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Dogfighting Making a Comeback in Afghanistan



Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

A dogfight in Kabul, Afghanistan. The sport, banned under the Taliban, is popular again, with dogfighters entering their charges in informal weekly tournaments on dusty lots.

By KIRK SEMPLE

Published: December 27, 2008

KABUL, [Afghanistan](#) — In a dingy butcher's shop reeking of slaughter, a half-dozen sheep's carcasses dangled from hooks, and two men spoke of dogs.

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Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Dogfighting tournaments in Kabul draw thousands of men and boys as spectators.

"My dog is younger than his dog. I have the advantage," said one of the men, known as Abdul Sabour, 49. "And my dog is more energetic than his dog."

"He's lying," grumbled the other man, Kefayatullah, 50. "His dog is old. He's just here wasting his time. How many dogs has my dog beaten? Sixty! My dog has been a champion for three years!"

The men were arranging a dogfight, largely in the international language of trash-talking. They represented two groups of bettors. The purse, they said, was \$50,000, a fortune in this impoverished country and one of the biggest prizes here in recent memory.

Afghans like to fight. They will boast about this. They will say that fighting is in their blood. And for all the horrors of three decades of war, they still find room to fight for fun, most often through proxies: cocks, rams, goats, camels, kites.

And dogs. [Dogfighting](#) was banned under the [Taliban](#), who considered it un-Islamic. But since the Taliban's ouster in 2001, the sport has regained its earlier popularity, with dogfighters entering their charges in informal weekly tournaments on dusty lots in the country's major cities.

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...Afghanistan is strongest, though the crowds have thinned somewhat since February, when a suicide bomber detonated himself at a dogfighting match. About 80 people were killed and more were wounded.

Here in the capital, there are two tournaments every week, both on Friday, the day of prayer. The bigger one unfolds in the morning in a natural dirt amphitheater at the bottom of a craggy slope on the city's outskirts. It draws thousands of men and boys as spectators — like most sports and sporting events in Afghanistan, it is almost exclusively a male pursuit.

"It's something from our ancestors," said Ghulam Yahya Amirzadah, 21, whose family owns 17 dogs in Kabul and in their hometown in the northwest province of Badghis.

Mr. Amirzadah, who is known in dogfighting circles as Lala Herati, said he inherited the pastime from his father, who ran fighting dogs in his youth.

"It's not about money," Mr. Amirzadah said. "If my dog beats another dog, it makes me feel like I've won \$100,000. I can survive just from the happiness."

On a recent Friday, Mr. Amirzadah was at the dogfighting amphitheater, though without his dogs. He was watching the fights and arranging future matches for his stable.

More than 2,000 people were there — poor men who had arrived on foot as well as former warlords in sport utility vehicles accompanied by Kalashnikov-toting guards. And there were dozens of dogs — hulking, big-headed mastiff breeds that, in the right light and the wrong setting, might be mistaken for small bears. Some were so big that they had to be restrained by two men. A few owners, their arms tired, had lashed their dogs to the wheels of cars.

An informal committee of arbiters, including Mr. Kefayatullah and Abdul Sabour, was selecting the fights and matching up the dogs. Some fights had been organized days in advance, with hundreds of dollars, sometimes thousands, riding on each.

A ringmaster, a toothless old man with a turban and a limp, presided over the event. He carried a wooden staff that he used to beat spectators who crowded the dirt arena and members of the dogfighters' entourages who blocked the view.

Though dogfighting is again popular here, it is far from universally embraced. The country's elite disparage it as the domain of the uncultured and the criminal.

"In my personal view, it's not a good thing," said Ghulam Nabi Farahi, deputy minister of information and culture. "In today's world, these animals should be treated well. But unfortunately, there's a lot of fighting."

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Abdul Waheed Wafa contributed reporting.

A version of this article appeared in print on December 28, 2008, on page A6 of the New York edition.

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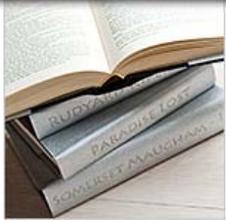


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