

WAY OF THE PEHALWAN

Training for *kushti*, traditional Indian wrestling, is an arduous undertaking that demands not just passion and perseverance, but the willingness to sacrifice for the art, as the writer discovers in a mud pit in Pune.

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Wrestlers grappling in the *talim* (gym) at Maharashtra Institute of Technology (MIT) Pune. The *talim* is a sacred area and footwear is forbidden in the gym, especially in the ring.



I'm standing in a pit, facing down an opponent 20kg heavier. He has just flung mud at me, an act that would have been offensive, had it not been for the context of the sport. Barely an hour ago, I had been dressed in my casual clothes, a guest in the world of *kushti* (traditional Indian wrestling). Now, I'm naked save for the orange tights I wear in place of a *langhot* (loincloth), ready to tussle with Maruti Varpe, a senior wrestler at Chinchechi Talim, Pune's oldest *kushti* gym, built in 1786.

Eager to experience the sport first-hand, I had agreed – perhaps too soon – to participate in a training session with the *pehalwans* (wrestlers). I crouch into what I hope is a proper wrestler's stance, swinging my hands back and forth for effect. The other wrestlers look on from across the ring, a show of wonder and amusement on their faces. Maruti advances, appearing larger as he draws closer. I contemplate faking a stomach ache, just so I can back out of my bad decision. But, before I can move, Maruti cuts off my retreat, and the moment his hands clamp the back of my neck, I realise that I've made a big mistake.

QUICK REWIND Grappling is an ancient sport; the earliest record of wrestling is a cave painting in Mongolia dating back to 7000 BC.

Among all the grappling arts that have developed since, *kushti* remains one of the most straightforward disciplines. There are no mats, shoes or headgear – equipment often associated with modern wrestling. Instead, wrestlers fight in the mud, wearing nothing but *langhots*. In *dangals* (wrestling competitions) held under traditional rules, matches are even fought without rounds or weight classes. Each fight is a story of two wrestlers trying to pin their opponent's shoulders to the ground for the win. Everything else is secondary. It's a sport as simple as it is demanding.

There is no exact point in history that marks the birth of *kushti*. The most common belief has it that the Mughal Empire, a Muslim dynasty of Turkic-Mongol origin, introduced the grappling art into India during their invasion of the country in the 16th century. This mixture of Mongolian and Iranian wrestling influences of the Mughals, combined with *malla-yuddha*, an ancient form of wrestling that existed in India at the time, resulted in the sport now known as *kushti*.

This martial art has been credited for moulding Olympians like Sushil Kumar, Yogeshwar Dutt and Sakshi Malik. Sushil took home the bronze in the 2008 Olympic Games, ending India's 50-year medal drought in wrestling – an

accomplishment that he swiftly upped with a silver-medal win in 2012. The country's winning streak continued with bronze medals from Yogeshwar (2012) and Sakshi (2016). Because of their success, India is seeing a resurgence of interest in the art that has long been an integral part of the country's history.

Driven by a strong passion for martial arts and a deep curiosity for *kushti*, I'd flown 6,000km from Malaysia to Pune, a city on the western fringes of Maharashtra, which alongside Haryana, Delhi and Kolhapur, is known for *kushti*. Thinking that I'd pick up a thing or two about the sport, I'd travelled to Chinchechi Talim, but it wasn't long before I learned just how much I had underestimated the scope of this project. Simply put, *kushti* isn't just a sport; it's a way of life.

GETTING SCHOOLED Having heard that *pehalwans* have an early start, I'd arrived at Chinchechi Talim before sunup, hoping to catch them before they left their dorms. A typical day for them begins at four in the morning, where they perform conditioning exercises until eight o'clock. They then break for chores and cooking – some even clock in to daytime jobs – before reconvening for training from four to seven in the evening.



While waiting outside for the athletes to begin their training, I noticed a man at the front of the *talim* (gym), yanking on a rope and pulley, with a sack on the end. Seeing me, he shifted the load to one hand, and gestured with the other, beckoning me to give it a try. I naively agreed, and as he let go of the rope, I was almost hurled off the ground! The stranger laughed and helped me up, and somewhere in his banter in the Marathi language, I made out the words “sixty kilos”. The sack weighed as much as I did, and this guy was simply doing warm-ups with it! Soon, other men appeared to have their turn at the rope, and I watched in awe as they worked without so much as breaking a sweat.

Another barrel-chested man walked out and introduced himself as Maruti. I asked if it would be alright to watch them train, but he informed me that the gym was closed in honour of Lord Hanuman’s birthday. Also known as the Hindu Monkey God, Lord Hanuman is the patron deity of the sport, and *pehalwans* revere him as a symbol of physical strength, perseverance and devotion. Each morning, *pehalwans* perform *puja* (worship) to Hanuman before beginning their training. Since it was his birthday, however, ceremonies were going to take the entire day. Maruti told me that although

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Maruti Varpe clinching a young wrestler. Most wrestlers retire in their thirties, so childhood is the ideal time to get into the sport; Most *talims* have a shrine dedicated to Lord Hanuman (the patron deity of *kushti*), and worship rituals are part of the wrestlers’ daily routine. Lord Hanuman is often associated with the colour vermilion, which is why many wrestlers favour wearing vermilion *langhots* (loincloth); Wrestlers move up the ranks by participating in *dangals* (wrestling competitions). It is also a way for wrestlers to earn money, as besides cash prizes, the winner also receives monetary tributes from spectators.

OPPOSITE PAGE Pulling heavy pieces of wood is one of the traditional conditioning methods employed in *kushti*. Here, a junior wrestler hops on to provide extra resistance.

Chinchchi Talim was closed, I could join him for a training session at the Maharashtra Institute of Technology (MIT). I said ‘yes’ without missing a beat.

INTO THE RING The *talim* at MIT Pune was packed with *pehalwans* when I arrived. It was basically a rectangular hall with a recessed

mud pit built in the centre. Ropes dangled from the ceiling, and pictures of Lord Hanuman graced the walls. Besides that, the place was bare. The traditional setting of the *talim* juxtaposed sharply against the modern campus grounds of MIT.

The *pehalwans*, aged between five and 30 years old, were going about their daily routine, which involved a significant amount of calisthenics and wrestling. I tried to break the ice, but most of the wrestlers seem guarded. I figured that the most common language here was *kushti*, and the best way to connect would be by ‘speaking’ it. As I contemplated avenues to join in, Maruti, right on cue, asked if I’d be up for a session. I nodded, and was given a pair of orange tights and instructions to dress – or rather, undress – for the occasion.

Kushti workouts are as traditional as the sport itself. You won’t find any stationary bikes or rowing machines in *talims*. The conditioning





WRESTLING TRADITIONS

Wrestling is an integral component to combat sports, and many cultures have adopted it in their own way. Here are some forms of traditional wrestling around the globe.

BOKH This traditional Mongolian sport is won by forcing your opponent's knee or elbow to the ground. Wrestlers wear tight, long-sleeved jackets called *zodog*, and are allowed to attack any part of the body except for the head.

YAGLI GURES In Turkish wrestling, fighters coat themselves with oil before starting battle. It's not all about the pin in Turkish wrestling. According to its rules, the first fighter who has their "umbilicus exposed to heaven" loses.

SUMO Needing no introduction, this traditional grappling sport is typically fought without weight classes, which explains why its wrestlers add on as much mass as possible. The goal is to drive the other wrestler out of the ring, or get him to touch the ground with any body part other than the feet.

ABOVE Wrestlers cover themselves and their opponents in red earth, which has been mixed with lemon, turmeric, milk and ghee, as a sign of blessing. When it comes to wrestling, having your opponent smeared also provides for a better grip.

OPPOSITE PAGE Besides strengthening the neck, the *gar nal* (stone wheel) also helps with conditioning by providing extra resistance for squats, push-ups and running.



regimen consists of a host of bodyweight workouts, which includes push-ups, squats and sun salutations. Exercises with equipment involve: swinging *jori* (heavy clubs) or *gada* (maces) to improve upper-body endurance; wearing *gar nal* (heavy stones) on the neck to build strength; and climbing ropes to improve grip.

I fell in with the rest of the group and started with push-ups. Having completed 20 reps fairly quickly, I was feeling rather proud of myself till I realised that the group hadn't stopped. I asked Maruti if we were going for 50, but he laughed, saying that they do at least 500 reps of each exercise every day! Sensing my chagrin, Maruti mercifully allowed me to get by with just 20. Somehow, in between each set, he managed to find the energy to entertain me with a running commentary of his life as a wrestler. During push-ups, he said, "When I was younger, my guru used to light an incense stick, and make us do push-ups until the stick burned out!"

As he twirled a *jori* in figure-eights over his head, he told me how he was looking to place in the 2020 Olympics and bring home the gold. It seems that many Indian wrestlers who aim to aim to compete in the Olympics actually train in *kushti*.

Even as he hung upside down on a rope, Maruti spoke about the importance of mental

fortitude. "It's not all about physical strength. Your psyche plays a huge role too. Pushing yourself to the limit, eating right, having positive thoughts – all these things build mental strength. There are many things to fear, such as getting hurt, or getting chided by your coaches. But if you're mentally strong, you can handle the pressure, and when you conquer your own fears, everything will turn out all right!" Wise words for a 25-year old.

Later, while I squatted, exhausted just from watching Maruti perform various painful feats, he explained how *pehalwans* hacked the ground with a hoe to loosen the earth before a fight. A rich fragrance emanated from the red earth, which had just been treated with a blend of lemon, turmeric, milk and ghee. Maruti explained that this mixture energises the body, as well as helps it heal from cuts and bruises. And as he described how wrestlers rub the earth on their opponents and themselves before a match as a sign of blessing, he began coating me with the earthy mixture.

READY TO RUMBLE With Maruti's strong bear arms around me, it becomes clear how much time and effort he has put into his craft, as barely 10 seconds after we tie up, he breaks my balance and chucks me to the ground. He's

being gentle about it, but that doesn't change the fact that falling on packed mud hurts much more than on a wrestling mat. The other *pehalwans* cheer on my futile efforts to snag Maruti's legs, and it feels as though I'm breaking through to them. For a brief moment, I share their camaraderie. However, my euphoria doesn't last, as moments later, Maruti flips me onto my back, much to the amusement of the others.

Post battle, the wrestlers seem to warm up to me, and we start talking about training, diet and life. I pretend I am one of them and they don't seem to mind.

The first thing that they tell me is that being a *pehalwan* isn't easy. It's practically a monastic lifestyle. They own few material possessions, and abstain from distractions, such as smoking, alcohol and sex. *Pehalwans* maintain strict diets that consist mainly of milk, almonds, ghee, eggs and fruits, and cost about INR20,000 (approx. USD310) a month, a huge sum for many families.

It's a tough life to pursue, especially without financial support from family members, so, some *pehalwans* hold day jobs to sustain themselves. The luckier ones come from a family of wrestlers, who not only provide monetary support, but technical knowledge as well.



GIRL POWER Some 30km north of MIT Pune is the town of Alandi, home to Dinesh Gund, a wrestling coach and former pehalwan who runs the Jog Maharaj Talim – a *talim* that focuses on training female wrestlers in this sport, which, in India, is traditionally dominated by men.

Having witnessed top-notch wrestling from the female teams whenever he attended competitions with the national team, this former competitive wrestler was inspired to grow the pool of female talents back in Pune.

He decided to give up his job as a professor to found the Jog Maharaj Talim. Although his initial efforts were met with discouragement from naysayers, Dinesh paid them no heed. He has since grown his *talim* into a government-sponsored centre. The mats and exercise equipment in the gym, which cost INR10 Lakhs (approx. USD15,500), are fully paid for. Besides that, the girls who train there are given assistance in the form of a INR1,000 (approx. USD16) allowance per month. Periodically, national coaches are also sent over to help train the girls, all of which are benefits given by the government.

At any given time, Dinesh houses 30 to 40 girls, aged between 13 and 20 years old, in his dorms, all of whom juggle between wrestling and attending classes at nearby schools.

Here, the wrestlers, kitted out in wrestling



IMAGE: GETTY

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The *gada* (mace) works the grip, shoulders and back. An average *gada* weighs 8 to 15kg, but there are *gada* that weigh up to 100kg; A wrestler hoists a 60kg sack to improve his grip, an alternative to rope climbing; A young wrestler tries to pin her opponent's shoulder to the ground at Jog Maharaj Talim. While fighting on the mats poses a different kind of challenge than in mud, both *kushti* and modern wrestling share a common goal of winning by pin.

OPPOSITE PAGE The *pehalwans* warming up to the writer (5th from right) at MIT Pune.

singlets and shoes, warm up in ways I'm more familiar with. They run, roll, tumble, bridge and stretch just as how I've been taught at my grappling classes back home. They're young – most of them are still studying in secondary school – but their youthful appearances bely their capabilities, as when it comes time to spar, these girls go hard. Besides their relentless stamina, they also display technical finesse. Every step precisely where it needs to be, every throw executed with conviction.

This is the team that Dinesh hopes to place in the 2020 Olympics, and perhaps win a medal for India.

A TRUE PRIVILEGE While there are slight differences between mud- and mat-wrestling as a sport, the wrestlers who step into the ring are very much alike. These fighters dedicate their lives to achieving their dreams, a pursuit that's, well, as simple as it is demanding.

Before I embarked on this journey, I never expected the *pehalwans* to share their experiences with an outsider like me. I never expected to bond with them. Maybe my doubt proves that, sometimes, the toughest opponent we face may very well be ourselves, and if we take a page out of Maruti's book and learn how to conquer our fears, perhaps everything will indeed turn out all right. ☺

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