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LIFE'S LIKE THAT!

Challenge of Ice Shagai Game

Can you hit a sheep anklebone of about one dime size from some 80 meters distance? Sounds incredible, but this is what "musun shagai" or "Ice Anklebone" game is all about. The game's rules are very simple: clear up an ice patch on a frozen river bed, put five sheep anklebones between two stones, walk away 80 meters and then slide a hitting ball straight to the target.



The team members are keenly watching for the result.

The ball is made of round shaped, hardened piece of hide circled from outside with a copper stripe for easier sliding on ice. The goal is to hit the anklebones and then, slide the ball through between the two stones. Depending on the number of ankles hit, points are added.

The game is first mentioned in the "[Secret History of Mongols](#)," 13th century epic, which says, "Chinggis Khaan played on a river the shagai [game] with his named brother Jamukha." Despite this, popular belief attributes the game to Zaya Pandit Luvsan Perenlei, the high priest of a monastery in Arkhangai province.

"This happened some 300 years ago. The people living near the monastery were taken over by an unknown disease. Many people died because of a sudden fever. Then, Priest Zaya, by that time only 19, ordered his disciples to take off shoes and walk barefooted on ice and snow. This radical measure saved many lives. And then he thought out this game for children to grow strong and healthy," shares J.Erdene Ochir, president of the Union of Ice shagai Players.

The union was set up two years ago and unites some 600 ardent enthusiasts of the game. As any other public organization, the union faces many problems, especially financial.

In the past, during 50s, the game was so popular that a national championship was held every year. However, some communist functionaries thought the game to be "ideologically unsuitable" and banned national tournaments. An ice arena specially prepared each year was not set up again. But this ban did not prevent dedicated players, and they begun to play regularly on the Tuul River where ice was abundant and the rest they brought along with them.

Even nowadays, each Sunday, dozens of game fans gather at the frozen Tuul River just off the capital city suburbs. It is not easy to find them, as there is no a bus stop, and it takes another half an hour walking across deep snow to get to their place.

The area is totally barren with winter wind sweeping in and getting underneath any winter cloth. Since there is no a shelter or tea house, players warm up by an occasional cup of tea from thermoses they bring in. However, players are so committed that they spend all day long playing, often forgetting about food.

They come early in the morning to sweep off snow and dust, to straighten the ice mirror and prepare an ice path. "The river lies too close to the city, and from year to year it dries out. It is not easy to find a suitable place nowadays. That is why we are moving further from the city," explains Sh. Daramsenge, a retired long-haul truck driver.



He used to play the game ever since his childhood, and now, despite his age, he often comes here. "Today I am not playing, though. Came too late for the beginning. My children did not want me to go, saying I will catch cold. It was a hard task to persuade them to let me go. Have had to promise them to return earlier."

The winter day is clear and cold, but none of players cares about lunch or rest. Excited with the game, teams change turns, and no one cares about naked hands, cold wind or passing time.

But, probably, this is part of the game. "It is also about developing endurance," tell me experienced gamers.

The sun is slowly going down, and it gets cold. On the eve of night the temperature in this area falls below 30 Centigrade. But the players do not even think of ending the game. "There is still time 'til it gets really dark," they say continuing to throw the ball and follow it with enthusiastic shouts. The game goes on.

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