

## Zoorkhaneh: Historic Training in Iranian Culture

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**Abstract:** Zoorkhaneh is a Persian type of sports club where athletes undergo rigorous regiment training. The term Zoorkhaneh refers to the place of practice, which means "House of Strength" in English. The ritual is lead by a musician who chants sacred poetry while keeping time on a drum and ringing bells to mark the beginning of different sections. Zoorkhaneh sports have the factors issued to health (Muscular ability, muscular endurance, respiratory and heart endurance, flexibility and body composition) and physical ability and skills (Speed, alacrity, strength, action speed, equilibrium and coordination). The participants go through a lengthy sequence of exercises. This historic legacy of the Mithraic era is still, more or less, surviving in some parts of I.R. of Iran. This ancient school of thought in physical education, skill, strength, power and endurance, all in deep concentration and meditation, is still alive and as a legacy of the past deserves much attention to live longer. The purpose of this study was to investigate the selected number of technical terms and jargons of the Zoorkhaneh, historical, philosophical and religious background of this home of physical strength; also the strong points and drawbacks regarded to Zoorkhaneh and some suggestions for the improvement of the present situation of Zoorkhaneh in Iran.

**Key words:** Persian sport • Ancient school • House of Strength • Zoorkhaneh

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### INTRODUCTION

Indeed Iran is the birthplace of ancient cultures. Its position along important East-West trading routes brought not only rich cultural development but also wealth that attracted invading tribes and countries over the centuries [1]. Thus, Iranian rulers learned the importance of maintaining a powerful army.

Iranian soldiers honed their famed physical strength and confront combat techniques by practicing Zoorkhaneh (House of strength) comprehensive martial system with training exercises designed to develop the power and agility needed for fighting with the sword, bow and arrow, club and shield [2]. It's found this name in the sports field territory that has spread a common civilization of ancient Iran in South and West Asia to Central Asia (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Turkey) [3]. Though its origins are shrouded in mystery and legend, Zoorkhaneh is perhaps among the oldest extant martial arts in the world [1, 4]. Therefore, our purpose was to investigate the Zoorkhaneh as the most sacred and ancient sports places in the history of Iran.

Although nowadays new methods of exercise training such as resistance and endurance exercise and/or concurrent training for improvement of strength, power and aerobic capacity are employed in the world, exercise training in Zoorkhaneh is still alive and as a legacy of the past deserves much attention to live longer. Zoorkhaneh is the very specially designed physical structure, entangling, a myriad of philosophical, religious, cultural and educational bases, together with the necessary technical facilities and apparatus for the cultivation of the body and the excellence of mind [5]. Characteristic of Zoorkhaneh is attractive to young persons as it requires not only strong body but also the skills that youth enjoy. Most of the Olympic sports of today were once in the same stage as Zoorkhaneh and with some modifications to the rules and equipment they grew popular internationally.

The promotion and evolution that appeared in all aspect of the life of the Iranian life also embraced sports and physical education, thereby many of the sports philosophies or even the sports activities assumed holy images and spiritual forms [4, 6]. Sports and in the wake of it sport clubs and stadiums become much more active than the past but with the objective of being in the service



Fig. 1: Pahlevans of about a century ago

of the oppressed and struggling against the oppressed through which a higher growth development [6]. In this connection Zoorkhaneh that in its unique form had weak roots among pre-Islamic Iranian in the post-Islamic era as clubs and stadiums of today, aiming at training gentlemen heroes and real Muslims become more active and underwent much quantities and qualities evolution [6, 7].

#### Definition of Selected Phrases and Slangs Related to Zoorkhaneh

**Varzeshe Bastani (Ancient Sport):** This phrase includes some exercises practiced under special customs and rituals established over hundreds of years. Each session of Varzeshe-Bastani comprises: (a) Warming up; (b) Main body of physical exercises; (c) Warming down [5].

**Bastanicar:** Everybody who practices Varzeshe-Bastani. **Pahlevani:** Pahlevani is an Iranian martial art that combines elements Gnosticism and ancient Persian beliefs. It describes a ritual collection of gymnastic and callisthenic movements, each wielding instruments symbolizing ancient weapons.

**Pahlevan:** Is the first champion among other Bastanicars of a village, town, city, province, country or the world of the time. This title was awarded only to athletes who were

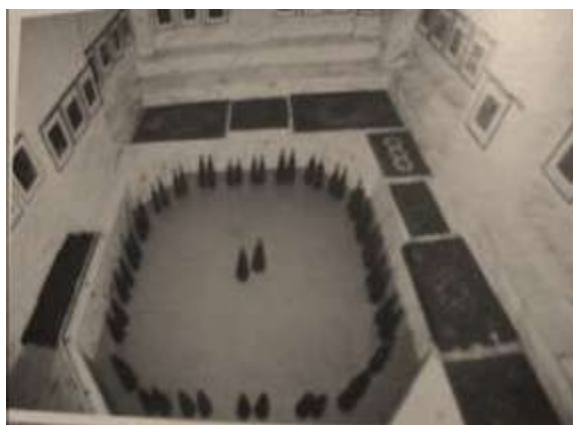


Fig. 2: Gowd [6]

recognized as having had reached perfection in the qualities of both physical prowess and moral virtue (Fig. 1). Pahlevans usually discharged important responsibilities in army and security of town [5].

**Gowd:** Is the most fundamental part of Zoorkhaneh where all the activities of the Varzeshe-Bastani are performed (Fig. 2). The shape of Gowd is constructed in a hexagonal or octagonal shape. The Gowd is generally an octagonal pit of about 75 to 100 cm. deep and its total surface depends on the size of the site (10 to 45 square meters). The floor of the pit is constructed with different layers of, from bottom to top, crushed tumbleweeds, a thinner cushion of dried fine straw, a thicker layer of coal ash and finally, a well packed layer of clay or argil in a way to assure softness and flexibility needed for the safety of the Bastanicars during their physical activities [5, 8]. In former days the floor was covered by dried bushes covered with soft earth to prevent injury to the sportsmen but nowadays the floor is prepared according to other indoor sports hall [6, 9].

**Morshed:** The Morshed (master) is an experienced Bastanicar who leads the Pahlevani ritual performs epic and Gnostic poems and beats out time on a Zarb (goblet drum). All Pahlevani-championship-exercises are synchronized with Morshed's drum, both individually and in group exercises where group coordination is needed. Some times there are two Morsheds who in harmony with each other direct the practice session (Fig. 3).

**Zarb:** Is a large goblet wooden drum, usually with a skin of deer or goatskin stretched over the larger end of it. It is played by hands. Zarb is used to give the indispensable rhythm and cadence for all the exercises (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Morshed, Zarb and Zang [5]

**Zang (Bell):** It is played by the Morshed who beats it in order to convey a rhythm or movement change (Fig. 3). The Zarb will play for the following aims:

- To signal the beginning or the end of a special exercise.
- B: To attract the attention for making an announcement or presenting some kind of activities.
- C: To honor the presence of a distinguished Pahlevan, guest, or a social personality in the Zoorkhaneh.
- D: To create occasional changes during the long rhythmical accompaniment given by the drum alone.
- E: To communicate with the Miandar and the other athletes who are performing in the Gowd [5].

**Miandar (Mid-Conductor):** He is the key person, model and leader of session who performs at the central part of the Gowd. He conducts all participants proportionately and coordinates them with Morshed.

**Dare Voroudi (Entrance Door):** The entrance door is low so that body of any walks of life at the time of entrance must of necessity bow in respect and enters this sacred place [6].

**Sardam:** Sardam is constructed adjacent to the entrance door and it is a place for Morshed to sit it. It overlooks the Gowd with a height of one meter or less. Sardam was carpeted with a skin rug and a brazier with charcoal fire was placed nearby to warm the skin of the drum [7].



Fig. 4: Sang Giri [6]

#### Exercises and Instruments of Zoorkhaneh

**Sang Giri (Stone Keeping):** It includes two rectangular hard wooden pieces with the ancient shields which is semi-circled at the middle a hand hold is cut. The side of the rectangular that is moved near the floor throughout the exercise is kindly arched. There is a hole at the central segment of each Sang with a bar across it that is used as a hand grip [4]. The characteristics of the Sang are: 100 x 75 x 8cm. with 60 to 120kg each pair [10] (Fig. 4). Other authors have asserted that each Sang is between 20 to 40 kg [11].

**Kabbadeh:** The Kabbadeh is a bow made of iron with metal rings and coin-like pieces hanging on its body. On this instrument, the string has been replaced by a heavy chain which generally is made of 16 links. Each link is about 12cm. long and 5cm. wide. In each link there are approximately six metallic discs, each one measuring about the size of a small saucer. The chain is about 65cm. longer than the bow itself, which is about one meter long (Fig. 5). Kabbadeh weight is mostly between 11 to 50kg [12]. Exercises with Kabbadeh include three forms:

- One-sided: The Kabbadehs are moved back and forth between one of the shoulders to the head.
- Two-sided: Here, the Kabbadeh is moved from the left shoulder to the right segment; only veterans and champions can do this exercise form.
- 3. Facing the chest: In this difficult form of exercise, the Kabbadeh is pulled vertically by extension of hands toward both sides of the body.

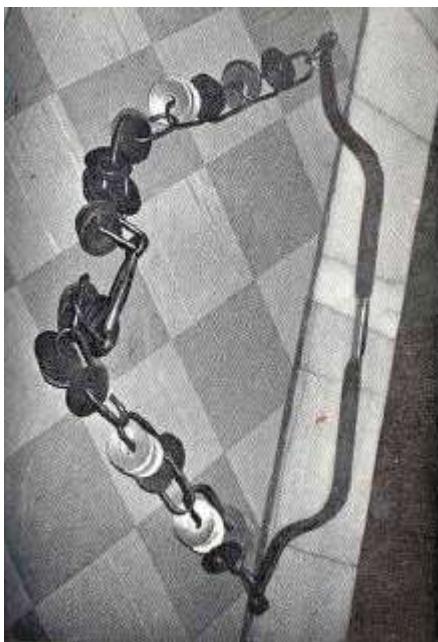


Fig. 5: Kabbadeh [6]



Fig. 6: Mil [4]

**Mil:** Mil is an instrument shaped like mass. It is a conical wooden. Its weigh is 10-30 Kilograms. There is smaller variety of Mil with longer handle weighing 4 kilograms. Working with the Mil is perhaps the most difficult part of the whole session (Fig. 6). In fact, these devices are comparatively heavy and difficult to control, especially in motion during the Mil exercises. In addition, this exercise bout is slightly longer than the rest of the session [13].

**Summary of Exercise Program in Zoorkhaneh (In One Session):** Depended to level of the participant's ability, each training session takes about 60 to 90 min. Similarly, the intensity or the degree of the hardship of the session is also related to the amount of strength and the endurance of the athletes. Each Zoorkhaneh training session consists of followings parts [5, 13]:

- Bastanicars arrival in the Gowd for training, then Morshed play the Zarb (drum) and the Bastanicars leave the locker area in a single line, with the Miandar first and the other athletes, according to their seniority, behind him. The athletes leap into the Gowd, in the same order of seniority and continue their way to the right in a slow trot unti everybody has come in and is positioned in a circular line that is defined by the walls of the Gowd with the Miandar at the center. This position will be kept until the end of the practice session [5, 14].
- Warm-up: Warm up in Zoorkhaneh is consisted jugging and leaping on both feet alternately. The athlete runs toward right, left and on the diagonal axis of the Gowd.

**Shena (Push-Up):** After Warm-up, the athletes (follow Miandar) takes up the push-up planks (Takht-e-Shena) from a special place on the side of the Gowd and begins the exercise (Fig. 7).

**Mil Greiftan (Club Exercise):** Exercise training by the Mils is probably the most difficult phase of the whole session. These devices are heavy, also it's control or conduction is difficult (Fig. 8). Following a few minutes of warming up exercises by the Mils, totally reposed on their



Fig. 7: Shena exercise [4]



Fig. 8: Mil Greiftan [5]

bases on the floor, the Miandar, as usual, communicates to the Morshed the time for signaling the athletes to lift and hold their clubs in a ready position: upside-down and with the hands held in front of the body, waist-height, elbows held close at the sides. Actual exercise with the Mils begins after the second signal from the Morshed. In this phase, the athletes turn the Mils around their shoulders alternately and in a balance, continuous and circular fashion until the Morshed gives the top signal [13].

**Mil-Bazy (Juggling):** In these activities the participant throws the Mils in the air at short and high heights and recaptures them. There are many forms and skills in this action in which the participant shows his skill in many ways and amuses the spectators and participants alike. This exercise is done with 4 mils or more. Mil-Bazy is not performed by some athletes who are skillful in handling these clubs [4].

**Charkhidan (Rotating):** Because control of body balance, this exercise needs great skill and experience. In many cases, the athlete will spin so fast that the Morshed can't keep pace with his speed. During Charkhidan, the head, arms, body and feet of athletes seem to pour into the mould of a single top (Fig. 9). This exercise is the symbol of refinements in ancient Iran.

**Pazadan (Foot Work):** Foot working is coupled with hands, arms and shoulders movements in different directions. Although, the movements are indicated by



Fig. 9: Charkhidan exercise [4]



Fig. 10: Kabbadeh Keshidan [5]

the Miandar, the cadence, as well as, the starting point and the end of this exercise bout is given by the Morshed.

**Kabbadeh Keshidan (Exercise by Iron Bow):** Because Kabbadeh is a hard exercise, is not obligatory for all the participants. However, since different sizes and weights of Kabbadeh are available in Zoorkhaneh, athletes take one that suits them and participate in this exercise.

For this exercise the athlete lifts the bow, holding it at arm's length and shakes it violently to the left and right of his head continuously; meanwhile, the Morshed counts and beats his drum (Fig. 10).

**Sang Greiftan (Stone Press):** the athlete must lie on his back on the floor with his legs straight to perform this exercise. In this position the athlete lifts the Sangs off the floor, at arm length and flexed arms to take the starting position (similar to bench press). The Morshed counts the number of times that the athlete carries the Sang across the body to help him to keep track of gradual progress with Sangs is the minimum and 117 double rotations are the maximum [5, 15].

**Koshti (Wrestling):** Similar to the Sang and the Kabbadeh exercises, Koshti is an individual event that is performed in the Gowd only by a few Bastanicars who are scheduled for the exercise session. The type of Koshti that is performed in Zoorkhaneh looks much like the Greek style wrestling where only the upper body of the wrestler gets involved in the technical pinning and holds of the combat.

**Warm Down:** The warming down in Zoorkhaneh consists basically of different kinds of running, hopping, leaping, short jumping and walking.

**Moshtemal (Massage):** The final stage of the Zoorkhaneh exercise session is Moshtemal which is performed in the Gowd. The techniques of Moshtemal Zoorkhaneh massage are simple. However, every Bastanicar is must to learn its techniques. However, it is possible massage have been recommended from Iranian scientists such as Al-Razi (854-935 CE), known in Latin as Rhazes or Ibn Sina (980-1037 CE) is also known by his Latin name, Avicenna [16].

**Historical and Philosophical Aspects of Zoorkhaneh:** Notwithstanding previous studies about history of Zoorkhaneh, Unfortunately, term of infrastructure of Zoorkhaneh is not well documented [9, 11, 17]. However, three testimonies seem to be prominent in this respect:

Some leading historiographers asserted that many resemblances can be found between the different aspects of Zoorkhaneh and the Mithraic temples that were built by the followers of the Mithra (a Persian religious cult that flourished in the late Roman Empire rivaling Christianity) first in the ancient Persia, shortly after in the Roman Empire and later in Europe [1].

It is suggested that the history of the first Zoorkhaneh goes back to the period of time when the ancient Persians worshiped Mithras, long before Christ [17] (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: Signet of shard from Bastan exercise at Sasanian period [4]

Other investigators reported that Zoorkhaneh was created during the Zoroastrian religion in the 6th Century B.C. To follow the guidelines of this religion, the Bastanicars, who traditionally were the fervent religious people, accepted the purification of spirit and the prime values of kindness and goodness. Henceforth, the two major qualities of “goodness” and “kindness” became the inseparable philosophical components of Pahlevanship [1].

Other researchers found some traces of the art of Zoorkhaneh in Iran’s longest poetical work, the Shah-nameh (Book of Kings), written by Ferdowsi in the 10<sup>th</sup> century [18]. Ferdowsi lived at the court of King Mahmud of Ghazne, for whom he composed the Shah-nameh in order to narrate the history of the Iranian kings all the way back to legendary and semihistorical times. The Shah-nameh describes the heroes and illustrious warriors of Iran’s past. Significantly, many words specifically used in Zoorkhaneh are used in this work with the same connotation [1].

Although the history of Iranian Zoorkhaneh is shrouded in mystery and legend, some evidences are found in other countries that have been influenced by Iranian culture. One of the main aspects of Zoorkhaneh has always been wrestling, specificity oil wrestling which is performed by two people whose bodies are soaked with oil. This type of wrestling is still very popular in turkey for

example. Turkish wrestling is taken directly from Zoorkhaneh. Its rules are similar to Iranian wrestling' and even the attire of traditional Turkish wrestling is the same as that worn in Zoorkhaneh [1, 4].

Some investigator believes connection between Zoorkhaneh and the south Indian martial art of Kalaripayat. In the south Indian state of Kerala, martial arts are part of the local cultural heritage. These traditional arts are called Kalaripayat and there are three main branches: the northern tradition, the central tradition and the southern tradition. Local lore holds that the central styles were influenced by the Iranian art of Zoorkhaneh. In fact, there are still a number of traditional Zoorkhaneh in northern India today [4].

The concept of hero (Pahlevan), which includes the qualities a hero ideally should have, is still relevant to the members of a Zoorkhaneh. This would suggest that at least parts of the philosophy of Zoorkhaneh are based on ancient Iranian views of heraldry and wrestling itself is the Persian word Pishrow, derived from the Persian verb Pishraftaen, which means "to progress", a Pishrow is someone who has made progress [8, 19].

**The Strong Points Regarded to Zoorkhaneh:** As modern promotion at physical education and exercise physiology science and awareness of training, there are some attractive points that warrant discussion.

- Exercise in Zoorkhaneh start by warm up and accomplish with warm down. This exercise method is according to training science principals [20].
- The model of "exercise and rest" or rest interval is performed in Zoorkhaneh (similar to resistance exercise) until end of exercise session. This pattern is effective to muscles recovery and performance improvement [21].
- The Charkhidan exercise can be very positive on improve athletes balance. In fact balance is one of the fitness factors.
- Mind centralization, sense of attention and coordination of nerve and muscle can be acquired by Mil-Bazy training.
- Pazadan has property of endurance exercise.
- Sang Giri, Mil Greiftan and Kabbadeh Keshidan are similar to resistance exercise.
- Post-exercise Moshtemal as massage is positive to rapid recovery and propulsion of metabolic pernicious exercise-induced. Also, massage at all as a treatment for pain relief, for increasing blood flow and for facilitating the healing process [16].

Therefore, the athlete train endurance and resistance exercise in Zoorkhaneh. It is well documented that endurance exercise improves cardiopulmonary system, cardiovascular adaptations and reduce rates of overweight [16]. Also, resistance exercise is critical for muscle strength and increase the muscle mass. Moreover, endurance or resistance exercise training is believed to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and other diseases such as diabetes, osteoporosis and hypertension [20]. Furthermore, the important point regards to exercise in Zoorkhaneh is about concurrent training. Concurrent training, in which resistance and endurance exercise are combined or included in the same training sessions or program, has been studied in the search for new methods to interfere with reduce rates of overweight, development of strength and aerobic capacity, also to cardiovascular adaptations [20]. As we cited in previous paragraph, however, Sang Giri, Mil Greiftan and Kabbadeh Keshidan (resistance exercise) where be combined with Pazadan (endurance exercise) can make the concurrent training. Therefore, it can be conclude that exercise in the Zoorkhaneh according to training science is up to date.

Fortunately, International Zoorkhaneh Sports Federation (IZSF) has been established on 11th October in National Olympic and Paralympics, Tehran- I.R. Iran in 2004 and representatives from 22 countries of the world. IZSF now has representatives in 5 Continents of the world and IZSF is trying to develop the Sport, Culture and health by organizing the training course all over the world [4].

**The Present Drawbacks:** Despite the efforts of the federation of Zoorkhaneh in Iran, there is still no precise statistics on the number of participants in sport activities; however, this number is quite small compared with the 70 million population of Iran. This could be because of several factors which, in order of importance, are as follows:

- Lack of public awareness and faith in essentiality and positive effects of Zoorkhaneh exercise in daily life; and subsequent inexperienced in this field.
- Insufficiency in conducting systematic and organized researches and studies to recognize people's needs as regards and their satisfaction of the present programs of sport for all.

- Barred of Zoorkhaneh exercise for women that established almost 45% of Iran society.
- Occupational difficulties due to financial problems, together with having insufficient leisure time to devote to sports.
- Inability of governmental administrations to create enough attraction to increase the number of participants.
- Budget deficit for development spaces of Zoorkhaneh.
- Lack the matches in country or international levels. Although it is six years since IZSF has started its operation; however the matches of Zoorkhaneh are less than other sport scopes.
- Because alternation in idea of youth population and modernity problems, tendency of youths is low to participate in Zoorkhaneh training.

**Some Suggestions for the Improvement of the Present Situation of Zoorkhaneh for All in Iran:** Based on the above mentioned advances and drawbacks and researcher's own information about the present social, cultural and economical situation in Iran, here are presented same suggestions applicable to the current condition in Iran:

- Public informing through the mass media including the television, attractive and colorful catalogues and magazines which help to emphasize the positive effects of Zoorkhaneh training on physical health and well-being (in physiology and psychology aspects) also its role in preventing social delinquency; and finally, to create happiness and enjoyment in such a way that all people, from children to the elderly, would be addressed and impressed.
- Allocating a higher budget, according to the priorities, for construction of space centers and administrators related to Zoorkhaneh by the government.
- Assigning a group of experts to obtain statistical data and information about the number of participants in sport for all activities and to analyze the results.
- Systematic and objective programming, by the authorities, based on public need; and the precise recognition of the present situation and predicting future trends.

## CONCLUSION

Zoorkhaneh is house of strength, joy of effort, generosity and chivalries spirit, love of country and combined with art and literature. This sport with the thousands years of history has played a great role in empowering the mental and physical health aspects of the people.

Despite new methods exercise training for development of strength, power and aerobic capacity are employed in the world; Zoorkhaneh is still alive and as a legacy of the past deserves much attention to live longer. Zoorkhaneh as sacred space and scientific training method can employed from children to the elderly. However some drawbacks are in related to Zoorkhaneh that must be management by government and administrates related.

The present study is not an exhaustive document that can provide all the answers about the Zoorkhaneh. Further researches are needed to describe the Zoorkhaneh at different aspects. Due to the lack of the scientific research in this area, any kind of study on the Zoorkhaneh is undoubtedly very challenging but, it is certainly worthy because it will help to describe and to explain one of the oldest schools of thought in physical education and athletics which in some extent was and still is, an efficient method of concentration and meditation as well in Iran.

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