



■ Archery may seem an activity that belongs in the past, but this sport is making something of a comeback. **Armani Ahmed** visits a sacred archery club in London to find out more about its appeal.

When one mentions the word archery, visions of Robin Hood, William Tell, or even the elves in “Lord of the Rings” may come to mind. Though it seems obsolete these days, archery has been recorded through history, literature and legend, and retains its stance as a romantic sport to this day.

While it is reported to have been a recreational sport enjoyed by kings, queens, and the pharaohs of Egypt, records of flint tipped arrows and feather shafts have been discovered in Africa dating back to 25,000BC. According to an Islamic tradition, the bow goes back to the beginning of the creation of mankind: it is said that Prophet Adam was given a bow, string and



two arrows by the Archangel Gabriel after he was expelled from Paradise. The angel then taught the Prophet how to use it and named the arrows ‘nushshaab’ which means ‘drive out the crow with this arrow’. This was passed down the generations – some say that Proph-

et Abraham used Adam’s bow. According to another tradition, archery was inherited from Abraham who made two bows out of wood, one for Ismail and one for Isaac.

Prophet Muhammad also took great pleasure in archery, thus it became a sunnah sport alongside swimming, horse riding and wrestling. This sacred sport is one that is preserved and promoted in the shape of an archery club based in the UK, and it is towards this club

that I directed my aim, to find out a little more.

The Sacred Archery Club was founded by Mohammed Rudall and Abdur Rahman in September 2005, with its head office based in Somerset. The two men were joined by Jehad



Shamis who had been a member of a mainstream archery club, and together they set up a branch of sacred archery in Thornton Heath, South London which currently has 20 members.

“Prophet Muhammad was an expert bowman who used to say ‘the angels attend no human sport except archery,’” Jehad tells me. “Muslims respected archery as a valuable skill in times of old for battle and as a sport in times of peace.” Jehad gives a beautiful scenario: “It is said that the garden of paradise lies between two points. The bowman shoots

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an arrow from a starting point towards the target. Once he hits the target he walks to it to collect his arrow which is either on the target or where the arrow falls. The bowman then shoots an arrow back towards where he originally stood. The Prophet said, “Learn the throwing of arrows, and do not be averse to it, for the areas between the two targets holds a garden of the gardens of paradise.” On this

glorious summer’s day, where I look around to see archers poised with their bows engaging in this graceful sport, it certainly does seem an idyllic haven.

For those who might be a little clueless about how a bow works, here’s a beginner’s lesson: the bow is a projectile weapon with a string fastened to each end making it bend. There is a nock at both tips of the bowstring where the ends of the arrow are inserted. The string is drawn back until the stave is bent and upon discharge the impelling force of the bowstring releases the arrow. Depending on the type of equipment the speed of the arrow can travel 179 feet per second or more.

Jehad tells me about various types of bows: the long bow, short bow, and about the style variations between the Korean, Turkish and Mongolian bows. “I use the Hungarian horse-back bow which is not necessarily the type the Prophet used but it is close to what his grandsons and the Companions would have used.”

Jehad continues to explain the main difference between sunnah shooting and non-sunnah shooting. “We tend to pull the string back with the thumb only, whereas traditional western archery uses the index, middle and ring fingers to draw back.” The fruits of this draw are more noticeable at an advanced level – it gives a cleaner release and applies to both the long and short bow alike.

You can understand why this sport is so attractive here. When the arrow is released and you hit the target – which I eventually did – you do get a thrill. Those who are archery addicts are known to spark up to 300 arrows a day.

I notice that women take part on this field in a separate range which the club encourages, “In Islam women have always taken part in all aspects of life including battle which of course involved archery. One professional brother from Germany told us that in his village there is a lady who represented Germany in the last Olympics for archery. She isn’t athletic, but she has mastered the technique of



holding the bow and arrow in a relaxed way, swiftly releasing it. Mastering the technique is key. In our club we have non-Muslim women as well, they are welcome and we encourage them to take part in games and contests.”

Islam encourages us to condition the body and maintain fitness; I can see that archery requires strength, skill and focus. Jehad

explains, “Standing feet shoulder width apart and drawing the bow requires muscle power. The upper back and shoulder muscles are used for this, the upper and lower shoulder muscles control the draw arm, the arm muscles extend the bow arm and the finger muscles hold the bowstring. To control balance, the upper and lower leg muscles are used

while the lower back and waist muscles control a steady stance.” So posture and control are part and parcel of this elegant sport.

One companion of the Prophet was Saad ibn Abi Waqas, who was a legend bowman. His record breaking techniques were adopted by future generations including the Ottomans. The distances covered by shots using the old Turkish bows recorded 800 to 900 metres are still beyond the reach of modern bows. Archery has made something of a comeback on the sporting front. It is the national sport in the Kingdom of Bhutan and was reinstated in the Olympics in 1972 for men and women after a long gap since World War II. This has contributed to newfound interest and generated greater public awareness.

Caliph Omar was reported to have said: “Teach your sons the art of swimming, sharp shooting, and horseback riding.” The reason behind this was not only for physical fitness and preparation for wartime, but also aided in other areas of life, like leadership and business, where acute senses were needed and developed through such sports. The multiple benefits of archery are also manifest today: this is also a sport that gets the youth active and away from street culture where they may be wasting their time. Archery offers a form of discipline and enjoyment: it is a community project with a difference.

Sacred Archery offers a four day leader course teaching the sport from scratch. Those who pass the various tests qualify to become leaders which entitles them to teach sunnah archery to others.

And so it is hoped that the art of archery will be passed down, and with time, will reclaim its place from history to become a widespread practice once again. ●

For further information visit www.sacred-archery.com

Interview with Gordon Taylor

■ Since he was appointed full-time Chief Executive in 1981, Gordon Taylor has revolutionised the world’s longest established professional sports organisation – The Professional Footballers Association. In an exclusive interview, he speaks to **Mohammed Bhana** about the modern game and equality in football.

As I take a seat in Gordon Taylor’s plush office, I look at a man, the likes of whom started the so called ‘football revolution’ long before I breathed. Born in 1944 in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire, Taylor played over 250 games for Bolton Wanderers and scored more than 50 goals before being transferred to Birmingham City in 1970. He went over to the US and played one season in the American League in 1977, before returning to play for Blackburn Rovers and finally Bury. A fully qualified FA coach, Taylor was tipped by many to enter the coaching world after hanging up his boots. The opportunity to assist fellow players was something Taylor could not turn down. The rest, as they say, is history.

Taylor cautions the general perception that footballers are too highly paid and arrogant. He believes footballers are some of the most vulnerable people in society. “Footballers are never as confident as they appear to be. When I meet footballers off the pitch, even the Joey Bartons and Roy Keanes of this world, who have a reputation for being aggressive, are in fact very mild mannered. How many people know that players made over 10,000 visits to schools and hospitals last year?”

The transformation of the top English clubs into groups of diverse multinational squads has not gone unnoticed. Taylor believes football, on the pitch, is a model of tolerant inclusiveness. However football is not as ‘multicultural’ as it should be - with regards to coaching, professional staff, directors and administrators; Taylor believes the issue can be addressed by setting a number of targets, whilst diversity executives monitor figures in an effective and efficient manner.



“When clubs draw up shortlists for jobs, they need to make sure that every shortlist is much more inclusive and reflective of the population in the particular area. The finance director at the Premier League, Javed Khan is an example of an Asian who is a senior administrator in football. At the PFA we have a number of employees from many backgrounds and we make sure our equality audit is proportionate and representative. Not even our worst enemy could say we haven’t worked hard on equality issues.”

When asked about the lack of professional Muslim players, or players from Asian backgrounds – Taylor sits back in his seat, looks me straight in the eye and admits: “That remains an area I’m not satisfied with; we’ve struggled to get the Asian and Muslim communities involved in football. We’re not reflecting on the percentages in society as a whole. Whilst you can’t force clubs to recruit Asian players, I know they are always pleased to tell me if they have Asian players in their academies. There

is one young Muslim from Blackburn who is now doing very well as an assistant referee in the Premier League – Mo Matadar.” Gordon Taylor explains how he is personally trying to help two young Muslims who dream of becoming professional footballers. He shows me the e-mails that have been exchanged. “I’ve asked scouts at Hull and Bolton to take a look at them,” says Taylor.

Taylor maintains football is very much a family game. He explains how behaviour at certain football grounds has improved dramatically by simply attracting more women and children from a range of backgrounds. “The fact is – if more women are present it generally improves the behaviour amongst the men. I’m very conscious about the image of the game. We have defeated hooliganism and provided financial support for organisations such as Kick It Out and Show Racism the Red Card. The PFA and its members encouraged community involvement when no one else did, in the terrible hooligan days of the 80s.”

Taylor’s mission is to give football a bigger social responsibility in the face of non football issues. Football and sport can get to places where politicians can never get to. How could one begrudge a man whose assistant was none other than former England manager, Terry Venables? The likes of Sir Bobby Charlton, Sir Tom Finney, Sir Bobby Robson, Garth Crooks and many other legends he counts as his friends know the true extent of his ability, yet he possesses such chivalry and humility. Admittedly, I had some misconceptions about the man before I met him – but, as they say, you should never judge a book by its cover. ●