

## *Zoorkhaneh and Varzesh-E-Bastani*

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### **Abstract**

From the beginning of the human civilization many forms and methods of physical training, with consideration to some spiritual or religious believes, social values and/or political exigencies have emerged and some of them for somehow the same reasons have vanished in the course of time. Zoorkhaneh (home of physical strength) and Varzesh-e-Bastani (special kind of physical training) are some of these historically precious legacies of the Mithraic era that are still, more or less, surviving in some parts of I.R. of Iran. This ancient school of thought in human physical education, skill, prowess, and vigor, 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 the study was fourfold: 1-Introduce Zoorkhaneh and Varzesh-e-Bastani to specialists in the areas of physical education and sports in a larger scale, 2-provide the grounds for the sport historiographers for more studies in the related areas, 3-provide the basic knowledge about this rich method of physical education for the people who are seeking different ways of physical exercise, 4-contribute to the preservation of an ancient method of physical training that was once one of the bests in the world. The materials presented in this article are based on the experience of the authors, as well as, the extant research documents and books. The article includes information about: definition of a selected number of technical terms and jargons; historical, philosophical and religious background; past and present physical structure; instruments and equipments; session program; and lastly, contemporary aspects and trends of the Zoorkhaneh and Varzesh-e-Bastani.

**Keywords:** Zoorkhaneh, Varzesh-e-Bastani

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### **Definition of selected terms and jargons**

The terms and jargons given in this section are in the order of their actual significance and frequency of use in the literature and practical training sessions of Varzesh-e-Bastani in the Zoorkhaneh. (Beizae Kashani, 1958; Bank Melli, 1971; Ayria, 1975; Givi, 1978; Amirtash, 1981; Abbassi, 1997).

**1-Varzesh-e-Bastani (ancient sport):** Is a rigorous and comprehensive physical exercise session of 60 to 90 minutes, consisting of different kinds of physical activities appropriate for the homogeneous age groups of 16 to 60-70 year old. These exercises were practiced under special customs and rituals established over hundreds of years. Each session of Varzesh-e-Bastani comprises: 1-Warming up, 2- main body of physical exercises, and 3-warming down (Amirtash, 1980).

**2- Zoorkhaneh (home of strength):** 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.

**3-Bastanikar:** Is everybody who practices Varzesh-e-Bastani and possesses a number of outstanding physical and spiritual traits and characteristics.

**4-Pahlevan:** Is the first champion among other bastanikars of a village, town, city, province, country or the world of the time. This title was awarded only to athletes who were recognized as having had reached perfection in the qualities of both physical prowess and moral virtue. Pahlevans usually discharged important responsibilities in

army and security of town. The significance of Pahlevanship has been well presented in the Farsi language literature. As an example, Ferdowssi, in his outstanding poetic book pictures Rostam, the Persian legendary Pahlevan, fighting heroically against depravity, vice, and sinful deeds and thoughts in the purest and most literary forms in the tenth century (Reuben, 1967). Other examples of the well-known Palevans are Ayyar and Shater who during the invasions of Arabs and Mongols struggled hardly to free the country from the foreign domination and to assure the autonomy and integration of their nation. In each Varzesh-e-Bastani session, the Morshed accompanies all the exercises with chanting the epics

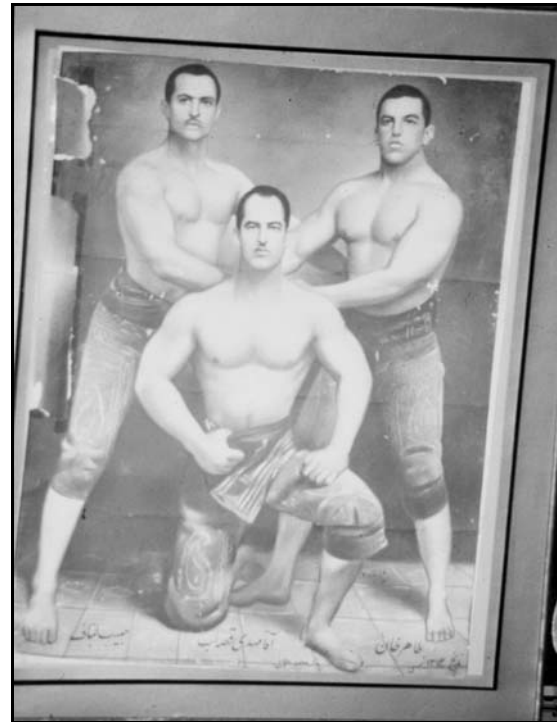


Figure 1. Pahlevans of about a century ago.

and poems that describe the braveries and heavenly prowess and heroism of these Pahlevans for the good of the human beings.

**5-Gowd:** Is the most significant facility where all the activities of the Varzesh-e-Bastani are performed. 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. The Khadem (janitor) of the Zoorkhaneh makes regularly sure that this floor is sufficiently well packed and humid before the start of every session (Ayria, 1975). To eliminate the detrimental effects of dust and humidity, especially in an indoor and relatively small space such as the Zoorkhaneh, the methods of construction of Gowd's floor are rapidly approaching the ones used in constructing the other sport activities areas like the contemporary running or playing fields (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Gowd, the lines on the floor are ornamental.



Figure 3. Two morsheds directing the practice session.

**6-Morshed:** Is an experienced Bastanikar who, at the same time, is a well-educated man who also has some talents in music. He is especially competent in providing the different rhythms that are needed for directing the various exercises of a Varzesh-e-Bastani practice session. He does this job by chanting the epic poems and couplets and by playing the Zarb and Zang (see below) that he has at hand. Some times there are two Morsheds who in harmony with each other direct the practice session (see Figure 3).

**7-Zarb:** Is a large hemispheric wooden drum, usually with a skin of deer, stretched over the larger end of it. Its special shape and practical size makes it possible for the Morshed to place it on his lap and to control it with his arms. Zarb is used to give the indispensable rhythm and cadence for all the exercises, and the quality of its sound and resonance is kept by a brazier, or an electrical heater, through-out the session (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Zarb playing by the Morshed.



Figure 5. Morshed playing Zang.

**8-Zang:** Zang is a proportionally 25-30cm. length-bell that hangs within reach of Morshed's hand. Morshed will play the Zang for the following purposes:

- 1- To signal the beginning or the end of a particular exercise
- 2- To attract the attention for making an announcement or presenting some kind of activities
- 3- To honor the presence of a distinguished Pahlevan, guest, or a social personality in the Zoorkhaneh.
- 4- To create occasional changes during the long rhythmical accompaniment given by the drum alone.
- 5- To communicate with the Miandar (see below) and the other athletes who are performing in the Gowed (see Figure 5).

**9- Miandar:** Miandar is a Pishkesvat (see below) who performs at the central part of the Gowed. He is the key person, model, and leader of session (see Figure 6).

**10- Pishkesvat:** Is a Bastanikar who is characterized by a high degree of expertise, experience and seniority. He also assumes the responsibility of teaching the technics of Varzesh-e-Bastani to younger Bastanikars.



Figure 6. Miandar performing at the middle of Gowed.

**11- Baladast and Paeindast:** To begin the Zoorkhaneh practice session, after the drum has begun to play, the Bastanikars leave the looker area in a single line with the Miandar first and the Nochehs(see below) last in the line. All the other athletes, according to their seniority, are ranked from high to low in between. The athletes approach the Gowed in trotting and leap into it in the same order. Except the Miandar who goes directly in the center of the Gowed, the rest continue their way to the right in a slow trot until every body has come in and is positioned in a circular line, which is defined by the walls of the Gowed. In this position, which will be kept till the end of the session, every one will necessarily have an athlete on his left and another on his right. The higher status athlete, standing on the right hand side of every participant, is exactly the one who is called the Baladast. Therefore, in the hierarchy of Varzesh-e-Bastani every body has a Baladast, as well as a Paeendast (the lower status athlete, standing on his left hand side).

**12-Nocheh or Nokashteh or Nokhasteh:** Is a beginner (novice) in Varzesh-e-Bastani. He is ordinarily under the direction and the apprenticeship of a Pishkesvat. This is the lowest rank in the hierarchy of Varzesh-e-Bastani. Other ranks from low to high are: Peesh-Kheeze, Khodsakhteh or Salevati, Saheb-e-Zang, Saheb-e-Zarb, Saheb-e-Zang and Zarb, Saheb-eZang, Zarb and Salevat. The highest rank in Zoorkhaneh is Saheb-e Taj (owner of the crown). It is noticeable that the one who is the first to start each one of the individual exercises like Charkhidan, Kabbadeh Keshidan and Sang Gereftan, is the Nocheh who is at the bottom line in seniority. The last athlete who will finish the exercise bout in the individual events is the Miandar (Enssafpour, 1974).

**13- Sar-Dam:** In this compound noun, Sar means “place” and Dam refers to “speaking or chanting”. From the technical standpoint, this is the Morshed’s rostrum from where he leads the practice session by his chants, Zarb and Zang (see Figure 7).

**14- Takhteh-Shena:** Is a plank of about 75 x 8 x 2 cm. It stands on two short lateral pedestals, each about 5cm. high and shoulder-width apart. The Takhteh-Shena is used for the different types of push up exercises particular to Varzesh-e-Bastani. One Takhleh-Shena is used by each one of the Bastanikars for push-up exercises (see Figure 8).



Figure 7. Sar-Dam of a Zoorkhaneh.

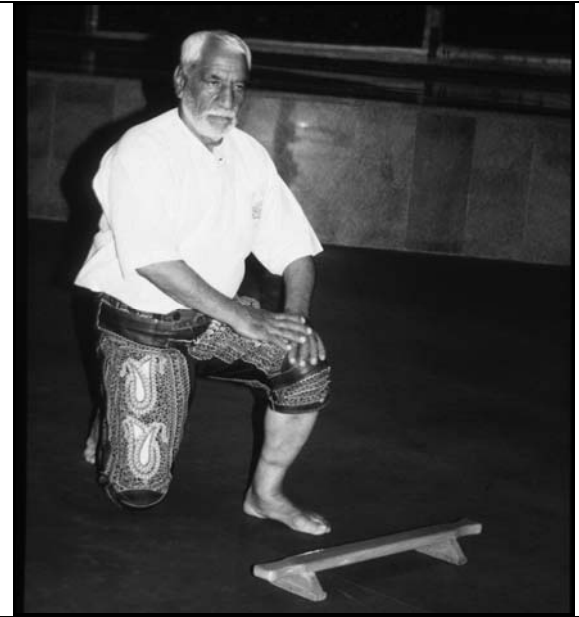


Figure 8. Man ready to start exercise with Takhteh-Shena.

**15-Meel:** Is a big chunk of hard and heavy wood related with the idea of using it somewhat like Indian clubs. However, it differs with them in a number of ways. First, its base is the largest part of it. Second, it is considerably longer (about 60 to 80cm.), larger (base about 20 to 30cm. in diameter) and heavier (about 12 to 40kg. pair). Third, Meels are used primarily for weight training. Fourth, one pair of Meels is necessary for exercise in Varzesh-e-Bastani. Fifth, the handle of the Meel is a cylindrical piece of hard wood about 12cm. long and 3cm. in diameter that is fixed very firmly on the top of the Meel (see Figures 9 &10).



Figure 9. Different size of Meels.



Figure 10. Meels by the Goweh, ready to be used by the athletes.

**16-Kabbadeh:** Is a bow shaped iron instrument used for weight training in Varzesh-e-Bastani. 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. Kabbadehs weigh mostly between 11 to 50kg (Haim, 1958). This weight can be adjusted to athlete's ability by removing or adding chain links or discs (see Figure 11).

**17- Sang:** Is a huge rectangular piece of hard wood that has some similarities with the ancient shields used to ward off blows or missiles. The side of the rectangular that

is moved near the floor throughout the exercise is gently arched. There is a hole at the central part of each Sang with a bar across it that is used as a hand grip. Around this opening is covered by a soft material to protect the hand. The measurements of the Sang are: 100 x 75 x 8cm. with 60 to 120kg. each pair (Hureau, 1975). Other authors have asserted that each Sang is between 20 to 40 kg. (Beizae. 1958). Sangs are used for weight training and one pair of them is necessary for the exercise (see Figure 12).



Figure 11. Kabbadeh in standing position.

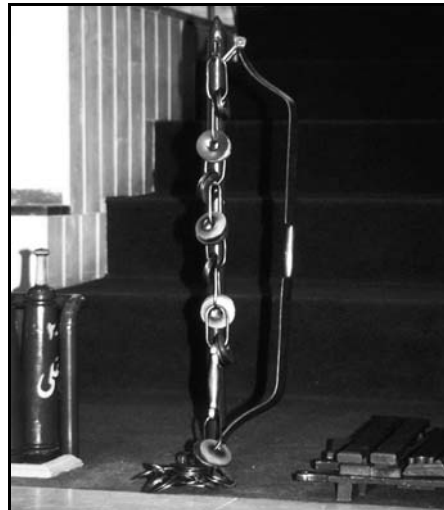


Figure 12. Exercise with Sangs.

**18-Shelang-Takhteh:** Is a plank of about 150-200 x 30-40 x 3-4cm. of hard wood. This equipment is used for stretching exercises, muscular endurance and agility of the legs,

aimed at running speed and endurance. This exercise is to lean the upper part of the Shelang-Takhteh on the edge of the Gowed and the lower end of it on the floor, then, the athlete jumps alternately on each foot for reaching as high as possible on this oblique plank with the other foot. This is a heavy exercise and 40 to 50 repetitions is considered to be a high performance in this event. The Shelang-Takhteh is gradually losing its popularity in the Zoorkhanehs (Abbassi, 1997).

**19-Shalvar-e-Bastani:** Is a knee-breeches pantaloons that is typical clothing for the Bastanikars. This clothing is made of either leather or of heavy embroidered cloth decorated with elaborate designs and scenes (see Figure 13). The firmness and resistance of this kind of trousers make it possible for the athletes to use it as a dependable grip during traditional wrestling of Varzesh-e-Bastani (Ayria, 1975).

**20- Kamarband:** Is a large and heavy leather belt made especially for Shalvar-e-Bastani. This belt provides a more dependable grip for wrestling specific to Varzesh-e-Bastani.



Figure 13. A Bastanikar with his Shalvar-e- Bastani.

**Historical and philosophical background**

According to the extant evidences such as exercise instruments and equipments, type of facilities and the old Persian names and titles which are still common in the Zoorkhanehs, this ancient school of thought in human physical education was created in old Persia. However, the sport historians are not in total agreement on a specific

date that marks its creation (Beizae, 1958; Kazimayni, 1963; Bahar, 1973). Three suggestions though seem to be prominent in this respect:

- 1-Zoorkhaneh was created during the Mithraic era. 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 (HCCA, 1976). The similarities between Zoorkhaneh and Mithraic institutions fall into three major categories: 1-physical structure of Zoorkhaneh and Mithraic temples, such as being built deep in the ground with the least external appearances and a small space just enough for a limited number of persons (Hinnells, 1975), 2-philosophy and rituals of the two institutions, such as heavenly concept of wrestling, 3-personal characteristics of the Mithraic feltones and the Zoorkhaneh Pahlevans such as humanism, altruism, darvishism and admiration for physical vigor, morality and personal honor. Based on these evidences it is suggested that the history of the first Zoorkhanehs goes back to the period of time when the ancient Persians worshiped Mithras, long before Christ (Bahar, 1973).
- 2- Zoorkhaneh was created during the Zoroastrian religion in the 6<sup>th</sup>. Century B.C. To follow the guidelines of this religion, the Bastanikars, 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 (Besant, 1897).
- 3-Zoorkhaneh was created after the advent of Islam in Iran in the seventh century A.D. This new religion not only induced substantial changes in the value system of Zoorkhaneh, but also caused the people to shift from worshiping Ormozd to theism (Dosabhai, 1884). Darvishism, Sufism and Erphanism were the three major philosophical waves that, based on the Islamic principles, influenced the Zoorkhaneh of after Islam. The Darvishism (Dervishism) is a devine school of thought in contentment and freedom from the materialistic needs, in virtue of self-discipline and preparation for survival in the famine periods. Sufism (Mysticism) entered the Zoorkhaneh because of its profound divinity and spirituality (Stevens, 1971; Nakhosteen, 1977). Erphanism (Gnosticism), basically different from the Gnosticism in early Christianity, consisted of an inquiry into an spiritual truth above faith. A Gnostic Bastanikar did not value the world but reaching to the salvation attainable only through a profound faith that would enable him to transcend matter. What was preceded reveals the close interrelationship between the Zoorkhaneh and the various schools of thought in philosophy, mostly derived from the religious beliefs of the general population of the time in Persia (Givi, 1978).

One of the outstanding happenings of the after Islam with respect to the Zoorkhaneh was the emergence of Pouryay-e-Vali in the course of the fourteenth century. A scientist, poet, Pahlevan, and religious man, Valy recognized the sportive and educational potentials of the Zoorkhaneh institutions. Also, impressed by their functional capacities and the brilliant performances in war and peace in the past, he decided to revive, recognize and update these institutions again. This great innovator, quite well known in the history of Zoorkhanh, believed that Physical Education should be linked with study and devotion in a disciplined institution. Therefore, he gave a format and set of regulations to the physical program of the camps and built a school, patterned after the Persian mosques, in which the new program would be thought. Physical training would be integrated with the cultivation of virtue and ethical codes. In this way he combined physical discipline with spirituality.

Vali named his school Zoorkhaneh. A Pahlevan himself, Vali used the Zoorkhaneh to reorganize Varzesh-e-Bastni under a new name and format to perpetuate the ancient order of heroic champion (Pahlevan). Individuals needed to become members of the school had to observe the rules of the institution if they wished to study the skills and rituals of the Pahlevan. Members visited the Zoorkhaneh several times a week and were tutored by the Pahlevans in the arts of wrestling, weightlifting, and floor exercises. Membership in the Zoorkhaneh became a subject of pride and honor (Profile of Iran, 1977). Gradually, other locations all over the country followed the Vali's guidelines for reproducing the similar social, religious and sportive centers and this was the beginning of a new era in the history of the Zoorkhaneh. Today's Zoorkhaneh match closely with the blueprint that Vali gave in connection to the establishment of the Zoorkhaneh many years ago. In our days, Bastanikars follow a very sophisticated set of rituals that are well established from long practical experience, codes of ethics and behaviors, as well as the conventional regulations of Pahlevanship which are a composite of all the relevant concepts of a myriad of social, religious, philosophical, moral, cultural, nationalistic, patriotic and leadership entities (Barzegar, 1971).

### **Physical structure**

The Zoorkhaneh, traditionally has had a peculiar physical structure that is on the one hand dictated by the technical exigencies of the special form of the physical exercises particular to these institutions, and on the other, in harmony with the cultural, religious and political aspects of these places.

The first form of the Zoorkhaneh must have been built in the caves outside the cities or underground within the cities at the end of narrow winding alleys, adjacent to some kind of fresh water and a private or public bath (Kazemayni & Babayan 1964).

In most places, they are still located deep in the ground as a reminder of the time when the Persians had to go to these gymnasia secretly, because the practice of Varzesh-e-Bastani were prohibited by the foreign powers who occupied the country at various periods of its history (Malcolms, 1948). The only exterior trace of the Zoorkhaneh at these times was a discrete small window that connected the high dome shaped ceiling of the Zoorkhaneh to the exterior world. The downward stairway, constituting the only access to the Zoorkhaneh, from one side, and this little window on the top of dome over the gowed on the other side created the necessary air current to make the place livable. The front door of these secret places were ordinarily located within another building to make the enemy's discovery of these nationalistic centers more difficult.

The Zoorkhanehs built after the 1950's have an entirely different outlook. The outside of the building is customarily square in shape and varies in size having more or less the form of any other public club. One other possibility is that the Zoorkhaneh is constructed with a high dome shape ceiling over its Gowed with a little window at the top of it to preserve a traditional architecture in the one hand, and to provide space for juggling exercises, on the other. The front door is ordinarily ornamental with signs and carvings that represent the Zoorkhaneh exercises and instruments, also short passages from Koran (the Muslim holy book). This front door is never opened to the regular traffic, instead, there is a smaller door, providing an opening of 1.5 x 1m., constructed within the heavy front door, which will be opened for the everyday use (Ayria, 1975). The main features of the interior construction of every Zoorkhaneh are the Gowed and the Sar-Dam which were described in the Definition of Selected Terms.

### **Aims and objectives**

The goals and objectives of the Zoorkhaneh, similar to any other of its counterparts in different parts of the world, were to promote the physical prowess of the citizens and to



contribute to their health and bodily skills, as well as training of the human beings' physical qualities with their mind and spirit behind it. By the same token, the physically fitted and skillful Pahlevans serve better in the army and for the nationalistic purposes (Mirie, 1970).

### Program (synopsis of a Zoorkhanh practice session)

Each practice session takes usually about 60 to 90 min., depending upon the achievement level of the participants. Similarly, the intensity and the degree of the difficulty of the session are also related to the amount of strength and the stamina of the athletes. Each Zoorkhanh practice session consists of several parts as follows (Bank Melli: Author, 1971):

- 1-Entering the Gowed for practice: - To begin a Zoorkhaneh practice session, after the Morshed has started to play the drum (Zarb), the Bastanikars 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 Gowed, one by one, in the same order of seniority and continue their way to the right in a slow trot until every body has come in and is positioned in a circular line that is defined by the walls of the Gowed with the Miandar at the center. This position will be kept until the end of the practice session (Babayan, 1958; Kashani, 1974).
- 2-Warming-up: -Consists of slow walking, juggling and leaping on one and both feet alternately. The direction of the movement, while doing the foot working, is toward right, left or on the diagonal axis of the Gowed. Coupled with the foot working are the calisthenics type movements for warming up the muscles of the upper body.
- 3-Shena (push-up): - Coming back to a slow walking around the Gowed every body, as initiated by the Miandar, takes up the push-up plank (Takht-e-Shena) from a special place on the side of the Gowed. After every body has taken this piece of equipment and has regained his original place, the Morshed gives the signal for the athletes to place the plank on the floor and begin the exercise. A variety of Shena exercises are included in a practice session. The Miandar usually starts with the easiest and simplest one for gradually increasing toward the more difficult forms (see Figures 14,15&16). The authors do not indicate a maximum number for Shena; because, it depends solely to the stamina of the athletes. However, according to an author (Kazemeini, 1960), some athletes do one thousand push-ups in a row in the Shena exercise. Another author (Beizae, 1958), has claimed that the number of Shena for some athletes goes even up to two thousand in one practice session.



Figure 14. Easiest form of Shena.



Figure 15. Ordinary push-up, a heavier form of Shena

4-Narmesh (calisthenics): - After the relatively long and tiring Shena exercises, there comes a period for stretching and different calisthenics movements. The purpose of this part of the session is to relax all the muscles by stretching and shaking them before going into another heavy exercise.



**Figure 16.** Push-up with twist for muscular endurance and flexibility.

5-Meel Greiftan (club exercise): - Working with the Meels is perhaps the most difficult part of the whole session. In fact, these devices are comparatively heavy and difficult to control, especially in motion during the Meel exercises. In addition, this exercise bout is slightly longer than the rest of the session. The procedure for starting this exercise is exactly identical to one of the push-up exercises; the athletes pick up the Meels and regain their places in the same order. After a few minutes of warming up exercises with the Meels, totally reposed on their 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. With second signal from the Morshed, the actual exercise with the Meels begins. The exercise, similar to the previous one, is done in different forms, from easy to heavier and more complicated in terms of the skill and the energy expenditure requirements. In this exercise, the athletes turn the Meels around their shoulders alternately and in a balance, continuous and circular fashion until the Morshed gives the top signal. This step of the session is designed primarily for strength and power training of the upper body muscles. Also, it contributes to flexibility and muscular endurance of the shoulders, arms and hands of the athletes (see Figure 17).



**Figure 17.** Meel Geireftan (club exercise).

6-Meel-Bazy (juggling): - Juggling is not actually a heavy work among the Zoorkhaneh exercises. First of all, it is not performed by all the participants, but few who are specialized in it. Secondly, it is considered as a distractive show by some athletes who are skillful in handling these clubs. In fact, it happens to be a very wise and necessary break right at the conclusion of the two very heavy exercises that constitute almost half of the whole session regarding time and energy expenditure.

7-Charkhidan (rotating or spinning): - In a sense, Charkhidan is a beginning for the second part of the session, or a warming up for it. This exercise needs more skill and experience, especially in maintaining the balance during the spinning rather than

physical fitness component. The high speed and the duration of Charkhidan are its two important features that are obviously very individual. The objective of this exercise is for the athlete to start spinning slowly at first and then try to reach his full limit of speed. In this particular exercise the drum is not expected to give indication and guidance as to how the athletes should perform, it only follows the rhythm of athlete's rotation.

In many instances, the athlete will spin so fast that the Morshed can't keep pace with his speed. This exercise is designed to increase the athlete's agility and balance and to decrease the lean body mass, also, cure dizziness and jaundice and to increase the ability of the body for a better blood flow. Charkhidan, similar to Shena and Meel exercises has various forms that are selected, specializes in and performed by the athlete individually. To stop the rotation exercise, the athlete slows down gradually before stopping completely. Then, regains his original place in the Gowed (see Figure 18).



Figure 18. Starting position for Charkhidan

8-Pazadan (foot working): - Foot working, with one foot or both, like leaping, jumping or hopping, coupled with hands, arms, and shoulders movements in different directions and from slow to faster rhythm and cadence, in place, is another kind of relaxation period for the Bastanikars before starting the heavy exercise of Kabbadeh. Here also, the Miandar acts as a model for other athletes who follow him closely. Even though, the movements are indicated by the Miandar, the cadence, as well as, the starting point and the end of this exercise bout is given by the Morshed.

9-Kabbadeh Keshidan (iron bow exercise): - This exercise is planned to increase the power and strength of the arms and shoulders by helping the torso flexibility.



Figures 19. Starting position for Kabbadeh exercise.



Figure 20. Kabbadeh exercise

The Kabbadeh exercise is not obligatory for all the participants, because it is a very heavy activity. However, since different sizes and weights of Kabbadeh are available, almost all athletes take one that suits them and participate in this exercise. Kabbadeh is a copy of the Achaemenian weapon seen in museums except for the fact that the string has been changed into a heavy metallic chain. This instrument weighs between 10 to 50 kgs. 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. The athlete stops the exercise when he is tired. Some of the advanced athletes in Varzesh-e-Bastani spin while carrying the Kabbadeh (see Figures 19 & 20).

10-Sang Greiftan (weight exercise): -To do this exercise the performer lies on his back on the floor with his legs straight (or crossed).



**Figure 21.** Starting position for Sang exercise with the Sangs lifted at arm length



**Figure 22.** Starting position for Sang exercise with the Sangs lifted at horizontal position

In this position the athlete grips the handle of the Sangs, which are held already by two helpers for each one. When the athlete is ready he lifts the Sangs off the floor, at arm length (see figure 21) or flexed arms (see Figure 22) to take the starting position. From this position the athlete begins to rotate on his back from right to left and back from left to right alternately. Every time the athlete turns on one side he stretches his opposite arm straight out in order to lift the Sang as high as possible in the air (see figure 23). 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

through the years of Zoorkhaneh practice. Another kind of exercise with Sangs is when the athlete, from the starting position, as shown in Figure 22, stretches out the arms simultaneously to lift the Sangs at arm length and then comes back to the starting position (flexed arms).

At the end of the exercise bout that the athlete feels tired he lowers the Sangs and put them in contact with the floor again. In other words, the duration of the exercise is determined by the stamina of the individual performer. Some authors have contended that for the advanced Bastanikars 50 double rotations



**Figure 23.** End of one repetition in Sang exercise

with Sangs is the minimum and 117 double rotations are the maximum; however, there has been Pahlevans who have done this exercise up to one thousand times (Abbassi, 1997).

11-Koshti (wrestling): - The very last physical practice of the session is wrestling. In fact, the wrestling activity and championship have always been very popular among the Zoorkhaneh Pahlevans, to the point where most of the internationally well-known Iranian wrestlers have been trained in these institutions. Identical to the Sang and the Kabbadeh exercises, Koshti is an individual event that is performed in the Gowed only by a few Bastanikars who are scheduled for the session. The extra practice periods for every body are obviously organized outside the Gowed during some other hours. There is no weight category for the Zoorkhaneh wrestling, therefore, the first champion is the one who beats all the others regardless of their weight category. The kind of Koshti that is specific to 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. The wrestling tournaments were and still are arranged at all levels from a single Zoorkhaneh up to the national championship and the champion of every level enjoyed their own prerogatives and privileges.

12-Shelang-Takhteh: - In this compound noun, "Shelang" means long gait (steps in running), and "takhteh" signifies plank. In the older times Shelang-Takhteh was another very exhausting practice for the Bastanikars. In this exercise, the athlete had to jump continuously on one foot for extending the other one as far as possible straight ahead on an inclined plank of about 30cm. wide which was leaned from one side on the edge of the Gowed, and from the other on the floor of it. The duration of the exercise indicated the legs' muscular endurance of the performer. In the later years, this form of exercise is changed into running around the Gowed, slowly at the beginning, but gradually gaining speed at the end.

13-Warming down: - The movements included in the warming down of the Varzesh-e-Bastani are very close to those of the warming up section of it. The warming down activities consist basically of different kinds of running hopping leaping short jumping and finally, walking. The difference though is that these exercises gradually decrease in intensity and velocity until they finally reach a state of calmness and immobility.

14-Moshtemal (massage): - The final activity of the Zoorkhaneh practice session is Moshtemal which is done normally right after the wrestling in the Gowed. The

technic of Zoorkhaneh massage is very simple and every Bastanikar after a few times of practical training can do it properly. It is, however, important to know that this kind of massage is even only to the upper part of the body because, in fact, they have been much more active during the whole session of physical exercises than legs. To receive the



**Figure 24.** Position of the Bastanikars at the concluding ceremony.

massage the athlete sits on his knees and bends forward from the waist with his hands on the floor in front of his knees. The masseur (a peer or a specialized person) stands behind him and massages primarily the back, shoulders, neck, and the arms of the Bastanikar. 15-Concluding ceremony: - After the athletes receive the massage, they go back to their original places in the Gowed and while they cover their torso by a uniform piece of clothing which is called "Lowng" they wait quietly for the Miandar to start the traditional concluding benediction and prayers (see Figure 24). At the end, the Bastanikars thank the Morshed for his studious help and direction, and after a communal lowed word of benediction, called "Salevot" they leave the Gowed in the same order that they entered at the beginning of the session. Finally, the athletes will take a shower in the Zoorkhaneh, or in a nearby public bath that used to be very beautifully constructed and decorated in the earlier times.

### **Contemporary aspects and trends**

Despite its great contributions to the autonomy and the entity of the country, Physical prowess, and health of the people, as well as the preservation of the Iranian language and culture, the Zoorkhaneh's popularity and importance has been constantly declining during the last five decades. This downward trend is called by a number of different reasons. Some of which are:

- 1-An acute tendency in Iran toward the industrialization and modernization.
- 2-Financial difficulty as the non-profit institutions.
- 3-The traditional exclusion of women and youngsters from the Zoorkhaneh's physical activities.
- 4-Decrease of the Zoorkhaneh's importance in the defense and the autonomy of the country by training the strong and faithful soldiers, as more efficient warlike devices and machineries were created and improved.
- 5-Attractiveness of the modern sports in terms of new facilities and the possibilities they provided for various financial benefits and international contacts.
- 6-Changes of the cultural and social values of the younger generations.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

An important part of the beauty and, at the same time, the complexity of the Zoorkhaneh and Varzesh-e-Bastani is inherent in its vast and well-established technical jargon. In fact, the Bastanikars have their own vocabulary. Everything in Zoorkhaneh's environment has its special name and meaning, including the physical exercises, facilities and equipments, rituals, and the code of ethics and behavior, as well as, the social and organizational customs and rites.

Partly, due to the conviction and also, because of the significance of the knowledge on these jargons in the understanding of the materials included in this article, an effort was made to provide the reader with an extensive body of information on the terms and definitions of this institution.

What a Zoorkhaneh achieved from the sociopolitical standpoint and how it greatly influenced the internal life of the Iranian people were some other points that were briefly mentioned in this article. To give a concrete image of what the Zoorkhaneh actually is and what the Varzesh-e-Bastani looks like, sections of this article were allotted to explain the facilities and the equipment of the Zoorkhaneh in some details. The bibliographical list given at the end of the present article will hopefully assist the reader in further enquiry and research.

Many social, economical and political factors, during the past centuries, have influenced the Zoorkhaneh and the Varzesh-e-Bastani to go under slight physical and

methodological modifications that have been necessary for its survival. This evolutionary cycle is not yet completed and the rapid changes and trends within the dynamic societies and the life style of the human beings will necessarily stipulate new developmental transition of Zoorkhaneh in the future.

There is no doubt that the present article is not an exhaustive document that can provide all the answers about the Zoorkhaneh and the Varzesh-e-Bastani. If such a complete document seems desirable at all, then many other scholars should help to clarify and illuminate the different aspects of this ancient method of physical education that are still obscure and ambiguous. Due to the lack of the scientific research in this area, any kind of study on the Zoorkhaneh and the Varzesh-e-Bastani 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.

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