



# FOOTBALL

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**FOOTBALL** (soccer). The game of football was introduced to Persia in the first two decades of the 20th century by British residents and American missionaries. In Tehran the employees of the British legation, the Imperial Bank, and the Indo-Persian Telegraph Company each had a team and competed with each other. In the south of the country engineers in the oil-fields of [Ābādān](#) and Masjed(-e) Solaymān played the game too. First the Persians watched, then they began joining the expatriates' teams. In the beginning these first Persian football players were sometimes criticized for playing the "infidels' games" and even pelted with rocks (Bigdel Chahsavani, p. 33). Later officers of the South Persia Rifles played the game and introduced it to their troops (Merritt-Hawkes, pp. 164-66).

The first Persian teams were founded after 1910 by U.S. missionaries. Around 1915 Samuel M. Jordan made football part of the physical education curriculum of the American College, later [Alborz College](#). Other schools imitated the American College, as Persian modernists came to consider football and other team sports a useful means to inculcate Persians with the value of cooperation (Jordan, pp. 350-51), which, in their view, the exercises of the *zūr-kāna* (traditional gymnasium) neglected. In 1921 the *Majmaʿ-e tarwīj wa taraqqī-e fūtbāl* (Association for the promotion and advancement of football) was formed under the patronage of Reżā Khan (later Reżā Shah); it became the forerunner of the Persian football federation, which joined FIFA, the international governing body of football, in 1945.

In 1934 the government invited Thomas R. Gibson, a recent graduate of



Columbia University, to build up a physical education program for Persian schools. Within a few months he set up 24 teams that competed with each other. The sport received an added impetus in 1936, when Crown Prince Moḥammad-Reza Pahlavī returned from his studies in Switzerland. At the Rosey School he had been captain of the school's football team, and in Tehran he became captain of the team at the military academy which he attended. The official press promoted the game (*Ta'lim o tarbiyat* 4/2, Ordībehašt 1313 Š./1934, p. 117; 5/9-10, Āzar-Dey 1314 Š./1935-36, pp. 549-51).

In the 1930s Persia's most successful team was Tehran's Ṭūfān, but in the 1940s Šāhīn and Dārā'ī emerged as serious rivals for it. In 1946 Tehran's cycling club (*Bāšgāh-e dočarkasavārān*) established a football team, which changed its name to Tāj in 1949 and replaced Ṭūfān as one of Tehran's top three clubs. When the owner of Tāj, General Parvīz Ḳosravānī, used his influence as head of the National Physical Education Organization (*Sāzmān-e mellī-e tarbiyat-e badanī*) to dissolve Šāhīn in 1967, Šāhīn's players joined a hitherto minor club, Persepolis. Soon thereafter Dārā'ī was dissolved, leaving Tāj and Persepolis to vie for the championship. Their rivalry has marked Persian football ever since, and both teams have commanded the intense loyalty of a large number of fans (*Kāšefīpūr*, pp. 8-11).

Until the mid-1960s freestyle wrestling was Persia's most popular sport, and, together with weightlifting, the only one in which Persian athletes won any international medals. But in 1968 football fever reached Persia when the national team beat Israel's in the finals of the Asian Nation's Cup in Tehran, soon after which the rivalry between Tāj and Persepolis began. In the 1970s a national league, *Jām-e Taḳt-e Jamšīd*, operated in Persia. Outside the capital the most important centers of the sport were Gilān and Ḳūzestān. In 1978 Persia qualified for the quadrennial World Cup, but was eliminated after the first round. In 1972 and 1976 Persia was Asian champion (Paul, p. 77).

After the revolution, Tāj and Persepolis changed their names to *Esteqlāl* and *Pīrūzī*, respectively, but only the first name change caught on. The new regime was not well disposed towards football. Oppositionalists had accused the Shah's regime of promoting football fever to distract the young from politics. Moreover, the rowdy behavior of fans in Europe and the high prices paid by clubs for star players were seen as evidence for the degeneracy of athletic culture in the West, which was contrasted with the free spirit of chivalry (*javān-mardī*) that supposedly animated traditional Persian athletics.



All football clubs were nationalized, the national league was dissolved, and women were barred from attending matches. Occasional scuffles at games confirmed the government's view that football fever was counter-revolutionary. After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, however, football policy was relaxed, and television coverage increased dramatically. In the 1989 the national league was revived as Jām-e Āzādagān. Football in Kūzestān did not recover from the effects of the war with Iraq, but Azarbaijan and Khorasan emerged as new centers of football talent. In November 1997 Persia qualified for the World Cup again, and the popular enthusiasm generated by the returning team acquired a political dimension when it was linked with support for the recently elected President Moḥammad Kātāmī (Bromberger). During the 1998 World Cup in France, in another game which attracted much attention in view of relations between the two countries, Persia beat the United States 2-1 but did not go on to qualify for the second round.

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