrestlers compete in one bout at the ring of wrestlers. Every wrestler has his own second. The wrestlers are arranged on their line by the sequence of their titles. At the first and second bouts wrestlers can struggle with their opponents on the assignment. At the third and later bouts, a titled wrestler challenges his opponents to wrestle. But recently, the challenging has become less than it was in the past as the result of amendments made to the wrestling rules.

The wrestling coach takes off the hat of wrestler and chants his title and exploits together with his name in a loud voice. The wrestler flaps its hands in imitation of the wing flaps of an eagle, hawk, falcon, or garuda. Only then does he go into the competition ring to meet and begin to wrestle with his opponent.

An ancient chronicle's description of the wrestler's fluttering says, “the hands of the wrestlers flap in the shape of the garuda’s fluttering, and his chest bulges out in imitation of a lion’s breast”. The wrestling imitates the tussling of lions or elephants as each tests the other’s might and skill. They skilfully trick each other with hands and legs.

During the wrestling period each wrestler’s coach hints at their own wrestler’s imprudence. These hints are cryptic remarks that resemble a concise poem. The coach of the wrestler should be adept in wrestling and various tricks and be able to chant the wrestler’s title and his exploits in a tuneful voice. There is also a group of referees. They sit on a bench under an erected tent in the south of the wrestling ring and referee the match. These referees are former wrestlers who have much experience at wrestling and are considered fair in umpiring. If there is a dispute concerning a match, these umpires can settle it.

The winner can flap three times and come back to the loser. The winner stretches out his arms in a gesture called takhim avakh or toos buulgakh (to take a knock-knee or to clean the dust). The loser unknots the waist-band of his jacket and bows his head under the stretched arm of the winner as the sign of defeat. If the wrestler does not agree to his defeat, he does not need to unknot his waist-band, but the wrestler’s coach will run to the group of referees to settle the dispute. The winner who has taken his hat from his coach, puts on the hat and runs to the hoisted flag on the wrestling ring. He slows his running and starts flapping his hands. He goes around the hoisted flag three times in a clockwise direction. Then he takes bootsog (boiled loaves in oil) and scatters them in the direction of mountain and river nymphs. At the national festival, the wrestler who wins five successive bouts earns the title of the ‘tercel’, the wrestler who wins seven successive bouts earns the title of ‘elephant’, the wrestler who wins for the first time at the national festival earns the title of ‘lion’; and the wrestler who wins twice at the national festival earns the title of ‘champion’. There was an amendment made in the act of the national festival that allows the winner of bouts five, six, seven, eight and nine to earn a title. There are titles of tereel at the fifth bout, of hawk at the sixth bout, of elephant at the seventh bout, of garuda at the eighth bout, of lion at the ninth, and of champion at the tenth bout.

There are epithets which are given to the title of the wrestler who continues his success at the national wrestling festivals. The epithets such as ‘highly ebullient’, ‘magnificently robust’, ‘eagerly expeditious’, ‘apparently mighty’, ‘more promising’ are given to the ‘tercel’-titled wrestler. The epithets such as ‘clearly perspicacious’, ‘amazingly enterprising’, ‘conqueringly mighty’ and ‘dauntlessly willing’ are given to ‘elephant’-titled wrestler. The epithets such as ‘exceptionally mighty’, ‘sporadically increasing’, ‘tremendously prosperous’ are given to ‘lion’-titled wrestler. The epithets such as ‘all-rejoicer’, ‘nationally famous’, ‘exceptionally celebrated’ are given to ‘champion’-titled wrestler. These are customary titles.

The flapping of wrestler’s arms is a dance meant to imitate the flapping of birds. The wrestler is said to imitate the flapping of the garuda as he flutters and slaps his thighs. He stands ready to tussle with and looks askance as elk do and seizes his opponent like a hawk that swoops down on its prey. This description of the wrestler’s movement is the description of mighty animals. That is why our wrestlers move in a manner of a mighty animal when they stand they look like a mighty bird flapping its wings. They slap their thighs and demonstrate their readiness to compete. The melody of the wrestler’s exploits, as recited by the wrestler’s coach, arouses enthusiasm similar to that of the hawk that swoops and hovers in the fresh air. The reciter improvises the character and feat of individual wrestler in a tuneful voice.
COURSE-RACE OF SWIFT HORSES

The course-race of swift horses is one of the main parts of the Mongolian revelry and festivity. From an ancient time, animal husbandry was the main source of our life. Apart from this, it is impossible to imagine the life of livestock-breeders without a horse. Our Mongolian course-race of swift horses is very ancient and very old. There is no doubt about it.

Mongolians accumulated a stock of knowledge to increase, herd, and tend to five kinds of animals and to choose grassy pastures. Among them there is a systematic experience and knowledge to examine and recognize good and swift horses. To train them, our ancestors developed the course-race of swift horses. In such a manner course-racing became the most important part of life and a source of nation-wide enjoyment. All the Mongolians love horse racing. The rule to race swift horses at the national festival is very peculiar. The horse-trainers choose the swiftest horses from his horses and coach them to race for a month before racing. The horse-trainers reduce their horses’ food and race them at the shortest place. Then they race them at a long place. This kind of training continues every day before the national festival.

The race horses are classified by age. The distance of racing depends upon the age. The matured swift horses (ikh nas) can race for 25-30 kilometers. The five-year colts (soyolon) and stallions (azarga) can race for 20 kilometers. Four-year colts (khyazaalan) can race 18 kilometers. Three-year colts (shidilen) can race for 15 kilometers. Two-year colts (daaga) can race for 10 kilometers. Our horse race is a course-race. The distance of racing depends upon the mountains or streams and undulating roads. Our jockeys of swift horses in general are children between 6 and 10 years old. Those child-jockeys wear ample, light and vivid-coloured dresses. The patterns of wheels, wish-fulfilling signs, five stars or signs of luck or figures of birds or butterflies are stitched onto the front or back of the jockey’s shirt, and onto the breeches or onto the front of their cap. There are marks that symbolize prowess, fame and promptness. In another word, a figure of a butterfly is a symbol of lightness. The bird symbolizes swiftness of horses.

The forelocks and tails of swift horses are bound with strips. The sweat-scraper and brush are patterned with symbolic designs of the horse’s prowess and promptness. For instance, the sweat-scraper of a swift horse is engraved with figures of four powerful animals and eight signs of luck.

The swift horses are recorded at a fixed hour. When the recording of swift horses is completed, a man clad in ceremonial garments with a brocaded sleeveless jacket and gentleman’s mitre robe will mount a light-coloured ambling or trotting horse. He will then hoist a flag and lead the swift-horses around the finishing field. When they go around, the child-jockeys sing a giingoo (cheer) in a tuneful voice as a way to encourage their horses. The Mongolian national long-song ‘Tumen Ekhi’ is then sung. The lyrics of this song include:

Well, good horse
Which is the most suitable
Fastest at training
Chosen well
From the trained ones
Among the many matured horses

The swiftest horses go to the starting place. All the horses to race stand in one line at the starting place. When the steward waves his flag, the racers start running toward the finishing line. Meantime, the wrestlers continue wrestling and archers continue shooting until the racers come to the finishing line. When the racers appear in a sight, the musicians play a melody and singers sing the song, which goes:

Well, spirit stirring
At the starting line
Exceptional winner
At the finishing line
Is this whose steed
Among the many racers
Well, best racer
Among the many racers
Is this racer, well

As soon as this song is over, the song ‘A horse good at long distance’ is performed with the accompaniment of the national traditional music of the morin khuur (horse-head fiddle). This is traditional. The winner is called ‘Tumen Ekhi’ or best racer. The racer recorded to be rewarded is called “Buren jargal” or full happiness.
**ARCHERY**

Archery is one essential part of the Three Manly Sports and it is also very ancient. This sport was created to improve the skill of shooting at a distance as far as possible, to hunt as much game as possible, to celebrate a hunting ceremony, and to let the shooters shoot while the hunting-dance is performed.

There is no limit of the participants’ number in this sport, but the winner is chosen by their ability to shoot at a great distance. A stone inscription found in a place near the vicinity of the Onon River says, “Ezynkhe, grand-son of Chinggis Qahan shot a target of thirty-five feet, when Mongolians gathered and shot at a target at the place Bukh Sochikhai.” This inscription attests to the fact that these Mongolians had great success at shooting arrow-heads at great distances. At the end of the last century, eastern Mongolians called their shooting-match the “arrow-flying.”

The shooting of bows and arrows has traversed many centuries. In these competitions, posts were driven into the ground in a row. Skin-balls were hung from each post. The archer, who rode on his horse at full gallop, shot every hanging skin-ball without missing. This was called ‘ball-shooting’. The sheep skin or cow hide was stretched out. Each archer shot at this stretched skin or hide with twenty arrows. Then the score was reckoned. It was called Sarampai khavakk (thin worn skin shooting). Eight sheep skins were joined. The figure of a human being was drawn onto the middle of this stretched skin, which was stretched on the square frame. This figure was called the ‘enemy’. Archers shot twenty arrows at it from the behind a hill or ravine. The distance of shooting was forty feet. Whoever got more scores at shooting was the winner. It was called ‘enemy shooting’.

The distance of the contemporary sport of archery is 45 feet or 75-80 meters. We make shooting targets by weaving leather strips into a tub-shape. There are two forms of shooting targets. One is a walled target, another is an individual target. The wall target is the arrangement of targets in a stack. The individual target is the arrangement of targets in row. The archers can use only blunted arrows. Then two shooting teams alternately shoot and test their skills. There are two forms of shooting. One is an individual, the other is a team sport. The amount of shooting for individuals or teams is fixed. Then the result is reckoned.

There is no special poem for shooting. But in various epics heroes say a spell before shooting. Such passages in the literature are very common.

At present our archers say ‘Khurai, khurai, khurai.’ This is an encouragement of archers to shoot. There are three types of encouragement: an encouragement to shoot; congratulations for good marks; and acceptance of congratulations. Our archers chant these khurai’s three times in a tuneful voice at a single turn. The winners can get the title of Mergen or ‘good marksman’ and also an epithet. For instance, winners used to get titles and epithets, such as ‘a very marvelous shooter’, ‘a very bold shooter’, ‘a sharp shooter’, ‘a very accurate sharp shooter’, ‘more prosperous’, ‘graceful shooter’, ‘most trustful’, or ‘exceptional shooter’. At present there is a new system to confer titles upon archers.