

Sport and Decapitated Goats: Let the Nomadic Games Begin

The World Nomad Games come to Kyrgyzstan.

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Viktor Drachev / TASS

On Sept. 4, after years of facing off on the international stage, Russia and the United States stared each other down in a new arena: a 10,000-seat hippodrome near Kyrgyzstan's Issyk-kul lake. There, the Americans and the Russians struggled not over nuclear arms policy or the future norms of international relations, but over a dead goat.

Yes, you read correctly: a dead goat.

The struggle was **kok-boru**, an aggressively physical, Central Asian variety of polo in which two teams of horsemen try to capture the decapitated carcass of a goat and pass it into each other's goal. The match was hardly a true showdown between Russia and the United States: Most of the Russian team's athletes were ethnic Kyrgyz residing in Russia, while the Americans were largely unschooled in the game they were playing. Moscow's victory was stark and decisive. But the contest embodied the spirit of internationalism and rowdy fun inherent in the second World Nomad Games (WNG), held from Sept. 3-8 in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan.

While the concept of a nomadic Olympics might provoke a chuckle among Western sports fans, the event is no joke to Kyrgyzstan or the more than 55 participant nations. The Kyrgyz government spent over 1.6 billion som (\$23.2 million) on the games, and over a thousand athletes came to compete in ancient nomadic sports.

"In the modern world, people are forgetting their history, and there is a threat of extinction for traditional cultures," Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev said during the event's flashy opening ceremony.

The WNG are intended to serve as an antidote to that tendency.

Kok-boru — and not just the U.S.-Russia match — was the main event at the WNG. But other important events included the women's mas-wrestling, a traditional ethnosport from Yakutia in which players attempt capture of a stick from each other's hands; several varieties of wrestling (both standing and on horseback); horse racing; eagle and dog hunting; and a board game known internationally as mancala.

The celebrity guest of honor was none other than action film star Steven Seagal, who appeared suited in armor atop a horse during the games' opening ceremony. The event marked yet another bizarre appearance for Seagal, who popped up at Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko's country residence last month eating fresh carrots on national television. Two years ago, after Moscow annexed Crimea, the action star also controversially visited Sevastopol to perform a music concert for pro-Russian separatists.

Despite a long list of attendees hailing from countries as diverse as Germany and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uzbekistan was noticeably absent.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have had particularly strained relations since a border conflict in March 2016, and border tensions have intensified over the past week. The most decisive factor behind Uzbekistan's absence, however, was likely the ill-health and subsequent death of President Islam Karimov, who was declared dead on Sept. 3.

Politics have also found their way into the WNG on the Kyrgyz side. Some in Kyrgyzstan criticized the idea of a poor country hosting and paying for such an extravagant international sporting event, as the nation struggles to provide for the basic needs of its citizens. At least one member of parliament, Aida Salyanova, called for the games to be cancelled after 14 Kyrgyz labor migrants died in a fire at a Moscow print house.

But the World Nomad Games appear to have been an enormous success. Many of the participants and attendees say they were impressed by the quality of the events, and the opening ceremonies have garnered significant coverage in the press and on social media. For Kyrgyzstan, the games represent one of the country's first opportunities to present itself in a positive light to a large international audience.

"Everyone, including me, is in shock that Kyrgyzstan can put on such cool events," said Artyom Kolosov, a Kyrgyz photographer and blogger who is attending the games. "I feel like I'm somewhere abroad."

Escaping some of the hostility now present at the Olympics, which a doping scandal has tarnished in the post-Soviet region, the nomad games have placed a strong emphasis on sportsmanship and sharing culture. For instance, despite the Russian team's crushing victory over the U.S. team in kok-boru, Colleen Wood, an American Peace Corps volunteer who competed for the U.S. in mancala and watched the kok-boru match, sensed strong ethos of sportsmanship.

"It was the U.S.'s first time actually playing using the goat carcass, so the Russian team showed them how to pick it up and put it in the goal," she said. "It wasn't just about winning the game, but about sharing the beauty of kok-boru and of nomadic culture."

The challenge of teaching kok-boru to Americans, however, may have been lost on the WNG announcers, Wood says, judging by their frequent comment: "These cowboys came from across the ocean and they're the best kok-boru players in America!"

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