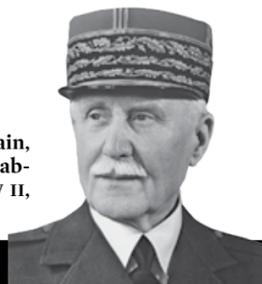


1478

Pazzi conspirators attack Lorenzo de' Medici and kill Giuliano de' Medici in Florence

1945

Marshal Henri Philippe Petain, leader of France's Vichy collaborationist regime during WW II, arrested for treason



1956

First modern container ship, the Ideal X, leaves Port Newark, New Jersey for Houston, Texas

1986

World's worst nuclear disaster: 4th reactor at Chernobyl nuclear power station in USSR explodes, 31 die, radioactive contamination reaches much of Western Europe

Kalashnikovs for bat and pads: Cricket, the Taliban and peace



Outskirts of Kabul

Afghanistan by British in the 19th century, the game was popular in the refugee camps in Pakistan, where more than 10 million people fled after the Soviet invasion and the 1990s, and has since spread in the country, especially among ethnic Pashtuns in the southern provinces

men away from prayers, according to former national cricketer Hasti Gul, but later became more tolerant of cricket.

From there, despite at least two attacks in the past couple of years on cricket matches claimed by the ultra radical Islamic State group, the game now rivals football for popularity in a country that has long been cut off from international sport.

Star names

Admitted as a full member of the International Cricket Council in 2017, Afghanistan won its first five-day Test match against Ireland last month after making steady progress in the lower levels of the international game.

However it is in the dynamic, shorter form of the sport that Afghans have had most impact. Players such as spin bowler Rashid Khan or big hitting batsman Mohammad Nabi



When Afghanistan play against another team, we listen to the radio with great interest and we also check for scores in social media and follow those in Facebook who give live updates

MULLAH BADRUDDIN

Esakhil have become undisputed stars of the Indian Premier League (IPL), the razzle-dazzle showcase of so-called T20 cricket, the 12th season of which has just got under way. Despite the Taliban's former suspicion of organized sports and their opposition to much of the transformation in Afghanistan since their hardline Islamic regime was toppled in 2001, many of the mainly Pashtun movement's fighters are fans.

Unlike football, which offends the sensibilities of some very conservative Muslims because it is normally played in shorts, cricket is played in long sleeves and trousers, in line with traditional dress codes. It also bears some resemblance to traditional Afghan children's games involving throwing and using sticks to hit smaller sticks or balls.

Karim Sadiq, a former batsman in the national team and an early pioneer of the sport who visited some Taliban-controlled areas in eastern Afghanistan this year, said he was mobbed by fighters asking about the game and their favorite players.

A video clip he shot on his mobile phone shows dozens of Taliban, many with Kalashnikov automatic rifles slung across their shoulders, dissecting the quality of the team. "I like all the players but my favorite is

Rashid Khan Arman," says one fighter, referring to the young spin bowler who stars for the Afghan national side and IPL's Sunrisers Hyderabad. "His bowling is amazing."

World cup dream

With the approach of the cricket World Cup in England and Wales from May to July, Afghanistan's hopes of making a dent in the tournament are higher than they have ever been, even if few give them a chance against giants of the game such as India, Australia or England. "We have a very strong team and my dream is Afghanistan bring the World Cup home," said Hazrat Gul, a young cricketer in the eastern city of Jalalabad, as he prepared to play a friendly match against a team from neighboring Kunar province.

As peace talks between the U.S. government and Taliban officials continue and Afghanistan looks for a way out of 40 years of conflict, excitement is building and officials and government ministers lavish praise on the players, whom President Ashraf Ghani has called national heroes.

From the other side of the war, the feeling is similar. Sadiq who has just returned to practice after a long injury, aiming to take part in the upcoming World Cup, said the Taliban usually send them congratulatory messages through social media and on his cellphone when Afghanistan win.

Such broad appeal has seen the sport widely hailed as a unifying force in Afghanistan, a patchwork of different languages and cultures, sometimes at peace with each other but increasingly in recent years in conflict.

Ethnic divides

Not everyone is on board the cricket bandwagon, however.

Look deeper, and the state of the game has

much to say about a country where sport has repeatedly attracted violence, including suicide attacks on cricket and wrestling matches, and where politics is increasingly divided along ethnic lines that shade into all aspects of life.

For many Persian-speaking Tajiks and Hazaras, cricket is a sport for Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group from the south and east of the country that has provided almost all kings and presidents throughout Afghan history.

"I have no interest and don't know anything about cricket," said Ahmad Jawad, a shopkeeper in Parwan, a mainly Tajik province north of Kabul. "It's a Pashtun game with Pashtun players, so let them enjoy their game."

After the Taliban fell following the U.S.-led campaign of 2001, Sadiq and Gul - brothers who, like many teammates, learned their cricket in Pakistan - and other players struggled to convince Tajik commanders from the victorious Northern Alliance that swept into Kabul to allow them to continue playing the game.

"Palace officials told us to join Afghan guard units and forget about cricket," said Gul, who recalled having to cancel a provincial tournament in Kabul in 2005 after losing a fistfight with soccer players who wanted to use the pitch.

Now, with the IPL beamed into homes all over the country and the looming World Cup, he feels change is coming and the sport can give Afghanistan a platform no other can equal, one that offers hope for a more normal future after so many years of war.

"We literally had no support from the government for so many years before they have realized we could bring glory to our country," he said. "Now everyone loves cricket and we are so proud to raise our national flag on the world stage."

HES

of women through art

se and my n of her going to ur nose?', 'for a girl'. ing for my t her nose doesn't m. And not do an nose

not nice for e's not nice for ch comprise a ik, along with to sit and talk

about such subjects, so maybe we can break them or stop them or have the courage to say 'no, I won't do my nose operation' or 'no, I want to leave the house' or else," Atik said.

The illustrations, shared across the internet, have gathered lots of reactions and shares. They have also increased Atik's followers on one social media platform to 6,000.

International Women's Day

"I hadn't at all expected people to share them that much, and women have started to send me things they hear from their families and societies around them. Women from many countries... were touched by the illustrations I did, so that was something really nice," she said.

Atik said she celebrates International Women's Day on March 8 every year by partying with friends.

"I think we have a long way to go in Lebanon and in the whole world (on women's rights) but I think we're getting there, little by little," she said.

Atik, who lives in Beirut, created several illustrations as a way to "let out suppressed feelings" around what is expected of women in a traditional society. The result was an emotive comment on the way society can dictate how women should or shouldn't behave, which has resounded with audiences around the world



Lebanese artist Christina Atik works on her illustration, at her apartment in Beirut, Lebanon