

Buzkashi!

Young Habib lived in northern Afghanistan. He lived in a small village, where most people herded goats and sheep on the vast green plains. A family's wealth was judged by the number of goats and sheep they owned. In Habib's village, all the men rode horses and played a game called Buzkashi.

Buzkashi is a very different game than anything we know in America. Buzkashi players ride horses and chase each other around. One player has a tied-up goat on his horse, and the other players try to catch him and take the goat. At the end, the winner can keep the goat for his own herd. More importantly, a good Buzkashi player earns the respect of everyone in his village.

Being a good Buzkashi player meant more to Habib than anything in the world. He practiced every day. His mother said he was Buzkashi-crazy. She said that he should study instead, but she let him play because she knew how much he liked the game.

Habib's friend Zula was the only one who seemed to understand why he liked the game so much. She always wanted to play too, but the way of doing things in their country meant that only men were allowed to play Buzkashi. Habib let Zula practice with him, though, because she was better on a horse than anyone else he knew.

Zula had to sneak out from her house to play the game. She tried to find times when her father was napping and her mother was away at the market. She and Habib both knew that she would get in big trouble if her parents found out she rode their horse without them knowing. Even worse, if they realized she was breaking the rules and playing Buzkashi even though she was a girl, she might never be allowed to see her friend Habib again.

One time, Zula had snuck away to play. As they pranced and dodged, turned and raced on their horses, they saw Zula's mother walking back toward the village. They had to hurry! Habib and Zula charged off at top speed. They arrived at Zula's house well before her mother, but just as she hopped off the horse, they saw her father standing at the door. She was doomed for sure! "What have you been doing?" he asked with a stern look on his face.

"Oh, father! I just finished my chores and took the horse out to graze so that you would not have to, and Habib here was nice enough to come with me for protection," cried Zula, thinking fast as usual. Her father relaxed and smiled.

"That's my girl!" he said. She tied up the horse and walked into the house with her father. Habib wasn't sure, but he almost thought that Zula's father had smiled and winked at him as the two of them had walked through the door.

Buzkashi was a pretty hard game. The players all competed against each other, trying to be the one person left holding the goat at the end of the game. At the same time, players from the same village would always help each other as they tried to win against the other villages. Habib and his friends were pretty good players, but they often lost to the boys in the other villages. Habib often dreamed about how great it would be if Zula were allowed to play on the team. He just knew that with her skill, his team would win a lot more games. They would be the best team for miles around!

Each year, teams from all the villages in the region would play in a huge contest. On the day of the big contest, Habib and his friends played all morning in the games for boys before watching the adult men play all afternoon. Zula came to watch, as she usually did. In their first game, Habib captured the goat at the very last second, while his friend Abdul blocked another boy who almost stole it right back. The whole team cheered as they made off with the goat, winning for Habib and his village!

The next game went equally well, with Habib helping his friend Hamid capture the goat for their village. The next game, however, was against a village of bigger boys. These boys always won, and they tended to play rough. Almost every time they played, they ended up hurting at least one or two boys from Habib's village.

As they watched the bigger boys ride onto the field, Habib's team all grew nervous about what was coming. They were going to do their best, but they knew that they had little chance of winning and that someone might get hurt. The bigger boys were laughing. They were slapping each other on the back, looking as confident and careless as ever.

Zula and Habib shared a look of disgust as they watched the boys ride out onto the field. Suddenly, they heard a desperate voice calling from behind them.

"Zula! Zula!" cried the voice, coming closer and closer. It was her father, who was calling and running as fast as he could toward them, "Zula, Zula! It's your mother! She's very sick, and I have to go to town to get medicine!"

Zula wasn't sure if she should really be concerned. Her dad had a habit of worrying far too much when anyone in the family felt the slightest bit sick. Still, she heard what sounded like real fear in his voice this time. "Oh no!" she cried, "What's wrong? I'll go take care of her!"

"No, no," her father replied, "She is resting in bed. I came to tell you that you must leave her alone so she can rest quietly. I will be back before it is dark. I love you. Goodbye!" And with that, he was off. Zula had never seen him so worried, and she could barely stand not to go see her mother, even though she suspected that she really had nothing to worry about.

Just then, one of the big boys threw a rock their way and laughed. "Zula, Zula!" he

mocked her poor father. His teammates joined in, "Oh no! What to do? I love you! Goodbye!" they sang in silly voices, nearly falling off their horses with laughter and pushing each other.

Never had Habib felt such anger. More than anything, he wanted to put those boys in their place. He glared at them and when he turned back, Zula was running back to her house. "Wait, Zula, you can't go home now!" he cried. He started to run after her, but Abdul and Hamid grabbed him and pulled him back to the game.

"We can't worry about her now," they said. "The game is about to start! Stay with us right now, and we'll find her later." Habib knew he couldn't abandon his friends to the ruthless bigger boys. They got on their horses and set off for the field determined to play hard.

The game was rough from the start. The bigger boys knocked Abdul off his horse. They elbowed Hamid in the ribs, and they nearly made off with the goat several times. But each time, ragged and tired, Habib and his friends managed to steal the goat back and stop them. Soon, they all felt exhausted and ready to quit. Finally, Habib took a push from behind and ended up on the ground. He was nearly trampled by a horse. As he picked himself up from the dirt, he decided his team didn't have much choice. They would have to lose or risk permanent injury.

When he looked up, however, he saw the game had taken a turn. The horses ran faster, everyone was playing harder, and at the front of the pack with the goat rode Zula! It was finally their chance to play together as the best team they could be!

Spirits soared as they cheered and charged ahead. Zula was outrunning, out-dodging, and out-doing them all! None of them had ever seen her so determined to play hard. Habib and his friends gathered courage and began to block the bigger boys. They ran them down, got in the way, and prevented them from even coming close to Zula. With the older boys worn down, they easily made away with the goat. They had won yet again, and this time in their toughest match ever!

The boys gathered and cheered for Zula and for their whole village. Even while he was cheering, though, Habib was worried about Zula, her mother, and what her father would do when he found out she had broken the rules and played Buzkashi.

Just then, Zula's father's voice came crying for her again. "Zula! Zula!" Habib and Zula both froze. Would he be mad? Was he coming to punish her?

As soon as they saw Zula's father, they realized they didn't need to worry. He had a huge smile on his face as he cried out, "She's OK! Your mother's OK! She got better before I even came back!" Zula breathed a big sigh of relief as her father hugged her and smiled bigger than ever.

"And I heard about a fantastic new Buzkashi player from our village, today's winner in a tough match!" he cried out, eyes sparkling as he lifted her off the ground. Zula looked down, and tears came to her eyes as she and her father walked home hand in hand, talking and laughing.

Habib breathed a big sigh of relief and went back to watching the last game, thinking about his Buzkashi dream coming true... and his best friend's dream as well.

- 1. How did Habib feel when the bigger boys from the other team made fun of Zula?**
 - A. It made him angry.
 - B. He felt sorry for Zula.
 - C. He thought it was funny.
- 2. How was a family's wealth judged in the village where Habib and Zula lived?**
 - A. By how many horses and cows the family owned.
 - B. By how many goats and sheep the family owned.
 - C. By who won the game called Buzkashi.
- 3. Why did Zula have to sneak out of the house and go behind her parents' back when she wanted to play Buzkashi?**
 - A. Her father told her not to play because it was too dangerous.
 - B. There was a rule that only men were allowed to play Buzkashi.
 - C. She was supposed to stay at home to be with her sick mother.
- 4. What showed how far Zula would go to keep her father from finding out that she practiced Buzkashi with Habib?**
 - A. She didn't mind leaving her sick mother to go play the game.
 - B. She would sneak out of the house to play the game.
 - C. She was willing to lie to her father about it.

5. How did Habib's mother feel about him playing Buzkashi?

- A. She thought Habib was too young to play such a dangerous game no matter how much he liked to play.
- B. She thought he should study instead but let him play anyway because she knew how much he liked the game.
- C. She wanted Habib to play the game instead of doing his schoolwork because the family would benefit if he won.

6. What happened right after Habib and Zula rode at top speed and got to Zula's house before Zula's mother got home?

- A. Zula lied to her father about where they had been.
- B. They saw Zula's mother walking toward the village.
- C. They saw Zula's father standing in the doorway.

7. How did Habib feel about Zula practicing Buzkashi with him?

- A. He was willing to take the chance that he and Zula would get into big trouble because Zula was the best rider he knew to practice with.
- B. He didn't care if Zula got into big trouble for practicing with him because he only cared about being the best Buzkashi player in the village.
- C. He was concerned that he and Zula could get into big trouble and wanted Zula to get her father's permission to use his horse for practice.

8. What did Habib often dream about Zula?

- A. That she would be allowed to play on the team, and it would make the team the best in the area.
- B. That her father would say it was okay for her to use his horse to practice with Habib.
- C. That Zula would show him how to improve his skill so he would be as good at Buzkashi as she was.

9. What was the most important thing about winning at Buskashi?

- A. The winner got to keep the goat for his own herd.
- B. The winner got to play in the games the next year.
- C. The winner got the respect of everyone in the village.

10. What was Zula's father like?

- A. He loved his family and was willing to let Zula break important family and village rules at times.
- B. He worried about everything that concerned his family and insisted that they follow all the rules all the time.
- C. He didn't care very much what his family members did as long as they took care of themselves and didn't get sick.

11. What was the main thing Habib and his team did to help Zula win the game for them?

- A. They got in the way of the horses of the other team so Zula could have a clear run.
- B. They encouraged each other to get back into the game and follow Zula to the victory line.
- C. They turned their anger at the other team into action and encouraged Zula to try harder to win.

12. Why probably did Zula's father act relaxed and smile instead of being angry when Zula lied about why she was riding his horse?

- A. He didn't have any reason to think that Zula was not telling the truth.
- B. He didn't want to show his anger and punish Zula while Habib was there.
- C. He knew that she loved to play Buzkashi, and he was secretly okay with that.

13. What was the main problem in this story?

- A. A father was having a problem with his daughter and didn't know what to do about it.
- B. A young girl was caught between following the rules and doing what she really wanted to do.
- C. Boys on one of the Buzkashi teams were bigger and meaner than boys on any of the other teams.

- 14. What was Habib worried about when the team was cheering Zula for winning the game?**
- A. How their worn out team was going to win the next game if Zula wasn't able to play.
 - B. How they were going to get Zula's horse back before her father found out that it was gone.
 - C. What her father would do when he found out that Zula had broken the rules.
- 15. What was Habib like after he got pushed off his horse by one of the members of the team that had the bigger boys?**
- A. He felt worn out and decided that it was time to give up so no one would get seriously hurt.
 - B. He felt strong anger toward the other team and was ready to get back into the game and win.
 - C. He was concerned that someone on the team might get seriously hurt, but he was determined to stay in the game.
- 16. Why did Zula run home after the bigger boys on the other team made fun of her?**
- A. She wanted to make sure her mother was okay before she went back to the contest.
 - B. She went to get her father's horse so she could play against them in the Buzkashi match.
 - C. She was very hurt and angry about what the boys said and wanted to be alone.
- 17. How did Zula know at the end of the story that her father approved of what she did?**
- A. He walked home with Zula hand in hand, talking and laughing.
 - B. He told Zula that he was proud that she had won such a tough match.
 - C. He talked about a great new Buzkashi player who won for their village.

18. How did Zula feel when her father said that her mother was sick but Zula should not go home to help her?

- A. She first thought she should go home no matter what her father said but then decided to stay so she wouldn't miss the Bazkashi contest.
- B. She felt confused about what to do because her father always overly worried when someone in the family got sick.
- C. She decided to go home even though her father said not to because she didn't trust her father when it came to family sickness.

19. What worried Habib after his team had won the first two Buzkashi matches at the yearly contest?

- A. The team might lose the next game, and then they wouldn't get to keep the goat for their village.
- B. His team members were tired from playing the first two games and might not have enough energy to win again.
- C. The next team they had to play had bigger boys who liked to play rough, and usually members of his team got hurt.

20. What was this story mostly about?

- A. What families need to do when there are problems in the family, especially when a family member is sick.
- B. Making decisions about breaking the important rules that everyone was supposed to follow.
- C. How team members can work together to win a contest against a team whose members are bigger and tougher.