



HORSE RACING AND INFORMAL BETTING IN IRAN

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RUNNING ON UNCERTAINTY

This project documents a layer of social culture surrounding horse racing in Iran, where sporting competition, social interaction, and a form of informal economy intersect. Among these regions, Golestan Province stands out as one of the most important centers of equestrian culture. Horse racing has long been embedded in the local way of life and cultural traditions. Yet, many races occur without consistent organization or a stable professional system, falling short of international standards.

Despite this, horse racing events run throughout the year, attracting a wide range of participants, from local enthusiasts to casual and professional bettors, who gather to watch and engage with the races.

In Iran, what is sometimes called “legal” or “halal” betting is officially permitted only within horse racing competitions. However, due to the absence of an integrated and well-organized system, these official methods are seldom embraced. While official betting tickets are occasionally available, many participants continue to wager in traditional, informal ways, often within small circles of friends or local groups. Beyond its financial aspect, this informal practice has grown into a social ritual and a form of shared interaction.

In this context, betting is not just a game of chance. It also reflects broader economic and social realities. Uncertainty and precarious livelihoods shape decisions and expectations. For many participants, predicting the outcome of a race and placing a wager, even a small one, offers a fleeting sense of agency and control in circumstances that are often unpredictable.



The jockeys at the horse racing track are getting ready for the summer races in Gonbad-e Kavus.



A rider is heading towards the Gonbad-e Kavus racecourse.



A guy into gambling shoots a glance at the camera amidst the horse racing events in Gonbad Kavous. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



A few bettors are discussing betting before the horse racing competitions in Gonbad Kavous. In Iran, it's common for gamblers to traditionally place bets among themselves by exchanging cash on the horses before the races.



A guy into gambling shoots a glance at the camera amidst the horse racing events in Gonbad Kavous. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



Bettors are informally placing bets during the horse racing competitions in Gonbad Kavous. Official ticket sales are in place, but numerous Iranian gamblers lean towards informal betting among themselves.



A guy into gambling shoots a glance at the camera amidst the horse racing events in Gonbad Kavous. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



A male gambler is seen on the outskirts of the horse racing competitions in Bandar Torkaman, where the races were canceled due to rain.



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A bettor is seen in the horse racing events in Aq Qala. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



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He shields his face from the photographer while placing bets. Gambling provides a fleeting escape from inner turmoil, such as depression, fear, and anxiety, shaping our perspective toward the unknown and threats.



Bettors are checking out the monitors with info on horses and jockeys on the sidelines of the Gonbad Kavous horse races. Printed tickets and a lone monitor are the go-to for keeping gamblers in the loop at the prime spot for races in Iran.



One of the gamblers is examining the participating horses during the horse racing event at Gonbad Kavus on December 22, 2023. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



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A bettor are seen in the horse racing events in Aq Qala,. Informal gambling is a kind of betting that's pretty widespread among Iranian gamblers traditionally.



Ice cream container is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



Official and unofficial gamblers standing on a hill during the horse racing event in Aq Qala, Golestan Province, on October 17, 2024.



Official and informal gamblers at the sidelines of the horse racing competitions in Gonbad Kavous are seen at a designated spot for spectators.



A hand of a bettor is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



A leg of a bettor is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



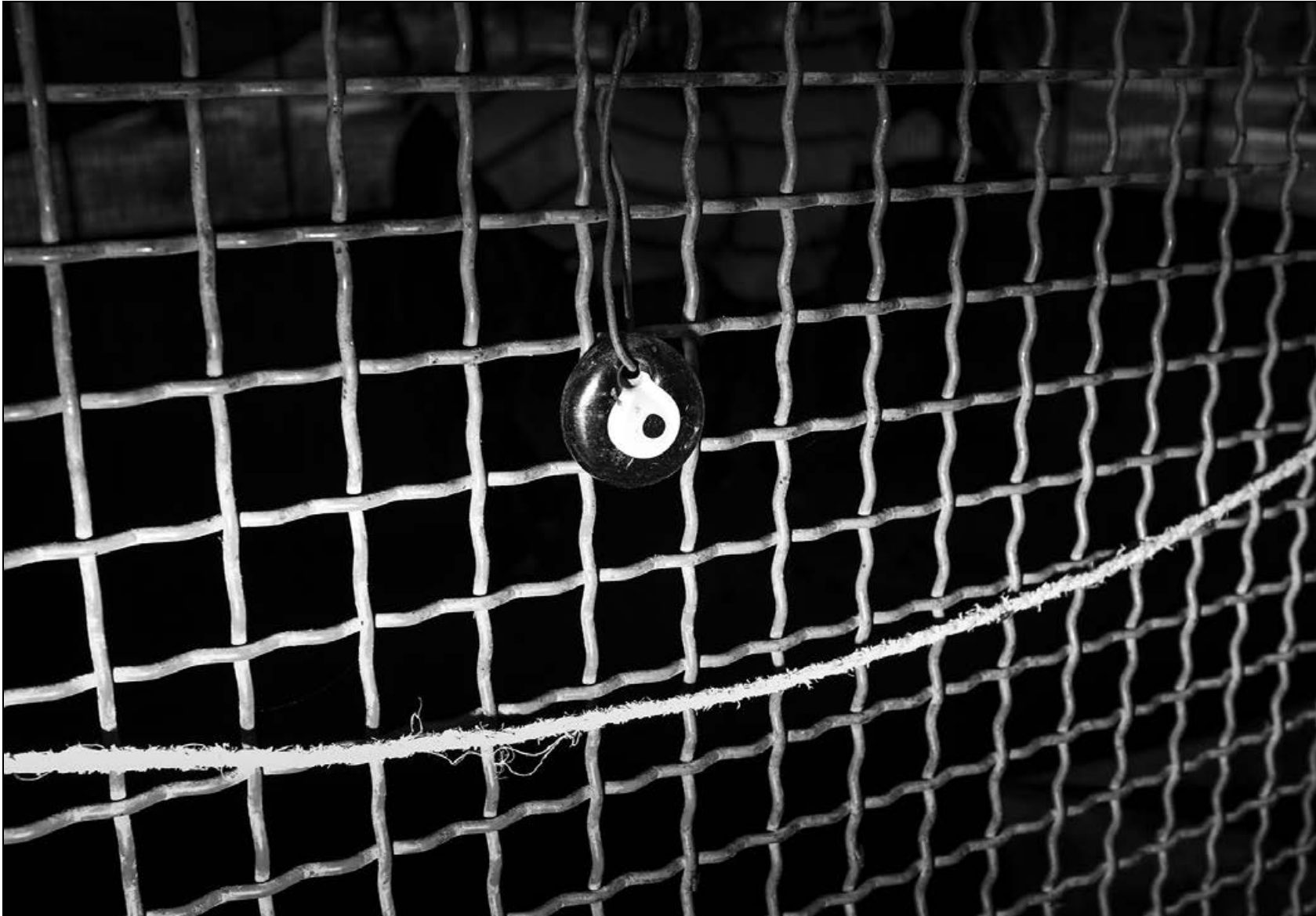
Spider web is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



A boy is climbing over the fence of the Gonbad-e Kavus track before the races begin.



Official and informal gamblers at the sidelines of the horse racing competitions in Gonbad Kavous are seen at a designated spot for bettors. Gambling provides a fleeting escape from inner turmoil, such as depression, fear, and anxiety.



A “Do Not Disturb” sign on the fence of the stables at Bandar-e Torkaman riding track.



The Gonbad-e Kavus horse racing competition was held on December 22, 2023, at the Gonbad-e Kavus in Golestan Province.



A bettor is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



Bettors are seen during the horse racing event in Aq Qala, Golestan Province, on October 17, 2024.



A bettor is cheering during the horse racing competitions in Gonbad Kavous. Official ticket sales are in place, but numerous Iranian gamblers lean towards informal betting among themselves.



A boy, along with his father, is thrilled about their win in the betting of the Gonbad Kavous horse racing competitions. Fathers only permit their children to engage in Halal betting.



One of the bettors celebrating after the final round of the horse racing event in Aq Qala, Golestan Province, on October 17, 2024.



The car of a gambler is seen during the Bandar Torkaman Horse racing course in 2023.



A bettor is seen during the Gonbad Kavous horse racing competitions.



A bettor is seen during the Gonbad Kavous horse racing competitions.



Bettors are seen during the Gonbad Kavous horse racing competitions.



Bettors are cashing in on their bets by heading over to the booth linked to the horse races in Turkmen Port. This kind of betting is a unique Iranian flavor, known as 'Halal betting'.



The owner and the gambler are giving some love to the champion horse after the horse racing showdown in Bandar Torkaman. Post-race, sticking to Turkmen traditions, owners and high-stakes gamblers come together for a snapshot next to the winning horse as a keepsake.



The joy of bettors alongside fans of the winning horse on October 17, 2024, during the horse racing event in Aq Qala, Golestan Province.



The joy of bettors alongside fans of the winning horse on October 17, 2024, during the horse racing event in Aq Qala, Golestan Province.



A horse rider is seen after the Gonbad-e Kavus Horse racing course in 2023.



A view of the entrance to the Bandar-e Torkaman horse racing track on a day when the races were cancelled due to rain.