



SPARLO

Background

In the north of Afghanistan winters can be unforgiving as temperatures can drop to -30 degrees, especially 1800 feet above sea level. However, this is the time when the north of Afghanistan comes to life as it is when the buzkashi season begins. Buzkashi, not only the national sport of Afghanistan, remains a way of life for the sparlo (master riders) of the north.

A day prior to the beginning of the actual game, an individual prepares the buz (the slaughtered calf or goat). Weighing in at thirty-five to forty pounds, he slaughters the buz as he prays while facing the holy city of Mecca. Draining the buz of its blood and intestines and severing the head, the remaining carcass soaks in salt for twenty-four hours preceding the game. The game itself pops up almost anywhere, on remote roadsides as well as in the ancient ruins of cities such as Bakh -- where Alexander the Great married his wife Roxanna.

Buzkashi fields match the approximate length of a football pitch but have no defined boundaries apart from two simple markers which are the jor (the circle) and the flag. The flag is positioned marking the end of the field whereas the jor is closer to the top of the field near the crowds who gather to see the game. Throughout the game, the masters of ceremonies announce amounts of money that may be donated from the crowd, which consists of all manner of people ranging from businessmen to local mafia to warlords for bringing the buz to the jor or the flag. Although the official sport states that the game should be made up of two teams of fifteen riders, in reality, the game comprises of many individual riders or small groups of three or four riders. As they play against one another for monetary prizes, which may range from a few Afghanis or thousands of dollars, as is the case during Nau Roz (New Year) which closes the season with four days of games. However, the value of buzkashi extends beyond that of monetary prizes as it is one of the rare few arenas in Afghanistan in which a public figure becomes truly loved and respected.

While the patrons of the game put up the cash for the horses and stables, it is the sparlo - also known as chapandaz or pahlawan - who take the risks, sometimes paying with their lives.

The Film

Sparlo takes place in the predominantly Uzbek provinces of Sar-e-Pul, Sheberghan and Balkh in northern Afghanistan during the buzkashi season of 2010/11.

A buzkashi season marred by mafia style shootings and suicide attacks, Sparlo focuses on two families from different tribes possessing some of the most gifted riders in Afghanistan. At a time when power struggles within the country are at an increase and as international forces struggle to continue rationalizing a continued presence in Afghanistan, Sparlo offers proof of the parallel, continuing life. If the emergence of culture and industry through the sport of buzkashi proves nothing else, it proves that something, albeit as a microcosm, works in Afghanistan. Sparlo, not merely a film, forms an original record of a country of extraordinary beauty with a proud history where decent people struggle to rise above the trials of everyday life.

The Riders and Their Story



Faizullah (Chopan)



Najibullah



Jahangeer



Hussain

From the city of Sheberghan, three master riders dominate the province and its surrounding areas. Jahangeer (whose name appropriately translates as “World Taker”), his younger brother, Najbullah, and their cousin, Faiszllah (also known as Chopan meaning Shepherd) make up one of the families in Sparlo.

When we first meet Chopan, his younger cousins, whom he introduced to the game much to the annoyance of their Mother, sit quietly by his side barely uttering a word. Chopan frames the season by describing an incident in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif where the final games are played during the Nau Roz (New Year) festivities. Chopan describes the incident where a young boy was shot in the crossfire between two horse owners after their security guards intervened when one owner whipped the other’s horse. He explains how buzkashi in Mazar-e-Sharif has been shut down for two weeks and that the governor will not open the venue unless tensions are relaxed. He also refers to what he calls the Char Qulaas [the men with four hats] who have built a wall around the Mazar-e-Sharif ground so that they can charge for tickets. The wall around the site will not be seen until the end of the film and its hard corners will be in stark contrast to the beauty of the other grounds in villages throughout the north.

Each season ends with the Nau Roz festival in this city, which is home to the famous Blue Mosque site holding the tomb of Ali bin Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Mohammad. Each year, these four days of non-stop buzkashi draw the best riders in Afghanistan and is attended by tens of thousands of people from all over the country. Average riders can only dream of touching the buz during the games.

Buzkashi is being taken over, the smaller, less powerful riders are being pushed out as the power struggles of influential men are played out on the fields much to the annoyance of many riders who are farmers hoping to make some extra money during the season. Throughout the season, the characters and traits of Chopan, Jahangeer and Najbullah are revealed game by game as their quiet humility turns to ferocity as they compete on the buzukashi field always making the jor or flag at least a few times.

Riding for the stable of the Uzbek leader General Dostum*, they are informed by him not to ride in Mazar-e-Sharif owing to threats but their season is interrupted abruptly regardless when a suicide attack occurs in Maimana at a wedding for where buzukashi games will be played. When we next meet Chopan, who was hit by shrapnel at Maimana, it is at Aqcha. A buzukashi ground which crops up on the side of the road between Sheberghan and Balkh, Chopan is flanked, as always, by his two younger cousins.

The audience meets the riders in their homes where their sons are playing and the riders have foals in their back fields. The time and attention to detail they pay to the animals reveal the patience and determination of these young riders as they look toward the future of the game. Although Jahangeer leads us proudly through his fields, Najbullah, quiet and skeptical, is never far behind wearing the number two at home and on the buzukashi field where he wears it on an old Russian tank jacket. Their season ends with the Nau Roz festival where they are given permission to go to Mazar-e-Sharif by General Dostum, but they find themselves sidelined on the first day owing to a disagreement over team numbers.

The second family in Sparlo consists of a father, Hussein, and his six sons who are all buzukashi players. In a country whose history has been erased through decades of war, Hussein remains keenly aware that if he is to preserve his legacy as that of a once great rider, then he must do so through our film. The historian of the film, Hussein, having played for kings and presidents, explains how the sport was dead twenty years ago from war. In a country whose archives have largely been destroyed, Hussein is one of only a handful of riders left who can account for the game so articulately. A proud man, however, Hussein's story is unveiled as being one of a strained relationship with his sons as he tried to keep them away from the game due to the inherent dangers.

One of his oldest sons, Muhssen, a regal and powerful rider whom we first meet at Aqcha, reveals his feelings for his late brother Salam when asked, who are the best riders in Afghanistan. His tensions with his Father begin to be revealed with the words, "There was one rider, his name was Salam Pahlawan, may God have mercy on him." We learn through an interview with Hussein that his son was poisoned by his in-laws as he wanted to marry above his station. Muhssen swore revenge but was prevented from doing so by his father who did not want a lengthy feud. In a country known for long standing feuds, the story of Hussein's restraint in the face of his son's death serves as an example of the dignity and desire for peace rarely seen in mainstream media.

The strong traditions of Hussein's family and their desire for an organised game are contrasted against the often times chaotic game of buzukashi and never more so than at a game in Dawlat Abad in which a vicious brawl sees them calmly step aside and wait for the madness to stop. Hussein's interviews are the story of Afghanistan told in parallel to his own. Having dedicated his life to the game and trying to obtain official recognition for it, he now wants to pass the responsibility to someone else but to whom, he reflects? As Nau Roz approaches, as if to prove to himself and to us that he was once a great rider, he says that he will beat every other rider at Nau Roz. True to form, he does land a buz on the second day while his sons join the ranks of those who can only dream.

*Abdul Rashid Dostum (born 1954) is a former pro-Soviet fighter during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and is considered by many to be the leader of Afghanistan's Uzbek community and the party Junbish-e Milli-vi Islami-yi Afghansitan.

Visual Style

In photographing Sparlo our primary concern was how to visually articulate the sport so that audiences would clearly understand how it worked but also to ensure that we were capturing our riders at the games.

Equally we wanted to show the parallels that exist between buzkashi and the broader Afghan narrative. It was also important for us that Sparlo be as exciting for the audience as it was for us to be there. Quite simply, we wanted audiences to feel the heat from the horses when they were at the centre of the scrum for the 'buz'. In order to achieve these aims we filmed using two Canon 5D's, wrecking one in the process. This choice allowed us to film in full HD and with the consistent light levels in Afghanistan, at low ISO's achieving at times a painterly look.

Choosing different shooting styles for every game, we filmed handheld and on lenses not wider than 50mm when we were handheld and on the ground ensuring that the audience would be seeing the game as close to our P.O.V as is humanly possible. We also used wider lenses at this level making the action feel even closer, as horses and riders were constantly wiping the frame. Each game also has another story going on in the background. Behind the crowds are kebab sellers and children with small bags of popcorn which we filmed extensively also. In filming the snow capped mountains of Sar e Pul and the ancient city of Balkh where Alexander the Great came through Afghanistan, we filmed on tripods and on longer lenses to show the expanse of these majestic landscapes. Whilst we filmed interviews with riders after games and before games whether they were waiting for the call to prayer to finish or strapping their legs, we also filmed them in more intimate settings such as at their homes or stables.

Always using available light we have captured the lives of our characters as faithfully as is possible.

Our Intentions

Our priority during the filming of Sparlo was to tell a story devoid of the clichés which have been the pitfall of many other films about Afghanistan. We have not sought to impose a narrative on our story and so we consider Sparlo to be Afghanistan very much as it is. Despite our attempts to avoid the war, it came to us and despite our attempts to avoid politics we were reminded that everything is political in Afghanistan.

Despite this, we have filmed in villages in which no foreigners have ever set foot not to mention taken their cameras with them and we have been invited into the homes of riders who in any other country would adorn billboards. We have been met with support at every ground we visited and we have managed to film safely in areas where the Taliban are the status quo.

What has emerged from our time is the contradiction of Afghanistan; we have captured some of its beauty, some of its trouble but mostly all of its possibilities.

If only audiences could see what we've seen, if only they could sleep on the floors that we have slept on. Someday perhaps it will be possible for people to get off of a plane in Mazar-e-Sharif and drive to Aqcha or Dalwat Abad and watch a game during those beautiful winter months or visit the ruins of the ancient city of Balkh where Alexander the Great married Roxanna in the same way that people visit similar historic sites in so many neighbouring countries.

Regrettably, this will not come to pass most likely as the people on the streets of Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, Dawlat Abad, and Sheberghan know that civil war waits.

This film is a record of a game which dates back to the time of Genghis Khan and which once thought dead a few decades ago came back to life.