



TAḲTI, ĠOLĀM-REŽĀ

TAḲTI, Ġolām-Reżā (b. Tehran, 20 Šahrivar 1309 Š./27 August 1930; d. Tehran, 27 Ordibehešt 1347 Š./7 June 1968), freestyle wrestling champion, and Persia's most popular athlete of the 20th century. His early death at the age of 38 is still a matter of controversy.

Taḳti was born in the Kāniābād neighborhood in south Tehran, the youngest child of an ice-maker. His childhood was marked by poverty. At the age of fifteen he entered Tehran's Pulād Club in south Tehran, where he received his first training in wrestling. He then left Tehran for the oil fields of Masjed Solaymān in Khuzestan, where he worked as a manual laborer. It was during his subsequent military service that his exceptional talents were recognized, and he continued training seriously after becoming an employee of the State Railway Company in 1948. He gained the first of many national championships in 1951. In his first trip abroad, at the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki, he won a silver medal (freestyle, middleweight division); this was the first international medal ever gained by a Persian wrestler. The subsequent highlights of his career were an Olympic gold medal (light heavyweight division) in 1956 (Melbourne), another silver medal (light heavyweight) in 1960 (Rome), and world championships of the International Federation of Associated Wrestling Styles (www.fila-official.com) in 1959 (Tehran) and 1961 (Yokohama). Although not a frequent practitioner of the traditional exercises (*varzeš-e bāstāni*) associated with the *zur-kāna*, he competed in traditional wrestling (*košti-e pahlavāni*) and three times became *pahlavān-e pāytaḳt* (national champion) in the 1950s, each time receiving his



prize from the shah personally. He continued participating in international competitions until 1966, but without success. He was married in 1966, and he died on 7 June 1968, probably by suicide.

A number of Persian athletes have won more international medals than Taḳti, but none has achieved his enduring popularity, which owes as much to his personality as to the many medals he won. Like few other men in recent Persian history, Taḳti embodied the values of the traditional *javānmard*: he was kind, fair, humble, and generous, and he kept his distance from the powerful while passionately caring for the poor (Adelkhah, tr., pp. 142-43). Politically, he was a sympathizer of the nationalist movement of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq (q.v.). When Moṣaddeq's followers revived the National Front (Jebha-ye Melli, q.v.) in 1960, Taḳti collaborated with it and put much effort into the founding of a workers' sport organization affiliated with the National Front. In August 1962 he gained much popular sympathy when he organized a successful relief operation for the victims of the Bo'in Zahrā earthquake near Qazvin. Finally in January 1963, he became a member of the High Council of the Second National Front (Sanjābi, p. 224). Thereafter his relations with sports officialdom deteriorated. His popularity, however, did not diminish, and his lack of success at international sports events was commonly ascribed to spiteful officials intent on humiliating him.

It is not astonishing, therefore, that when his suicide was announced on 7 January 1968, few people believed the official story. His funeral at Ebn Bābuya in Rey, south of Tehran, was attended by many of Moṣaddeq's followers, and, open oppositional activity having been made impossible after the proclamation of the so-called White Revolution and the June 1963 riots, it turned into a political event. Taḳti's body had been found in a room he had rented at the Atlantic Hotel, and since the hotel was situated very close to the headquarters of SAVAK near the intersection of Šāhrezā (now Enqelāb) and Sepahbod Zāhedī (now Sepahbod Qarani) avenues, it was surmised that he had been arrested by SAVAK, tortured to death at headquarters, and then dumped into a room at the hotel. Those who refused to believe the official story argued that Taḳti had proven his valor often enough and would not be so cowardly as to run away from life's problems by committing suicide. Poems were written in his memory, and in the popular imagination of Persians he became another victim of the shah's regime.

There are many reasons to believe, however, that Taḳti did indeed commit suicide. He had married a woman far above his social station, and by late 1967



he was facing serious marital problems. A shy and introvert person, he is said by those who knew him to have often suffered from depression. The death of Moṣaddeq in 1967 was also known to have affected him. Moreover, recently published SAVAK documents about him do not include any indication of SAVAK involvement in his death (Fāṭemi Nevisi).

After the Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic turned Taḳti, who was a pious man in his personal life, into a major icon of the Islamic struggle against the shah, even though he had always been a supporter of Moṣaddeq. Suicide is a major sin in Islam, and therefore the officially propagated story of his death must perpetuate the fable of his murder by the shah's regime, for otherwise he would be a sinner and, thus, not worthy of admiration. Secular nationalists dispute his appropriation by the Islamists, but, having few martyrs to boast of compared to Islamists and leftists, do not dispute the official story.

Taḳti has been celebrated in a number of ways since the Revolution. Numerous stadiums, sports halls, athletic clubs, *zur-kānas*, and streets bear his name, and statues of him have been erected in public places. His life story was turned into a film project, but the shooting of the film was left unfinished by the death of the director 'Ali Ḥātami. The anniversary of Taḳti's death is commemorated at his tomb side every year.

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