

The Indian Club was monumentally popular in the West as recently as the early 20th Century. Indian Clubs were first used in the Olympics in 1904 in St. Louis under the auspices of "Rhythmic Gymnastics" and remained an Olympic sport until 1932. These days it seems like everything old is new again and certainly Indian Club swinging is no exception.

They originated in ancient Persia where they were known as "Meels". These "Meels" were utilized by the Pahlavan (a grappler and strongman) to increase their strength, endurance, and health. The lighter version generally weighed in the range of ten to fifteen pounds and were used in high rep sets to build stamina while the heavier class weighed from anywhere between twenty-five to sixty pounds and were used to build great strength.

According to longtime Pahlavani researcher Farzad Nekoogar, Meels first made their way to India as late as the thirteenth century by Persian grapplers. Indian Club Swinging is likely a derivative of the ancient war club or mace. In India, the mace is called the "Gada", and it is a powerful symbol of physical prowess and mountainous strength.

Nearly every depiction of the gods and goddesses in Hindu religious art finds the deity brandishing a war club of some kind. Probably the most famous and feared embodiment of the Club Swinging athlete was a man known as "The Lion of the Punjab", "The Great Gama" Baksh. He was born into a famous family of grapplers from the northwestern part of India. To give you the scope of his commanding physical presence, Gama had thirty inch thighs and a fifty-six inch chest.

At only six years old, Gama's father died and this event, in many ways, drove him to excel in grappling. Gama's first feat of physicality came at a national physical culture competition held sometime around 1888. Despite the fact that Gama was a mere ten years old, permission was granted for him to compete when the powers that be learned that he was the son of the great wrestler Aziz Baksh.

As Joseph Alter, Ph.D. tells the story of Gama's abilities (see his article entitled GAMA THE WORLD CHAMPION: WRESTLING AND PHYSICAL CULTURE IN COLONIAL INDIA in the October 1995 edition of the journal Iron Game History for more);

"the main contest in the competition was to see who could do the highest number of repetitions of free squats called "bethaks". Indian wrestlers regularly do hundreds if not thousands every day, and even at ten years old Gama's daily routine included five hundred. Over four hundred wrestlers from around the country had gathered for the contest. after a number of hours had passed, only fifteen wrestlers were left exercising. At this point Jaswant Singh ended the contest saying that the ten year old boy was clearly the winner in such a field of stalwart national champions. Later, upon being asked how many (bethaks) he had done, Gama replied that he

could not remember, but probably several thousand. In any event he was bed-ridden for a week.

...Starting at the age of ten, Gama's daily exercise routine included not only five hundred bethaks, but five hundred dands (jack-knifing push-ups) as well. He is said to have regularly done three thousand bethaks and fifteen hundred dands and run one mile every day with a 120 pound stone ring around his neck.

In 1908, two years before he went to London to compete for the world championship belt, Gama's regimen was increased to five thousand bethaks and three thousand dands. Every morning he would also work out by wrestling with forty compatriot wrestlers in the royal court. Added to this, he began weight-lifting with a one hundred pound grind stone and a santola (wooden bar-bell made from a tree trunk).

...His phenomenal diet and regimen of exercise was meant to develop a kind of pervasive subtle energy rather than just the kinetic power of particular muscle groups.

...Even at the age of fifty, Gama was still doing 6000 bethaks and 4000 dands every day, and wrestling with eighty compatriots in the royal court."