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Iranian Olympia: Bodybuilding, Class, and Masculinity in Iran

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December 18, 2022 marked a moment of national pride for the people of Iran. Hadi Choopan was crowned Mr. Olympia, the first-ever Iranian to achieve this feat. Better known by his nickname, “The Persian Wolf,” Choopan has taken the international bodybuilding scene by storm and subsequently become a public persona, providing a fascinating subject for an analysis of contemporary Iranian culture. Traditional notions of Iranian masculinity emphasize moral and non-physical characteristics such as humility and courage, while Choopan’s physique represents new and emerging notions of masculinity that emphasize representations of one’s body.

Previous scholarship on Iranian masculinity and its relationship to bodybuilding focused on the impact of steroid use but failed to analyze how the sport of bodybuilding has impacted Iranian culture. My research brings together scholarship on gender and sexuality, sport and modernization, and masculinity studies. Additionally, I draw on Persian primary sources on Hadi Choopan and the sport of bodybuilding and their representations in Iranian official and diaspora media. I divided my paper into three sections. In the first section I discuss scholarship on Iranian masculinity; in the second, I examine the sport of bodybuilding and its relationship to class; and finally, I analyze the discourse on bodybuilding and masculine women in Iran. Throughout, I elicit the workings of hegemonic masculinity to support my argument that Hadi Choopan and his Mr. Olympia win represent the formation of a new model of hegemonic masculinity in Iran.

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IRANIAN OLYMPIA

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ORIGINS OF IRANIAN BODYBUILDING

- Manchocher and Monir Mehran found *Niro va Rasti* gym and magazine in Tehran 1940
- Bodybuilding made its debut in Iran in 1945 on Lalezar Street in Tehran
- Mahmood Namjoo being one of the early athletes that brought fame to the sport. Namjoo is pictured on the cover of *Niro va Rasti* at Persepolis with the *Shir o Khorshid* in the background.
- In 1971 Sohrab Sarabi beat Hamazasb Sion, earning him the status of *Pahlavan Sarabi*.

MEDIA AND INTERVIEWS

- Iranian news outlets represent the way in which the “Persian Wolf” is broadcast to the Iranian people.
- Toby Miller’s analysis of the representation of sport stars and their relationship to media and nation is consistent with the response of the Iranian media to Choopan.
- In interviews the Persian Wolf emphasizes individual will to be the best
- Choopan’s poor origins and subsequent upward mobility helps for him to be painted as a success story.
- Choopan has openly criticized athletes that leave Iran to compete for another country as taking the easy way out which only goes to support Choopan’s intense nationalism.

HOW HAS HADI CHOOPAN’S MR. OLYMPIA WIN SHAPED THE SPORT OF BODYBUILDING IN IRAN?

Background

What is bodybuilding? What is the Mr. Olympia? Who is Hadi Choopan?

- Bodybuilding is a sport dedicated to muscular developments where its participants display their muscles in an artistic way
- Mr. Olympia is an international bodybuilding competition that is akin to the Olympics of bodybuilding
- Hadi “The Persian Wolf” Choopan is the first ever Iranian to win the Mr. Olympia title.



CONCLUSION

Bodybuilding and the representations of a strong body have been used as a way to promote nationalistic dominance. Hadi Choopan’s Mr. Olympia win became an embodiment of this discourse.

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