



A modern compound bow is a must for a serious Bhutanese archer—even if, at \$1,500, it may cost a full year's wages.

TRAVEL

Arrow Envy

IN BHUTAN, ARCHERY AND MANLINESS GO HAND IN HAND.

By James Sturz

A TRIO OF DOGS loll on their sides in the morning sun, oblivious to the arrows whooshing invisibly above them at 200 mph. When the shafts appear with a telltale *thwack* in the foot-wide oblong targets, the dozy beasts don't even bother looking over. The hundred or so spectators in the bleachers here at the Changlimithang Archery Ground in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, are another matter. Like true fans everywhere, they know to arrive with cushions and cardboard

panels to sit on. Among them are a dozen monks, who have come by taxi and will have to return to their monasteries by the end of lunch. But more enthusiastic still are the players on the field: each time an archer lands a shot, his teammates—clad in *ghos*, the knee-length, white-cuffed robes that Bhutanese men wear—stream around the targets to strut, yelp, and sing, even flashing a little thigh as they kick their legs like cancan dancers.

Archery is Bhutan's national sport, and every village has at least one range.

According to legend, in the 15th century the Buddhist mystic Drukpa Kunley launched an arrow from Tibet, with a prayer that his descendants would flourish wherever it landed. When it crossed the Himalayas and hit a house in Bhutan, he followed it there and seduced the owner's wife, forever endowing the country with a twinned reverence for archery and the phallus: giant paintings of the latter, spilling semen, adorn buildings throughout the kingdom to protect residents from evil spirits. The pastime involving narrower shafts gained additional sway in the 1980s when then-King Jigme Singye Wangchuck embraced the compound bow. (He also introduced Gross National Happiness as his country's chief index of well-being, but that's another story.) Today, traditional bamboo bows are spurned by anyone who

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DISPATCHES

can afford a modern, American-made, carbon-fiber weapon—even if, at \$1,500, it may cost a full year’s wages.

Those high-tech bows are the only ones I see at Changlimithang today. The competition I’ve come to watch, the Yangphel Open, is in its 15th year, and among Bhutan’s biggest. It began with 252 teams of five archers each; after three weeks, 78 teams now vie for quarterfinal slots. Three squads compete at a time, shooting at targets 476 feet away—more than twice the Olympic distance. From the sidelines, the challenge looks insurmountable, which is why, even in this Buddhist country, plenty of bravado is involved. “Archery is a manly game,” explains a 29-year-old competitor named Kunzang. (Many Bhutanese go by just one name.) “With bamboo bows, you see the arrows coming, so you can stay by the target and dodge. But not with compound bows.”

Of course, no serious player attributes his prowess to mere equipment. Most agree that the sport requires patience, practice, and inherent talent. Many also maintain that drinking alcohol helps to calm archers’ nerves. “We’ve been criticized for permitting this,” says Kinzang Dorji, the president of the Bhutan Archery Federation and two-time former prime minister of Bhutan. “But without alcohol, traditional archery would be incomplete, because it’s also a game with singing, dancing, and merrymaking. But we have rules during competitions.” In addition to banning intoxication, these rules prohibit aiming bows at spectators or at other players.

Still, sports based on weaponry do have their perils. At Changlimithang, I’m careful not to cross the range until dancing triggers a break in the action. But mishaps do occur: during the tournament, the winner of a shoot-out to name Bhutan’s best archer (prize: an Indian-made Maruti Suzuki A-Star hatchback) revealed that he’d been shot

in the past. So had the runner-up. And so had the Bhutanese Parliament member Ugyen Tenzin, who had to be airlifted to Calcutta for neurosurgery when an arrow lodged in his brain in 2010.

Yet accidents aren’t what frighten archers most. Matches between villages and the final rounds of large tournaments such as this aren’t complete without cheerleaders who trash-talk the competition, employing the kind of sexual innuendo one might expect in a country with 10-foot penises painted on the walls. Some teams also hire *tsips*, astrologers believed to possess mystical powers. *Tsips* can be used to divine players’ relative luck and help establish a lineup, but some also curse the opposition by shaping effigies of its archers and then immersing them in pit toilets, burying them at intersections, or smearing them with menstrual blood. Between matches, a monk named Rinzin Wangchuk assures me that Bhutan has outlawed such black magic. “We have respect for all sentient

beings,” he says. “But you have to make your *tsip* happy, or he’ll curse your village so it never wins again.”

At Yangphel, I also meet Prince Jigyel Ugyen Wangchuck, a younger brother of Bhutan’s king and the head of the Bhutan Olympic Committee, which fields teams in just one sport: archery. The prince, who is 27, is competing at Changlimithang, and when I ask him what he loves about the sport, he gestures to the spectacle all around us, as archers storm a target and begin to sing and dance. “It’s in my blood,” he says. (His team would go on to win the tournament.)

A few days after leaving Thimphu, I try my own hand with a bow. Hitting the target proves every bit as hard as I expected, but eventually I start landing shots within 10 feet of it. “Are you going to dance?” I ask my guide hopefully. He shakes his head, and hunts for the arrows I’ve buried in the tall grass. ▣

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The Tiger's Nest, Bhutan's most famous monastery, is perched on a cliff 9,678 feet high.