

# SPORTS DIPLOMACY IN A CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT: THE CASE FOR CONTINUED EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

By Ryan Robertson

## Abstract

Over thirty years of war and centuries of tribal and ethnic marginalization and centralization have left Afghanistan a nation both war-torn and in search of an identity. During the ten years of Operation Enduring Freedom, Coalition Forces and the Afghan government have tried to find ways to keep the nation's immense youth population away from insurgent influence. To date, the most effective method appears to be the implementation of sports diplomacy initiatives targeted at both the youth and female populations. With these government-run programs, Afghan youths and women are being offered an alternative to violence and respite from continued conflict. With further support and oversight, these sports programs could not only aid in quelling the resilient insurgency, but also in reshaping a nation despite decades of hardship and turmoil.

## Key Words

Afghanistan, ANOC, AYSE, buzkashi, cricket, FIFA, football, Ghazi Stadium, GIRoA, HiA, HiG, international relations, ISAF, Olympics, Pakistan, peace, Rohullah Nikpai, rugby, taekwondo, sports diplomacy, Taliban, U.S. Embassy, women's sports, youth sports, peace building, conflict resolution

## Introduction

Afghanistan has been in a constant state of war, oppression, or civil strife for over thirty years. With seven main ethnic groups, five super-tribes (with roughly 350 sub-tribes), and over thirty spoken languages,<sup>1</sup> its people have been wracked by centuries of tribal enmity and ethnic discord. Now, they find themselves caught in the middle of a decade-long engagement, pitting the alliance of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), against an incessant and brutal insurgency composed mainly of the ousted Afghan government, the Taliban. In an effort to bring the greater Afghan population back from the depths of social depression, disunity, fear, and insurgent intimidation, Coalition Forces (CF), spearheaded by both the United States and the United Kingdom, have sought to offer Afghans an alternative to violence: athletics. Based on the current and past conflict environments within the region, the overwhelmingly large youth population, and a burgeoning desire to progress in all facets as a legitimate and autonomous nation in need of an international boost, Afghanistan may serve as an ideal test bed for the implementation of long-term sports diplomacy initiatives for conflict resolution.

By using athletics to further the understanding of how to defray aggression among peoples and dispel perceptions of disrespect, abhorrence, or rivalry in and amongst tribes, ethnic groups, local populations—or even nations—peace can be achieved in regions that—or among peoples who—have traditionally endured turmoil and conflict. Thus, athletics can aid in the pursuit of peace. The utilization of athletic competition and recreation as a diplomatic tool to achieve peace, though, is not a new concept. By learning and displaying sportsmanship, discipline, and respect for others, individuals and groups from different backgrounds have come together in non-violent ways. This helps to dispel and redirect aggression and overt nationalism that would otherwise manifest in brutality, regional turbulence, and disunity. In essence, sports diplomacy hopes to use, “the political cultures of sport as proxy warriors in a larger ideological conflict,”<sup>2</sup> something that could yield immense dividends with the current situation in Afghanistan.

“Sport and national identity, no matter how complex the specific relationships, are inextricably linked.”<sup>3</sup> Afghans, especially those in the central and northern regions, had for centuries used what is now the Afghan national sport, *buzkashi*, as a way to dispel their competitive spirit in an enjoyable and non-lethal manner, settle political differences, or gain status.<sup>4</sup> As Azoy notes, “Life in Afghanistan is less compartmentalized, in part because of a political culture in which power depends ultimately on reputation, and the investiture of authority is chronically insecure.”<sup>5</sup>

The sport, itself quite brutal, is essentially a form of polo wherein a headless goat's carcass is used instead of mallets and a ball, and two teams composed of locally sponsored players participate more so for themselves than for the team. The event organizers, coupled with the respective sponsors, seek to increase their social status by showing their ability to put on such a spectacle, or their ability to choose successful horsemen for these events. “Buzkashi is a part . . . of the total political process in which authority depends ultimately on impressions derived from a wide spectrum of events.”<sup>6</sup> Such a situation is exclusive neither to buzkashi as a sport, nor Afghanistan as a nation but does help to contextualize sport in the country.

This serves to illustrate the political limitations of endeavors in Afghanistan, where a localized ‘what have you done for me lately’ sentiment is pervasive in the culture. One's reputation within a community is critically important, as the majority of the population still relies upon village, tribal, or religious elders and leaders for guidance and support. Thus, any sports diplomacy endeavor must be undertaken with the mindset that unless there is the ability to reach the entirety of the population, and unless those involved can increase their social capital by some degree, they could prove much less successful than anticipated. In Afghanistan, social status and reputation carry a pivotal amount of weight, and “the ties, norms, and trust that social capital builds are ‘transferable from one social setting to another.’ In short, social capital is a civic resource that facilitates collective action. Through the social capital it creates, sports stimulates and sustains civic engagement and civic morale.”<sup>7</sup> How, then, can these endeavors be implemented without alienating populations or playing into political favoritism?

The chief strategy the ISAF and GIRoA use in Afghanistan to implement sports diplomacy programs has been to host clinics for coaches, referees, and officials, as well as inviting national and regional team players to train under world-renowned athletes and coaches. The goal is to encourage those attending to go back to their communities and teach others. By reaching the youth population, ISAF and GIRoA hope to end some of the violence within Afghanistan, allowing aggression to manifest peacefully in an athletic setting. By empowering regional, provincial, and local communities in Afghanistan and disseminating what they learned at these clinics and training sessions, the coaches, organizers, and officials can improve the state and quality of community-based youth programs. These programs provide a source of recreation that is desperately needed in a conflict- and poverty-stricken environment.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> John Milton Hoberman, “Sport and Political Ideology,” *Sports & Recreation* 62 (1984): 1-315.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 177.

<sup>4</sup> G. Whitney Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2003, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, 4

<sup>6</sup> Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, 18

<sup>7</sup> *Sport, Power, and Society: Institutions and Practices*, ed. Robert E. Washington and David Karen (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2010), 277-278.

<sup>8</sup> AAU Kristina, “AAU & NBA Cares Ambassador Mentor Afghan Coaches During Government Sports Diplomacy Visit,” *Amateur Athletic Union News*, February 13, 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Greg Bruno, *Interview with Thomas H. Johnson*, Council on Foreign Relations, December 11, 2008.

U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Harold Pittman, former Deputy Chief of Staff for Communication for ISAF, and Afghan Lieutenant General Zahir Aghbar, head of the Afghan National Olympic Committee (ANOC), have been instrumental in devising just such programs, reaching the immense Afghan youth population through coaches, officials, organizers, and mentors. This allows those returning to their communities from mentoring and training sessions in Kabul to gain a modicum of recognition and still ensure that the lessons and programs are circulated within each respective community. As Pittman stated,

“I’ve seen the difference sports can make, particularly with kids in underprivileged neighborhoods, and it can unite ethnic groups. ... In Afghanistan, 68 percent of the population is under age 25. It has the largest number of elementary-school-aged children of any country in the world. These youth don’t have a voice or many prospects for school or for jobs. By expanding sports, it gives them that much more to do to create an alternate future and avoid the things they could fall into, which includes drugs, crime, or the Taliban.”<sup>9</sup>

Youth sports are not the only method of community outreach Pittman and Aghbar use. In fact, broadening women’s sports in Afghanistan, which were banned under the Taliban regime, plays almost as important a role in these sports diplomacy endeavors. The concept of expanding and legitimizing women’s sports in Afghanistan is extraordinary. The Taliban’s oppression of women and other human rights abuses have been well-documented and eventually lead to the nation’s expulsion from Olympic competition in 2000.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the formulation of regular, nationwide female athletic competitions is a very poignant statement—sports can, and have, been used by subordinate groups throughout the world to shed light upon injustice.<sup>11</sup>

For example, the 2012 Olympic Games stood as a testament to the spread of women’s athletics in previously unrepresented nations. Brunei, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia all sent female competitors for the first time. Western media picked up many of these stories, including that of 16-year-old judoka Wojdan Shaherkani of Saudi Arabia, who faced immense difficulty within her own nation due to ultra-conservative religious officials attempting to ban her from participating, even going so far as to label her the “Prostitute of the Olympics” and promoting abuse toward her and her family.<sup>12</sup>

The apex of women’s athletics in Afghanistan may have come during the 2012 London Olympic Games, when Tahimina Kohistani represented Afghanistan in the women’s 100-meter sprint. Despite a poor finish, she viewed her participation as a tremendous victory, and an opportunity to shed light upon troubling situations in her home nation.

“In my society, there is no sport for females. My people do not accept sport for women. They think sport is not good for them. ... All along there have been people who wanted to disturb me, to stop me. ... I represent a country where every day there are suicide bomb blasts. It is important that a girl from such a country can be here.”<sup>13</sup>

She endured taunts by many men while training at Ghazi Stadium in Kabul, where spectators would shout, “Just be in your house,” and, “Be behind your man!” She was even refused taxi service due to her being an athlete.<sup>14</sup> Despite the abuse, she was able to represent her nation on the world’s biggest stage and serve as a beacon of hope for millions of Afghan women.

Another hero of Afghan women’s empowerment is Awista Ayub, who founded the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange (AYSE) and was responsible for the spread of women’s soccer throughout Afghanistan. She founded the AYSE to bolster female and youth participation in sports throughout Afghanistan, believing that, “Women in the States

<sup>9</sup> “‘Slow But Steady Progress’ in Afghanistan, Alumnus Reports,” *Appalachian Today*, February 24, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> M. Martens, C.J. Vogler, L.C. Wagner, and R. Wicks, *Sports and Diplomacy in the Global Arena* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State Press, 2005), p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Sport, Power, and Society: Institutions and Practices*, ed. Robert E. Washington and David Karen (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2010), 210.

<sup>12</sup> “The Muslim Women Who Overcame the Odds and the Prejudice to Make History Today on the Olympic Stage,” *Daily Mail Online*, August 3, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> “Running in Olympics is Like Winning Gold for Afghan Girl,” *Hindu*, August 4, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> “The Muslim Women Who Overcame the Odds and the Prejudice to Make History Today on the Olympic Stage,” *Daily Mail Online*, August 3, 2012.

benefit from playing sports by taking the lessons they learn on the playing field off the playing field. ... Young girls who participate in sports learn to be more confident, self-assured, and aware of their identity.”<sup>15</sup>

She also emphasizes that for any sports initiative to be successful in Afghanistan, both culture and religion must be respected.<sup>16</sup> This is an aspect that is, at times, forgotten in U.S. diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan. In 2007, a U.S. military attempt to reach children in southeast Afghanistan angered local mullahs and villagers as the soccer balls dropped in Khost province were emblazoned with flags from world nations, including Saudi Arabia, whose flag prominently displays the shahada, a Koranic verse declaring one’s faith to Islam. Some viewed the placing of one’s foot upon the word of Allah as disrespectful to Afghan culture and Islam as a religion.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, as female and youth movements gain respect and support in Afghanistan, the burgeoning two-pronged approach could yield revolutionary results for sports diplomacy as both a means to achieve a sustained peace and help majority-youth populations develop. If successful, it could simultaneously change the youth and female cultures of the nation.

General Aghbar firmly believes that he can dissuade young people from participating in violence by giving them something to do. And that something is sport. Contrary to popular thought in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Aghbar also espouses the concept that women deserve an equal voice.<sup>18</sup>

This does not necessarily indicate that the entirety of the youth population as violent, merely that those who would have a propensity toward conducting insurgent activities could be dissuaded through athletics. The melding of targets and respect for both sides of the sports coin is something that has never been accomplished in Afghanistan.

Before citizens and youths at local levels could be successfully and sustainably reached, however, the Afghan people needed something in which to take pride. First on the list for both ISAF and GIRoA was the renovation of Ghazi Stadium in Kabul. Built in 1923, this stadium was once the crown jewel of Afghan athletic competition, but upon the nation’s ceding of control to the Taliban during the 1990s, this source of pride turned into a soapbox for terror and oppression. Public executions were the norm, and as the overwhelming majority of sports were banned in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, including all women’s sports, cricket, kite flying, and buzkashi.<sup>19</sup> During that time, the stadium rarely hosted athletic events and succumbed to disrepair and neglect.<sup>20</sup>

From 2010 through 2011, the U.S. Embassy spearheaded the renovation, putting more than \$1 million into the effort. In a symbolic gesture, six feet of dirt was removed from the stadium’s floor and, with it, countless bloodstains representative of the oppressive Taliban regime.<sup>21</sup> The playing surface was laid with artificial turf, allowing for multiple sports, such as soccer and cricket, to be played. In addition, Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) certification of the stadium is forthcoming, which will allow for sanctioned international competitions to take place.<sup>22</sup> Afghanistan has been a member of FIFA since 1948, and the stadium’s certification will be a crucial step toward the long-term success of both amateur and professional athletic endeavors in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup>

In regard to the Ghazi Stadium renovation and current sports programs in Afghanistan, Air Force Major Robert Lyons, a U.S. Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A) strategic plans officer, recently stated,

...the stadium provides an immediate result that can be seen and deliver right away through sports.... With a new field like this, Afghanistan as a nation-state can invite members of the international community to play games in Kabul. This generates excitement in Afghanistan as they see their national teams compete. All peoples of the world know the power of sports and its relationship to the spirit of mankind.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Peg Lopata, “A Soccer Field of Dreams,” *Dreams* 28, no. 3 (Nov/Dec 2011): 34-35.

<sup>16</sup> Lopata, “A Soccer Field of Dreams,” *Dreams*, 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> Alastair Leithead, “‘Blasphemous’ U.S. Soccer Balls Anger Afghans,” ABC News, August 26, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Mike Friello, “Master Mike Friello: Memoir from Afghanistan,” *Amateur Athletic Union News*, February 29, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> “Taliban’s Bloodsoaked Stadium Re-opens as ‘Peaceful Place,’” MSNBC News, December 15, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> SFC Mark Porter, “Ghazi Stadium Reflects Changes in Afghanistan,” United States Army, December 19, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Nicole Nucelli, “Afghanistan’s Ghazi Stadium Enjoys Renaissance,” U.S. Department of State, December 28, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006), 515.

<sup>23</sup> SFC Mark Porter, “Ghazi Stadium Reflects Changes in Afghanistan,” United States Army, December 19, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> MAJ Jeffrey Miller, Telephone Interview, June 15, 2012



With Ghazi Stadium again serving as a beacon for Afghan athletic competition, as well as acting as the main training facility for the national and Olympic teams, Afghanistan finds itself on the cusp of international athletic relevance. Do Afghans, or the youths ISAF and GIROA are so hoping to affect, even care?

This was a topic touched upon in a recent telephone interview with Major Jeffrey Miller, a sports and youth outreach officer with ISAF. He noted that the Afghan people have few Afghan sports heroes to whom to look up, including those on Afghan national teams. This needs to be remedied. In order to take sport and athletic competition seriously, Afghans need a steady stream of individuals to whom they can relate and emulate. In an effort to encourage national unity, ISAF and GIROA hope to promote national sports heroes as they rise through the ranks in their respective sports.<sup>25</sup> To bring about national sports heroes, however, the culture of sport needs to be instilled into the youth, who could not only support those heroes, but strive to become sports heroes themselves.

One endeavor that hopes to draw greater attention to national athletics is an upcoming Afghan reality show. “Maidan e Sabz,” or “Green Field,” will offer thousands of athletes the opportunity earn a place on one of eight professional soccer teams. Abdul Sabor Walizada, one of the project’s trainers and a former member of the Afghan national team, said,

After years of civil conflict and war, people will focus on football and the businessmen from each zone will try to have the best players. ... It will create national unity. ... They will not care about his ethnicity. They will not care about his tribe. They will care that he is one of the best players.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, the aim in trying to reach the youth population is to not only offer a respite from war and conflict, but to foster a culture of sport and non-violent competition that is crucial to the well-being of a peaceful people. A generational, ideological shift needs to take place for these efforts to achieve long-term success. As the population of Afghanistan is overwhelmingly youth-centric and as insurgents look to younger individuals to balance out attrition, changing the mindset of those youths is critical to bringing about and maintaining peace in this never-ending conflict environment. As related by Sergeant First Class Mark Porter,

We want the world to know that young athletes here are ambassadors for peace. ... Their country is burning. There is smoke rising from it. But despite murders and explosions caused by the criminals of the last century, our young athletes can have a strong presence in international sports and bring medals to their country through healthy competition.<sup>27</sup>

The grandest possible stage for reaching that youth population is the Olympic Games, itself a globally recognized symbol of international sportsmanship, fraternity, cooperation, and peace. In 2008, Rohullah Nikpai won the bronze medal in the tae kwon do 58-kg division at the Beijing Olympics, sparking a frenzied response. Afghans eager for an international display they could finally be proud of championed their nation’s first ever Olympic medal. Shortly after winning the bronze, Nikpai said, “I hope this will send a message of peace to my country after 30 years of war.”<sup>28</sup> Nikpai, twenty-one when he won his medal, had learned the martial art in Kabul and continued to train despite living in a refugee camp in Iran (which had a tae kwon do team) at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. He returned to Kabul in 2004, and while other Olympic teams had state-of-the-art equipment and facilities, the ANOC had little to offer its athletes at the time.<sup>29</sup> In 2012, Nikpai again represented Afghanistan in the Olympics, earning the bronze medal in the 68-kg division.<sup>30</sup>

In Afghanistan, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) has again thrown its hat into the sports diplomacy ring, pledging support to the ANOC. According to Lieutenant General Aghbar, “The president of the U.S. Olympic Committee and the president of the U.S. Paralympic Committee want to help the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee. ... Now it is up to ANOC’s capability to help the U.S. Olympic Committee and Paralympics Committee help ANOC.”<sup>31</sup>

25 “Afghanistan to Launch Football League,” Al Jazeera, July 17, 2012.

26 SFC Mark Porter, “Ghazi Stadium Reflects Changes in Afghanistan,” United States Army, December 19, 2011.

27 “Nikpai Hopes His Medal Can Serve as Message of Peace,” ESPN.com, August 20, 2008.

28 “Nikpai Hopes His Medal Can Serve as Message of Peace,” ESPN.com

29 “Olympics Taekwondo: Afghanistan Hero Rohullah Nikpai Wins Bronze,” BBC, August 8, 2012.

30 Erika Stetson, “U.S., Afghan Officials Forge Olympic Partnership,” U.S. Department of Defense Information / FIND, November 15, 2011.

31 Stetson, “U.S., Afghan Officials Forge Olympic Partnership”

Rear Admiral Pittman believes that as security improves in Afghanistan, so too will youth sports expand.<sup>32</sup> This last point is especially poignant when considering the fact that in two of the world’s most violent conflict environments, Iraq and Afghanistan, intense cultural, tribal, and religious differences exist, but no major sporting event has been attacked by militants.<sup>33</sup> This runs counter to expected insurgent practice, and may shed light upon a hidden truth in sports: “No political leader can ‘exit’ from the culturally and symbolically powerful world of sports, even if he or she would like to do so.”<sup>34</sup>

Since the Taliban’s ouster from rule and the subsequent rise in athletic participation, Afghanistan has progressed immensely. After over three decades of conflict, some very positive athletic teams have risen to levels many would never have expected.

A decade ago, if anyone even mentioned Afghan cricket, they would have been the laughingstock of the cricketing community. ‘Afghans play buzkashi,’ cricket snobs around the world might have said derisively... ‘Cricket is too refined a game for them.’ What most people didn’t realize at the time was that Afghan refugees living in the impoverished camps of Peshawar on the Pakistani frontier were developing a love for Pakistan’s own national pastime.<sup>35</sup>

To illustrate this intense shift in sentiment, reporting has indicated that before the 2012 One Day International match between the Afghan and Pakistani national teams in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, Taliban representatives contacted the Afghanistan Cricket Board to offer support and prayers for the team.<sup>36</sup> A similar episode occurred in 2010, when the second most powerful militant group in Afghanistan, Hezb-e Islami/Gulbuddin (HiG)—typically referred to in Afghan media as Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan (HiA)—congratulated the Afghan team after its victory over Pakistan in the Asian Games *Twenty20* semifinals, stating, “As our youth brought honour to the country in the field of cricket and raised the Afghanistan flag, the same way they also liberate the country.”<sup>37</sup> Cricket is an immensely popular sport in the South Asian subcontinent. The ability of Afghan representatives of the sport to gain the respect of their fellow athletes is quite important for both achieving legitimacy and advancing regional relations, especially given the contentious relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the fact that the very militant group that outlawed the sport in Afghanistan (the Taliban) and the second most powerful insurgent group in Afghanistan (HiG) would make the effort to publicly and personally congratulate the teams and offer prayers is astounding and a testament to the power that athletics can wield.

Like cricket, rugby is another sport in its infancy in Afghanistan, and, based upon tradition and precedent, is well-suited to the Afghan people. Only 220 or so players have registered with the newly formed Afghanistan Rugby Federation, which recently gained membership to the Asian Rugby Football Union in November 2011. However, the sport appeals to both the legendary Afghan toughness and pays tribute to the nation’s rough background.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, while young, it offers another national sport body for the Afghan population to look to and join. With each successive sport moving toward national and international representation, the success of sports diplomacy initiatives is on full display.

These national teams and federations would not have been able to emerge were it not for the coordination of many individuals devoted to instilling sports values and establishing programs in the population centers of Afghanistan. The key to appealing to the entirety of the target audience is not only offering an alternative to or safe haven from conflict, but offering enough options to hold the interest of a wavering and easily influenced group. Ensuring accessibility and security around Afghan athletic programs is crucial to their viability and acceptance.

With so many moving parts, the programs put forth by ISAF and GIROA, despite being part of the ‘war effort,’ do not come without hefty expense. Miller broadly laid out both the means by which ISAF/Afghan-run sports programs are funded and the manner in which they’re conducted. He indicated that through grants, donations,

32 Andrei S. Markovits and Lars Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 12.

33 Markovits and Lars Rensmann, *Gaming the World*, 12.

34 Adnan R. Khan, “More Than a Game,” *Maclean’s* 122, no. 9 (March 16, 2009): 31-32.

35 George Dobell, “Even Taliban Lends Support to Afghanistan Cricketers,” ESPNcricinfo.com, February 11, 2012.

36 Rahmatullah Afghan, “HIA Congratulates Afghan Cricket Team on Victory,” Pajhwok Afghan News, November 25, 2010.

37 Khan, “More Than a Game,” *Maclean’s* 122, 31-32.

38 AFP, “Afghans to Play First Rugby Match Abroad,” Dawn Media Group, April 15, 2012.

39 MAJ Jeffrey Miller, Telephone Interview, June 15, 2012.

corporate sponsorships, and other external funds, ISAF and GIRA have been able to run clinics, host events at ISAF headquarters in Kabul and at Ghazi Stadium, provide equipment to local communities, recruit volunteers, and fund Afghan-based sports programs. Some of those volunteers are former collegiate or professional players working at ISAF headquarters who come from many different member nations.<sup>40</sup> He also touched upon an upcoming initiative to build thirty multisport facilities distributed between each of the Afghan provinces, which would provide locations for local sport programs, tournaments, and competitions.<sup>41</sup>

Coupled with the myriad Amateur Athletic Union of the United States' (AAU) initiatives, which have brought coaches and athletes from many sports into Afghanistan, the ISAF/Afghan-run programs aid in linking people with know-how to those executing at the local level. James Miller, vice president of sports operations for the AAU, stated at a coaching seminar at Ghazi Stadium, "These children in your community look up to you. . . . You are their heroes, you are their teachers, and you are their hope. We are here to better the lives of children all across the county." Without these initiatives, there would be few means by which to offer an alternative to conflict, poverty, and insurgent influence to the youth population in Afghanistan.

A multinational sports diplomacy consortium, composed of ISAF and NATO member nations, has aided in the implementation of a significant number of sports diplomacy programs in the war-torn nation. From creating athletic governance bodies, formulating national teams, training coaches, supplying equipment for regional use, resurrecting Ghazi Stadium, and developing athletic competition, to offering new alternatives to life as is known to Afghans, sports diplomacy's multifaceted options seem well-suited to both the regional situation and the people caught within that conflict.

Maintaining cultural and religious sensitivity is crucial to gaining the support of those most influential in the nation: the tribal, village, and religious elders and leaders, who are the chief decision-makers for their respective communities and constituents. As sports diplomacy attempts to branch out from a means for nations to find respect and common ground into a means to address the root causes of internal conflicts and a means to replace them with a peaceful and productive alternatives, its success or failure will reside with those who are charged with spreading their knowledge to their local communities. This trickle-down method is necessary in a nation as culturally and tribally diverse as Afghanistan. The slightest misstep could lead to protests, regression in progress made, or, worse, directing youth which one wishes to bring out of conflict toward insurgent recruiters. Should these sports diplomacy measures prove successful, however, the groundwork may be laid for the implementation of similar measures in other conflict environments, particularly those with a population-fueled insurgency.

---

<sup>40</sup> MAJ Jeffrey Miller, Telephone Interview, June 15, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> SSG Kris Levasseur, "U.S. Athletic Teach Afghan Youth Value of Sports," International Security Assistance Force, February 9, 2012.

---

Abawi, Atia. "U.S. Sports Diplomacy's Latest Target: Afghanistan," MSNBC.com, February 13, 2012, Accessed April 17, 2012. [http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/\\_news/2012/02/13/10399668-us-sports-diplomacys-latest-target-afghanistan?lite](http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/02/13/10399668-us-sports-diplomacys-latest-target-afghanistan?lite).

Afghan, Rahmatullah. "HIA Congratulates Afghan Cricket Team on Victory," Pajhwok Afghan News. November 25, 2010, Accessed May 14, 2012. <http://www.pajhwok.com/en/2010/11/25/hia-congratulates-afghan-cricket-team-victory>.

AFP. "Afghans to Play First Rugby Match Abroad," Dawn Media Group, April 15, 2012, Accessed April 27, 2012. <http://dawn.com/2012/04/15/afghans-to-play-first-rugby-match-abroad>.

AP. "Afghanistan to Launch Football League." Al Jazeera. July 12, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/sport/football/2012/07/2012717113059796364.html>.

Azoy, G. Whitney. *Buzkashi: game and power in Afghanistan*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2003.

Bairner, Alan. *Sport, nationalism, and globalization*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Dobell, George. "Even Taliban Lends Support to Afghanistan Cricketers," ESPNcricinfo.com. February 11, 2012, Accessed April 27, 2012. <http://www.espncricinfo.com/other/content/story/552874.html>

Friello, Mike. "Master Mike Friello: Memoir from Afghanistan," Amateur Athletic Union News, February 29, 2012, Accessed April 27, 2012. <http://aaunews.org/news/?p=6417>.

Goldblatt, David. *The ball is round: A global history of soccer*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006.

Hoberman, John Milton. "Sport and Political Ideology," *Sports & Recreation* 62 (1984): 1-315.

IANS. "Running in Olympics is Like Winning Gold for Afghan Girl." *Hindu*. August 4, 2012. <http://www.thehindu.com/sport/athletics/article3726933.ece>.

Johnson, Thomas H., interview by Greg Bruno. Council on Foreign Relations Podcast, December 11, 2008.

Khan, Adnan R. "More Than a Game," *Maclean's* 122, no. 9 (March 16, 2009): 31-32.

Kristina, AAU. "AAU & NBA Cares Ambassador Mentor Afghan Coaches During Government Sports Diplomacy Visit," Amateur Athletic Union News, February 13, 2012, Accessed April 27, 2012. <http://aaunews.org/news/?p=6324>.

Leithead, Alastair. "'Blasphemous' U.S. Soccer Balls Anger Afghans," ABC News, August 26, 2007, Accessed June 01, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=3525777#.T9upL7XrQxo>.

Levasseur, Staff Sgt. Kris. "U.S. Athletic Professionals Teach Afghan Youths Value of Sports," International Security Assistance Force, February 9, 2012, Accessed May 15, 2012. <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/news/u.s.-athletic-professionals-teach-afghan-youths-value-of-sports.html>.

Lopata, Peg. "A Soccer Field of Dreams," *Dreams* 28, no. 3 (Nov/Dec 2011): 34-35.

Markovits, Andrei S. and Lars Rensmann. *Gaming the world*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Martens, M., Vogler, C. J., Wagner, L. C., & Wicks, R. *Sports and diplomacy in the global arena*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2005.

"Nikpai Hopes His Medal Can Serve as Message of Peace," ESPN.com. August 20, 2008, Accessed June 01, 2012. [sports.espn.go.com/oly/summer08/news/story?id=3544339](http://sports.espn.go.com/oly/summer08/news/story?id=3544339).

Nucelli, Nicole. "Afghanistan's Ghazi Stadium Enjoys Renaissance," U.S. Department of State, December 28, 2011, Accessed April 17, 2012. [http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/afghanistan\\_ghazi\\_stadium](http://blogs.state.gov/index.php/site/entry/afghanistan_ghazi_stadium).

"Olympics Taekwondo: Afghanistan Hero Rohullah Nikpai Wins Bronze." BBC.com. August 9, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/taekwondo/19199046>.

Porter, SFC Mark. "Ghazi Stadium Reflects Changes in Afghanistan," United States Army, December 19, 2011, Accessed April 28, 2012. [http://www.army.mil/article/71097/Ghazi\\_Stadium\\_reflects\\_changes\\_in\\_Afghanistan/](http://www.army.mil/article/71097/Ghazi_Stadium_reflects_changes_in_Afghanistan/).

Shergold, Adam. "The Muslim Women Who Overcame the Odds and the Prejudice to Make History Today on the Olympic Stage." *Daily Mail*. August 3, 2012. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2183262/Olympics-2012-The-Muslim-women-overcame-odds-make-London.html>

"'Slow But Steady Progress' in Afghanistan, Alumnus Reports," *Appalachian Today*, February 24, 2012, Accessed June 02, 2012. <http://today.appstate.edu/hal-pittman-afghan/>.

*Sport, power, and society: Institutions and practices*, ed. Robert E. Washington and David Karen. Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2010.

Stetson, Erika. "U.S., Afghan Officials Forge Olympic Partnership," U.S. Department of Defense Information / FIND. November 15, 2011.

"Taliban's Bloodsoaked Stadium Re-opens as "Peaceful Place"," MSNBC News. December 15, 2011, Accessed April 29, 2012. [http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/\\_news/2011/12/15/9468942-talibans-bloodsoaked-stadium-re-opens-as-peaceful-place?lite](http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/12/15/9468942-talibans-bloodsoaked-stadium-re-opens-as-peaceful-place?lite).