

# Ancient wrestling offers a future for some in modern India

Continued from page one

But like many traditions in a country that's rapidly modernizing, kushti wrestling faces the threat of being left behind. It remains popular in states like Haryana, where these pehelwans are training. For many poor families, wrestling provides a glimmer of hope. Those who succeed can earn money, respect in their communities, and even particular jobs. They're often employed by the police force or India's railways.

Fifteen-year-old Ankur Bharadwaj says it's his dream to win an Olympic medal, like his idol Sushil Kumar, who has won two Olympic medals for India in freestyle wrestling. Bharadwaj says he gets up at 4:00am and jogs to the wrestling pit before going to school.

"Hard work makes a man perfect," he says. "That's why we are practicing so regularly. There are no breaks if you want to be a wrestler."

Inside the pit, Bharadwaj and the other wrestlers rub their hands with the earth and toss it over their bodies. Under the watchful eye of their coach, they lock arms with their opponents, lunging for their legs as they try to flip them onto their backs and into submission.

The boys aspire to be accepted into an *akhada*, a kind of wrestling hostel where they're given a bed and can devote themselves to the sport fulltime if they choose. Akhadas come with shrines to the Hindu god Hanuman, who is seen as a kind of patron saint to the sport.

At dawn at a small *akhada* in the suburbs of Delhi, a man circles the arena dragging a thick piece of wood to smooth the earth. Another crushes almonds with a large mortar and pestle. A poster on the gate advertises a local wrestling bout with a first-place prize of about \$3,000. The gate swings open and a cow noses its way inside, breaking into a trot when the wrestlers try to shoo it away.

Coach Hemand Kumar, 35, says wrestling has always been his passion. Even before he started at age 10, he would get up before dawn and



**ANCIENT SPORT.** Indian traditional wrestlers practice in a mud pit in Agra, India, in this file photo. India has hundreds of local academies for mud wrestling, which is an age-old and a very popular sport of Indian villages. (AP Photo/Pawan Sharma, File)

watch his father wrestle. The boys who take it up are saved from "the nonsense" of the streets, he says. But he worries about the sport's future in a country with a rapidly rising middle class.

"The rich kids, they don't want to do it," he says. "Those people who don't have the money, they're interested. But they don't have the resources."

Jai Prakash, a former Olympic wrestler who is president of the Delhi Amateur Wrestling Association, says it's getting more difficult to find the land needed to set up new *akhadas*. And unlike the nation's most popular sport of cricket, he says, it's tough to find sponsors for *kushti*.

"Wrestling bouts in villages used to be like the festival season, with a joyous mood and crowds celebrating victories of their favorite wrestlers," he says.

Still, he's upbeat about the future of the sport, which is also known as *pehlwani*. He says wrestling authorities want to make *kushti* a part of some international wrestling competitions, something he hopes might begin next year.

At the renowned Guru Hanuman Akhara in Delhi, there are about 25 resident *pehelwans*, most of them hulking men in their 20s and early 30s. Some train with giant clubs that

they swing behind their backs. Others grab a rope that's threaded through a pulley and haul into the air a bucket that's filled with concrete.

Sitting in a chair watching the men practice is Naveen Mor, who has won a number of international wrestling fixtures, including a gold medal at the 2011 World Police and Fire Games in New York. He says his wrestling prowess helped him land a job with the Haryana state police, where he works as an inspector.

Like many Indian wrestlers, Mor started in the pit and later became proficient wrestling on a mat, which provides the standard arena for most international bouts.

He says his first love remains the pit, where bouts can sometimes last an hour until somebody finally gives up. As he cuts back on competitions and does more coaching, Mor says he still follows the strict dietary rules of *kushti*, although he is more relaxed about other rules and has recently gotten married.

He says he doesn't regret dedicating his youth to the sport.

"No working. No shopping," he says with a grin. "Only wrestling, wrestling, wrestling. My life is wrestling. I love wrestling."

Associated Press writer Ashok Sharma in New Delhi contributed to this report.

## 50 Chinese couples marry in Sri Lanka in mass ceremony

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Clad in traditional Chinese, western, and Sri Lankan costumes, 50 Chinese couples were married at a mass ceremony in Sri Lanka's capital to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries and to promote the island nation as a tourist destination.

The ceremony in Colombo was attended by Sri Lankan politicians and diplomats from both nations. A number of Chinese nationals attended as well.

Soon after the couples arrived in decorated cars, the ceremony began with traditional Sri Lankan drummers and dancers blowing conch shells as a symbol of auspiciousness and performing a welcome dance.

The couples exchanged rings and had their fingers tied together and water poured over them in Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition as a sign of unity and purity, as schoolgirls chanted a blessing hymn.

Sri Lankan government ministers



**BIG WEDDING.** Chinese couples attend a mass wedding ceremony in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Clad in traditional Chinese, western, and Sri Lankan costumes, 50 Chinese couples were married at a mass ceremony in Sri Lanka's capital to mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries and to promote the island nation as a tourist destination. (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

handed the couples certificates of marriage and posed for photographs with them.

China has invested heavily in

infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka and a large number of Chinese tourists visit the South Asian island nation every year.

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Applications will be available for download online or pick up in our office from 9:00am on January 8, 2018 through 4:30pm on March 31, 2018. To obtain an application, visit our website at [www.vhousa.org](http://www.vhousa.org) or come to our office located at 2500 Main St., Vancouver, WA 98660. Units are offered to qualified applicants based on the date and time of application. For more information, visit our website at [www.vhousa.org](http://www.vhousa.org).

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