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The *Naadam* [naw-dum] festival is one of Mongolia’s largest national holidays. This national sports festival is marked by three traditional Mongolian sports: archery, horse racing, and wrestling. These three sports celebrate years of nomadic tradition and portray the Mongolian dependency upon animal husbandry and livestock.

**Starting Points**

1. Discuss national athletic competitions in America and around the world. Examples may include football in North America or soccer throughout the world. Ask the students how people support their favorite athletes.

2. Briefly explain the history of the Naadam Festival to the class. Lead the class in a discussion about the three sports (archery, horse racing and wrestling). Talk about how the Naadam Festival unites Mongolians.

3. Display the picture of wrestlers (see Traditions Visual 1) and focus the students’ attention on the wrestlers’ clothing. Discuss with the students how and why that design of clothing is appropriate for wrestling. How does Mongolian wrestling compare to wrestling in other countries?

**Information**

**Naadam Festival**

Next to the much celebrated Mongolian New Year in January and February, the Naadam Festival is perhaps Mongolia’s second most popular national holiday. The festival is held annually in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar [o-lawn-bot-her] from 11 to 13 July. These dates coincide with the celebration of Mongolian independence from Chinese control, which was won on 11 July 1921. During the three days of celebration, thousands of people travel throughout the city and participate in three major competitions, namely, archery, horse racing, and wrestling.

**Archery**

Long before the invention of firearms and artillery, Mongolians developed archery skills for offensive attacks and defensive protection. Ancient Mongolian Khurds took many lives with their razor-sharp arrows. Not only did they use their expert archery skills during times of war, but also during times of peace as a means to hunt for food. Often, livestock did not supply enough food for the armies and their families, so Mongolians hunted large antelope, wild sheep, and other larger game. They also protected their herds from wolves. Today, Mongolians celebrate archery skills in competitions among men and women of all ages.

In archery, the competitor stands anywhere from seventy to one hundred meters away from the target, depending on the age of the participants. Youth competitors
range from thirteen to seventeen years of age, and adults are eighteen or older. Men and women compete separately, and about thirty to forty people compete in each age group. The bai [b-eye], or target, is a small pile of little wooden blocks, rather than the traditional circular target used in western competition. The archer fires an arrow, and if it hits the desired target, the nearby judges chant and dance to signify success.

**Horse Racing**

For Mongolians, the most important and most respected animal is the horse. Horses provide transportation and aid in farm work. They were once used by the Mongolian armies to travel long distances. Mongolian horses are noticeably shorter than American breeds, having short, thick legs; long, flowing tails; and large, regal heads (see Traditions Visual 2). Because they are smaller, Mongolian horses have excellent stamina and can travel long distances at high speeds.

During the Naadam Festival, thousands of herdsmen bring their most prized horses to race in the city. While western horse races cover distances of 1–3 kilometers (about 1–2 miles), Mongolian horse races cover lengths from 14–45 kilometers (about 9–38 miles). The jockeys for these long races are children from five to ten years old (see Traditions Visual 3). The young jockeys use a rug or a small wooden saddle to prevent from falling off. This saddle is also used to minimize the weight on the animal’s back so the horse can run faster. As the event is a family affair, the children who race are usually the sons or daughters of the herdsmen, and the mothers make brightly colored hats for the jockeys to wear.

The horses are divided into different classes according to the age of the horse. Only horses in the same category race against each other. Stallions, fillies, colts, and older horses each run separate races, with up to three thousand horses competing at one time. The winning jockey is awarded a cash prize, and the winning horse is decorated with silks to signify victory. Horse owners also earn fame of from training a winning horse, which brings honor to their family as well as all who live in their province. Whether they win or lose, horses that finish the race are mobbed by spectators wanting to touch them. Mongolians like to touch the horses’ sweat because they believe it has healing powers—yet another indication of the Mongolians’ deep respect for horses.

**Wrestling**

Life in the xuduu [who-dew], or countryside, demands great physical strength of both men and women. Men must have strength to lift and herd animals. Mongolia’s national sport of wrestling, Mongol Bux [mongol buuk], combines both man’s strength and his playful nature.

Similar to Japanese sumo wrestlers, Mongolians also wrestle standing up. The match is over once a competitor’s knee, elbow, or back touches the ground. Because Mongolians do not distinguish wrestlers by their weight, competitors of all sizes and ages compete against one another. Mongolian athletes must have tremendous upper body strength and quick reflexes in order to avoid attacks and foot sweeps.

Mongolians hold year-round competitions to help wrestlers prepare for the Naadam match, but to be eligible to compete in the tournament, wrestlers must first compete well in their respective provincial tournaments. On the first day of Naadam 1,024
wrestlers of all ages fill the outdoor stadium in Ulaanbaatar. This huge, single elimination tournament is divided into ten davaa [da-vaa], or rounds. By the end of the first day, the third davaa is complete, and only 128 wrestlers remain to compete in the final rounds on 12 July.

The ranking system is deeply rooted in nomadic animal tradition. The ranks are (from lowest to highest) Nanchin [nan-chin] (falcon), Zaan [zaa-n] (elephant), Arslan [airs-lawn] (lion), and Avarga [aah-v-ruck] (champion). The winner of the event in the tenth davaa receives the rank of champion. The four wrestlers who make it to the ninth davaa are awarded the rank of lion, those who make it to the eighth davaa are awarded elephant, and the rank of falcon goes to those in the seventh davaa. A two-time champion is referred to as Dayan Avarga [die-ann aah-v-ruck] (supreme champion), and a three-or-more-time champion is a Darkhan Avarga [dar-hawn aah-v-ruck] (great conqueror). Mongolia’s most acclaimed wrestler, Bat-erdene, won the rank of champion fourteen years in a row.

A Mongolian wrestling uniform is quite different from Western apparel (see Traditions Visual 4). The zodog [za-duck] is a piece of clothing worn on the top part of the body. It has an open front with long sleeves. The zodog was previously worn closed in the front but is now worn open to discourage women from wrestling. Legend claims that a woman once entered the competition in disguise and defeated all the men. Since then, wrestlers have been required to wear the shirt with the front open. The shyydag [show-duck], or bottoms, look much like men’s underwear. Both parts of the outfit are made from several layers of strong silk.

Activities

1. Ask the students to find and read an online article about the Naadam Festival in Mongolia or other activities Mongolians enjoy participating in (see Additional Resources). Which sport had the most news coverage? Which sport seemed to be the most challenging?

2. Have the students design a travel brochure for the Mongolian Naadam Festival. The brochure should include a list of events, details of a proposed trip, and an outline of the three national sports.

3. Have the students research other famous sporting competitions and compare and contrast them with the Naadam Festival.

Discussion Questions

1. What qualities are necessary to be a good athlete?

2. What are the differences between American and Mongolian horse races?

3. Why do you think the Mongolian archery target is different from the circular target we are familiar with? Would it be easier or harder to hit?

4. Do women of all cultures participate in sports? How has this evolved over time?
Traditions Visual 1: Mongolian Wrestlers
Traditions Visual 4: Mongolian Wrestling Uniform