



## A STUDY ON HORSEBACK WRESTLING, A TRADITIONAL TURKISH SPORT

**Ömer Tarkan Tuzcuoğullari,**

**Kamil Boğaç İskender**

Gaziantep University,

Department of Physical Education and Sport,

Gaziantep, Turkey

### **Abstract:**

Horseback wrestling is an indispensable combat game played at the festivals, feasts, sports events and assemblies of the Turkic Republics of Central Asia. A popular sport in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, it requires substantial physical strength and will to fight. Its local names include Oodaryş and Audaryspak, pronounced “er-enish”. The present study aims to make a contribution to the wider recognition and embrace of this sport, which is relatively unknown in Turkey, and to help it gain a solid place among traditional Turkish games. Given the rarity of the printed sources on this matter, the study employed interviews to support and complement literature survey. The input gathered were categorized and coded, followed by the analysis stage culminating in the final version of the text. Horseback wrestling was found to be a traditional game played in weddings and festivals in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in particular. In this context, the game is played without any time or space limitation, and continues till one of the players is able to bring the other down through wrestling on horseback. Today, however, a rather professional offshoot is established, where athletes in 4 weight classes compete on an individual as well as team basis, subject to time and space limits, as well as a scoring mechanism, with the scores often determining the winner. Horseback wrestling is essentially a game to prepare for combat, based on the skills to command the horse and overpower as well as neutralize the opponent without using any weapons. In time, a set of rules were developed to govern the game format; yet it still is a traditional sport true in its nature. Even though horse breeding and training as well as associated subcultures had somewhat withered away among Turkish peoples who embraced a more sedentary lifestyle in Anatolia, the Traditional Sports Federation of

Turkey has an open perspective for such endeavors, and is expanding its activities. We believe the present study will be useful in this context.

**Keywords:** horseback wrestling, performance

## 1. Introduction and Objective

Life on Central Asian steppes is not an easy one. People need to be prepared at all times to handle survival challenges; and to cope with, protect against, or hunt stronger animals. Wild animals were not the only threat; the people had to maintain protection against and at times fight with other peoples as well. Whenever the tools of combat were rendered unusable, physical fighting and wrestling gained prominence as means which necessitated substantial strength, practice, and mastery. Owning and training a horse enabled one to apply all these arts of combat on that very horse. In this sense, breeding horses and wrestling on the steppes are traditions dating back to proto-Turks. Horse is an indispensable comrade of any steppe community. *“However, its place in the heart of Turkic tribes is even more special, for a Turk shares his homeland with horse, in the sense both have risen in Central Asia in the wider sense.”* (Roux, 1997) Austrian historian Koppers, Hungarian historian Allfödin, as well as German historian Portriatz have noted that the first people to domesticate horse were the Turks inhabiting the Central Asian steppes. Against this background, it is only natural for such two ancient sports (horse riding and wrestling) to come together in such lands, evolving into a combat training game with elements of power and struggle. For the Turks had made a point of engaging in horse riding sports at any opportunity such as feasts, weddings, assemblies, and New Year celebrations etc.

Horseback wrestling is considered a joint effort on part of the horse and the rider, among the Kyrgyz (Er-enish), and Kazakh (Audaryspak) peoples. Wrestling as such refers to *“a struggle where adults characterized by perfect physical prowess, skills, and endurance exhibit their mastery of the horse.”* (Kymyspaev, 2004) In addition, *“it requires the rider to achieve a gifted management of the horse. The rider is expected to either pull or push the opponent off his horse.”*(Kukushkin, 1961) The rider should establish mastery over the horse, and should try to dislodge his opponent by pulling him off his horse, at times with both hands. While doing so, he should still be able to direct his horse, using his knees. All these can only be possible if the rider and the horse acts in harmony. That is why all the techniques employed during a battle or a hunt would be witnessed frequently, in parallel to the case with any horse riding sport.

Even though the horse culture (breeding, riding training etc.) and its sub-cultures (health of the horse, saddle making, horse shoes etc.) in Anatolia are on the verge of extinction, certain institutions supporting Traditional Sports make substantial efforts to breath life into these cultures. The withering away of the traditional games, due to changes in living conditions, advances in technology, increased emphasis on individuals etc., in a process where oral transmission from one generation to another fails, leads to cultural erosion. Such a loss would become even more pronounced if other nations embrace and claim the material elements of our culture as their own. The present study, in this context, aims to promote, breath life into, and make popular “Horseback Wrestling”, an obscure game at the moment, by incorporating it under the umbrella of the Traditional Sports Federation.

## 2. Method

Given the limited numbers and scope of the printed sources on the subject matter, the literature survey was coupled with a number of interviews. Experts on this matter were interviewed; significant interviews were noted among the references. The data gathered through the interviews were then categorized, and employed in descriptive analyses to conclude the study.

## 3. Findings

Today, horseback wrestling matches between two take place in a circle with a diameter of 30 meters. The riders wear a belt on their waist, and would be naked from the belt up. They also wear strong pants and horse riding boots. Each rider also carries a whip, holding them either in their hands, or in a tight grip between their teeth. Upon the referee’s command, the riders approach each other, and try to get a hold of the opponent. *“Two strong and brave men start wrestling on horseback at the field chosen, holding each other strongly. The party that gets the opponent off the horse is then declared the winner.”* (Belek, 2014) The traditional variant of the game does not have any time or field restrictions. The institutionalized version is not very alien to its original form either. The more modern version incorporates a number of changes including the introduction of a scoring system, making it more exciting. *“Horseback wrestling can be a personal sport, as well as a competition between teams. Men older than 18 years of age take part in the events.”* (Demirbilek, 2016) Therefore, those younger than 18 are not allowed to engage. Wrestling matches are organized in four weight segments: 70, 80, 90, and 90+. Time limits applied vary from country to country, and from event to event. The matches usually vary between 6 to 15 minutes. During the match, the players use *“double-column*

(koş basmayıl), stronger backstraps (kuyuşkan), and cuirasses (kömöldürük)" (Ağgün, 2014) due to the extreme stress involved. "A strap called böktörünçök (boktorunchok) or an even larger and tougher belt is used at the back of the saddle, to prevent physical impairment which may be caused by the struggle." (Askarali, 2017)

The match is concluded on the following terms: "When a player pushes his opponent off the horse, or when any part of the opponent's body touches the ground, the match would be over. Such a feat is awarded four points, while the opponent gets nil. In case of equality of scores, an extension of 2 minutes is granted. The wrestlers start by holding the straps with both hands. In the extension, all the techniques applied by the wrestlers are taken into account. The wrestler losing the grip would also lose the match." (World Named Games, 2016)

The wrestlers assuming a passive stance and avoiding fight would be punished as part of the rules. "If a wrestler receives three warnings for passive stance in the fight, the match would be stopped and the warned wrestler would be declared defeated. The loser would be given zero points, whereas the opponent is given 4 points to win the game." (World Named Games, 2016)

The rest of the scoring rules are as follows: "If the wrestler applies 3 seconds of pressure on the neck or saddle of the opponent's horse, he would be given 1 point. If the wrestler forces the opponent to hold the neck or saddle of his own horse, in order to avoid falling down, the wrestler doing so will get a score of 2." (World Named Games, 2016) The rules of the game do not allow avoiding fight. "If the wrestler tries to avoid fight, he would get a warning for passive stance, and the opponent would be given 1 point." (World Named Games, 2016)

The following techniques are allowed as part of the game: "Grabbing the hand of the opponent; forcing the opponent's hand down on the saddle; grabbing the belt with one or two hands; grabbing the belt and dislodging the opponent off the saddle; grabbing the body or the leg of the opponent; holding the neck of one's own horse; pushing the opponent's body in various directions." (World Named Games, 2016)

The following techniques are not allowed as part of the game: "The wrestler cannot kick the opponent or the opponent's horse. If the wrestler uses the whip on the opponent, grabs the hair or face of the opponent, grabs the fingers of the opponent, or forces the opponent's wrist in a way to cause injury; he would be disqualified." (World Named Games, 2016)

It is well known that the physical culture dominating Central Asia can be characterized as training for combat. That is why, even though all other games are played by both genders, Horseback Wrestling is exclusive to men. Aybek Babakulov from the Secretariat of the World Nomad Games (Babakulov, 2017) underlined that this game was never played by women, and it was exclusive to adult man, even in the past.

#### 4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, horseback wrestling is essentially a game to prepare for combat, based on the skills to command the horse and overpower as well as neutralize the opponent without using any weapons. In time, a set of rules were developed to govern the game format; yet it still is a traditional sport true in its nature. Even though horse breeding and training as well as associated subcultures had somewhat withered away among Turkish peoples who embraced a more sedentary lifestyle in Anatolia, the Traditional Sports Federation of Turkey has an open perspective for such endeavors, and is expanding its activities. We believe the present study will be useful in this context.

#### References

1. Roux, J. P. ; "Türklerin Tarihi", Milliyet Yayınları, 3. Baskı, Ankara 1991, Milliyet Yayınları, 5. Baskı, Ankara 1997.
2. Kymyspaev, M.N. ; "Kazak Ulusal Spor ve Dođa Sporları", Kazakistan Cumhuriyeti Eğitim ve Bilim Bakanlığı, Kazakistan Tarım Teknik Üniversitesi, Uralsk 2004.
3. Kukushkin, M. ; "Beden Eğitimi ve Spor" 1. Fiziksel Kültür ve Spor Sözlüğü, Cilt 1, 1961.
4. Belek, K. ; "Kültürel Hayatta At: Kırgızlarda Seyislik Mesleđi", Türk Halklarının Geleneksel Spor Oyunları Sempozyumu, Kırgızistan, Kasım 2014, s:112-114. 5. Demirbilek, C. ; "At Üstünde Güreş", Karar Yayıncılık A.Ş., ([www.karar.com](http://www.karar.com)) 14.05.2016.
5. Ağgün, K. ; "Kırgızistan Milli Oyunları", Kırgızlarda Seyislik Mesleđi", Türk Halklarının Geleneksel Spor Oyunları Sempozyumu, Kırgızistan, Kasım 2014, s:59-62.
6. Askarali, M. (1988); Kırgızistan Milli Spor Ajansı Müdür Yardımcısı, (21.10 2017 tarihli görüşme).
7. World Named Games (2016); "Competition rule Book of Er Enish", Cholpon, Atacity, Kyrgyz Republic.
8. Babakulov, A. (1985); Dünya Göçebe Oyunları Sekreteri, Dış İlişkiler Baş Danışmanı ve Dünya Etnospor Konfederasyonu Kırgızistan Şubesi Genel Sekreteri, (20.10.2017 tarihli görüşme).

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Physical Education and Sport Science shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).