

Camel wrestling in Turkey

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Abstract

During thousands of years of Turkish History, camels were always important in their life. In the past camels were used as transport, pack, ride, war, food, and sport animal by Turks. After industrialization and modernization since 20th century, camel lost their importance and nowadays they are only a sport and tourism material in Turkey. Hence the camel population in Turkey decreased in number of about 1.000 recently. The camel population is mostly used for camel wrestling events in West Anatolia. The camel wrestling events are organized about in 60-70 places annually during winter season. Wrestling events are on Sundays and followed by not only men spectators but also women and children. Because of this side, camel wrestling events is a family sport. Although camel wrestling equipment, accessories, ornaments, wages of caretakers, transport for wrestling from city to city, accommodation, catering are quite expensive, camel owners are not so rich people, but low or middle income people. Hence, those organizations and camel owners should be supported by the state more in order to survive this traditional event.

Key Words: *Camelus dromedary*, *Camelus bactrianus*, genetic resource, native breed, sport.

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Introduction

Due to its geographical position, sitting between the continents of Europe and Asia, Turkey is like a bridge between ages, nations, cultures and civilisations (Yilmaz et al. 2011). In Turkey there is a long tradition of rearing and domesticating a wide variety of native animals. These include: companion animals; such as cats, dogs, donkeys, mules and horses farm animals such as; cattle, pigs, goat and sheep fowl such as; ducks, geese, turkey, and hens game such as; partridges, pheasants, guinea fowl, pigeons, rabbits and water buffalo and finally bees to produce honey and silkworms to produce fabric (Wilson and Yilmaz 2013^{a,b}, Wilson et al. 2011, Yilmaz and Ertugrul 2011, Yilmaz 2012, Yilmaz and Ertugrul 2012^{a,b}, Yilmaz and Wilson 2012, Yilmaz and Wilson 2013, Yilmaz et al. 2011, Yilmaz et al. 2012^{a,b,c,d,e,f,g}, Yilmaz et al. 2013^{a,b}).

The genus *Camelus* is probably the most recent animal species to be

domesticated in Turkey. It is believed that camels were first domesticated in the Saudi Arabian peninsula around 1.500 B.C. a practice which spread to Anatolia (Asian part of Turkey) around 300 B.C. (Wilson 1998).

In Turkey, camels are not currently widely reared and the numbers have dramatically and continuously decreased in the 20th century (Table 1). Today camels are used in small numbers as a pack animal in the provinces of Antalya, Mersin and Mugla (Figure 1). Whilst the majority of the camel population is used for camel wrestling in various places (Figure 2) (Table 2) (Yilmaz et al. 2011), the camel is also used as a sacrificial animal for slaughtering during religious festivals by Muslim people (Cetin et al. 2011).

The aim of this review is to report on the history of camel wrestling, past and present, in all its aspects.

Table 1. Camel numbers and camel meat production in Turkey 1999-2012 (Yarkin 1965, Aydin 2003, Anon 2014^a).

Item	Year											Change 1960- 2012 (%)
	1928	1937	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2003	2010	2012	
Number	74.437	118.211	110.000	65.390	39.000	12.000	2.000	1.350	808	1041	1315	-98,0
Animals slaughtered	N/A*	N/A	N/A	1.600	3.140	400	320	29	N/A	N/A	55	-96,6
Tonnes meat	N/A	232	160	208	531	60	75	8	24	N/A	18	-91,3

* N/A: Not available



Figure 1. Nomadic Yoruk Turks migrating from the plains to the highlands (Photo by M. Karakoyun)

Table 2. Camel wrestling organizations (Caliskan 2010^b, Anon 2011, Anon 2014^{b,c,d})

Province (Number)	Place
Canakkale (12)	Ayvacic, Bayramic, Biga, Buyuktepe, Can, Canakkale, Cardak, Ezine, Geyikli, Karacaoren, Lapseki, Umurbey,
Balikesir (7)	Altinoluk, Altinova, Ayvalik, Burhaniye, Karaagac, Pelitkoy, Sarikoy,
Manisa (4)	Gokkaya, Golmarmara, Sarigol, Turgutlu
Izmir (12)	Armutlu, Bagyurdu, Bayindir, Bayrakli, Bergama, Harmandali, Haydarli, Kemalpaşa, Menemen, Pinarbasi, Tire, Torbali,
Aydin (21)	Atca, Bagarasi, Bozdogan, Buharkent, Cine, Didim, Germencik, Isikli, Incirliova, Kosk, Kurtulus, Kusadasi, Kuyucak, Nazilli, Ortaklar, Osmanbuku, Selcuk, Soke, Turanlar, Yazidere, Yenipazar
Denizli (4)	Acipayam, Buldan, Saraykoy, Yenicekent
Mugla (13)	Bodrum, Dalaman, Gokova, Karaculha, Konacik, Milas, Mumucular, Oren, Ortakent, Selimiye, Turgutreis, Yalikavak, Yatagan
Antalya (2)	Demre, Kumluca,



Figure 2. Camel map of Turkey (Yilmaz and Ertugrul 2015)

Tricks

The technical terms or 'Tricks' for the movements that the camels make in wrestling are described as follows:

- 'tek' (single)
- 'makas' (scissors)
- 'cengel' (hook)
- 'bag' (tie)
- 'cirpma' (fling)
- 'catal' (fork)
- 'kol atma' (leg put)
- 'kol kaldirma' (leg lift)

Generally, a wrestling camel performs only one of these tricks. Rarely, some camels can perform two or more tricks. The board of referees pay attention to the type of trick the camel performs to guide them when they pair the animals for a 'match'. It is important that the board of referees pair camels that use the same

trick. Camels are also divided into two groups: 'sagci' (right side attacker) or 'solcu' (left side attacker) depending on the side that they prefer to attack their adversary.

Tek (single) trick: When two camels are side by side, a camel attacks the leg/s of the adversary camel and uses its head to force the opposing camel to fall down or flee. According to the camel wrestling experts, the most effective trick is 'tek' (single) trick. If a camel knows this trick, it usually wins.

Makas (scissors): In this trick both camels push each other by using their heads and havuts (which is a special saddle for camels) and they rotate about their axis in a combined circular movement.

Cengel (hook): A camel trips the adversary camel by using its leg to force

the opposing animal to squat. Camels which perform this trick can be further divided into two groups: 'duz cengel' (straight hook), and 'bicak cengel' (knife hook). Bicak cengel is a fairly dangerous trick, which can break a leg. Therefore, a cengelci deve (hooker camel) is the most unwanted wrestling camel type. Camel owners do not want their camels to wrestle with a 'cengelci deve' (hooker camel) because of the possibility of leg breakage.

Bag (tie): A camel pins the opponent's head with its knees and forces it to squat. Animals that perform this trick can also be divided into groups: 'tam bag' (full tie) or 'catal bag' (fork tie) and 'yarim bag' (half tie).

Cirpma (fling): When a camel applies the trick of 'bag' (tie), the other camel pulls its head away to attempt to avoid the trick, and then it puts its neck on the neck of the adversary camel.

Catal (fork): Both camels put their heads on the body of the adversary camel. Generally the camel that applies the trick last wins.

Kol atma (leg put): A camel places one of his legs on the head of the adversary camel and forces to him to squat.

Kol kaldirma (leg lift): A camel applies the trick of Kol Kaldirma, but the adversary camel pushes back and forces the first camel to fall down (Gulsoken 2010, Bagcil 2013).

Calendar

There are roughly 60-70 annual wrestling events each year (Anon 2014^{b,c,d}) and the wrestling season runs from

December to March to accommodate the reproductive cycle. The wrestling season is limited to the winter months when camels begin to rut during their mating period (Yarkin 1965). Training of the wrestling camels occurs throughout the year and is closely correlated with the breeding seasons. Events are publicised via posters, telephone and internet (Anon 2010). The major wrestling events are generally held in December and January because the wrestling performance of the camels is at the highest levels in these months. The dates of the most important matches are now fixed in the calendar and do not change much from year to year. For example, Selcuk, which is the biggest wrestling organization in Turkey host their events in mid January (Caliskan 2010^a).

The camels, owners and carers travel from one wrestling organization's events to another by trucks throughout the season. However, social and training wrestling matches, the number of which are gradually decreasing, are held in the second week of March, when the wrestling instincts of camels begins to decrease (Caliskan 2010^b). Wrestling is always executed on Sundays (Anon 2012). Thus, wrestling events are held in three, four or five distinct places in the region on the same day (Caliskan 2009). However bad weather conditions sometimes cause the wrestling events to be cancelled (Aydin 2011). Temperature is another determinative factor for wrestling events. As low temperatures are observed to have a negative effect on spectators, even though camels perform better in cold weather (Caliskan 2010^b).

Rules

Camel wrestling has certain accepted rules but those wrestling rules can change depending on the place where the event is being held (Aydin 2011). These rules generally cover some precautions in order to protect the camels from being injured (Kinzer 2000). The camels usually wrestle once a week with a typical match lasting for 10 minutes (Caliskan 2010^a). In the 1980s, the match time was 15, or sometimes, 30 minutes for prominent pairs of camels (Caliskan 2010^b). This shorter match time was decided as a result of the 'Cengelci deve' (Camels that trip the other by using foot tricks) (Culha 2008) and, as a matter of fact, most games today end in a draw since the time period was shortened (Caliskan 2009).

In wrestling events, camels used to be categorized into four group or classes including 'ayak' (lightweight), 'orta' (middleweight), 'basalti' (Light heavyweight), and 'bas' (Heavyweight). Recently this has been changed and now the camels are usually categorized into three group including 'ayak', 'basalti', and 'bas' class.. Only Tulu camels, which are older than 12 years old, can wrestle in the 'bas' (Heavyweight) category. Winning is determined by three match outcomes, they are: 'yikarak' (overthrowing); 'bagirtarak' (screaming) and 'kacirtarak' (bolting) the opponent (Gulsoken 2010, Bagcil 2013). A win designated as overthrowing is when the camels crash into each other and begin a shoulder-to-shoulder pushing match that resembles an outsize version of sumo wrestling. A screaming win is mostly seen when one of the camels applies either the trick of 'bag' (tie) or 'catalkapan' (fork). Matches can also be won by forfeit when the camel owner feels that his camel may

lose the game, or the camel displays pain behaviour or seems to be injured. In this scenario the owner of the forfeiting camel will throw a piece of rope into the arena. Camels often cannot beat the adversary camel in time resulting in a tied match (Kilickiran, 1987, Gulsoken 2010).

Barn

Camels are kept in a separate barn where they are separated from other animals. The most important thing to remember when planning the barn is to allow for the height of the animal because the camel has a taller body than the other livestock. In addition, doors should also be higher and wider in order to allow the camel to safely (Aydin 2003) and should be well ventilated. Camels are sensitive to cold and therefore should be protected from cold wind and weather. It is advisable to ensure that windows are left open in the direction of the oncoming wind. The floor of the barn should be made up of hard soil ground because this is good for the camel when it lies down. In winter the camel faeces can be left in the barn in winter season, because microbial decomposition of the faeces produces heat, which can warm the camel (Gulsoken 2010).

Nutrition

Out of the breeding season, wrestling camels are usually fed about 1.5 kg of a mixture of wheat, barley, oat, and vetch per day (Anon 2012), which is supplemented by external grazing. During the breeding season and wrestling season, camels lose their appetite and do not want to eat. A lump of dough, which is mixture of grains called as 'topak' is sometimes

given to camels during this time. It is important that rye is not given to the wrestling camels in the breeding season, because rye affects breeding behaviour (Bagcil 2013). Following the breeding and wrestling season, the camel will have lost about 30% of their bodyweight and become quite lean. At this point, the havut is removed and some grains and pulses are given to him in order to put on weight again (Gulsoken 2010).

Diseases

The major diseases are foot injuries and diseases, scabies, *Helminthiasis*, annelids, night blindness, chronic cough and pneumonia, neck pain, mastitis, and contagious skin necrosis. Camels are highly sensitive to *Trypanomiasis*, which is a mosquito borne infection, as they cannot remove the mosquitoes because they have short tails and weak dorsal muscles (Aydin 2003). Camels may also be susceptible to diarrhoea because of malnutrition. Although Camels have a large total body and muscle mass, they can easily be affected by temperature changes and become ill especially while they are being transported on a vehicle to and from wrestling events (Bagcil 2013).

Conclusions

In the organization of camel wrestling there are many expenses that have to be considered; first there is the cost of transporting the camels and accommodating both them, and the owners and caretakers. Secondly a 'Hali Gecesi' (Carpet Night) Party must be arranged and all of the camels have to be embellished. Finally the wages have to be found for the 'hakem heyeti' (board of referees),

'urganci's, 'agiz bagci's, 'agiz bagi contolcusu's and 'cazgir'. Even though wrestling camels is expensive, most of the camel owners are low or middle-income people. In addition to these expenses, the wrestling organisers and managers have to manage the cost of importing camels from Iran, Afghanistan etc., because camels are not native domestic animals of Turkey. The imported camels are mostly 7-8 years old, are very expensive, and owners have to feed and care for them until they reach wrestling age of 12-13 years old. In some provinces, the local government takes 40-50% of the ticket income gained by camel wrestling organizations or association.

In the past, communication was a serious problem for camel owners, but nowadays mobile phones and internet access have solved this problem. They are now able to follow daily weather forecasts, and be aware of any possible weather related cancellation of matches. In spite of the economic, social and cultural advantages of camel wrestling events, there have been no institutions or organizations, which are interested in or plan camel wrestles at a regional or national scale in Turkey. Local people organize all events, excluding Selcuk events. The most pressing issue is to overcome the financial problems involved in continuing these wrestling events. At present local municipalities do help some events but it is insufficient this is obvious because many of the wrestling organizations are experiencing financial difficulties. The State should support these events.

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