

Two wrestlers engage in a match during a training session. Wrestling bouts take place in the *akhara*, a sunken square arena filled with red clay dust. The dust is mixed with yoghurt, lemon juice, turmeric powder, peanut oil and milk to form hard pellets, and as the wrestlers sweat, the pellets turn into mud, caking their bodies. It's believed that the mud has cleansing and curative properties and a calming (or *sattvic*) quality, which balances the active and energising (or *rajasic*) effects of the wrestling

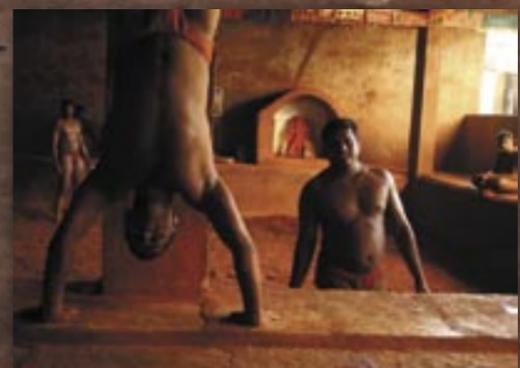


Harnessing techniques that have been used to train warriors for thousands of years, *kusti* is a form of traditional Indian wrestling that dates back to the 16th century. It was once considered to be the pursuit of heroes, and at the peak of its popularity at the beginning of last century, successful fighters were hailed as living legends. Now *kusti* is only practised in a handful of remote towns and villages across the country, and its future is uncertain. Kolhapur, a city in the southwest corner of Maharashtra, is one place where the sport continues to thrive. Photographer **Reuben Steains** recently visited an *garadi* (wrestling gymnasium) in Kolhapur to capture these revered wrestlers in action

All photographs: Reuben Steains



Above: competitors test their mental strength with a staring match between bouts; **Below:** wrestlers practice a form of callisthenics similar to yogic sun salutations in order to develop strength and stamina; **Bottom, left to right:** a fighter weighs in before a regional competition; inverted postures are practised to cleanse the mind of unwholesome thoughts; ground almonds are mixed with milk to create a protein shake that's a staple part of the wrestler's daily diet, apart from on Saturdays, when fighters fast to cleanse their bodies; wrestlers swing heavy clubs around their heads to increase upper-body muscle strength





Starting at 4am, the wrestlers train twice a day for a total of eight hours, six days a week, under the supervision of a guru. After their training bouts, wrestlers sit in the earth around the edge of the *akhara* to cool down, while others practise assisted callisthenics on the side of the arena



Above: at 125 kilograms, Vinod Chougale (centre) is the national heavyweight *kusti* champion. He's flanked by the two fighters who jointly claim the number two position; **Top left:** exhausted wrestlers relax their grip between bouts during a training session watched by an audience of the younger wrestling students; **Centre left:** Vijay Singh, 26, a national middleweight challenger, poses in the ring. Boys as young as ten will travel from all over India to join the *kusti* wrestling clubs in Kolhapur, where wrestlers live, eat and sleep together in austere conditions; **Bottom left:** after their morning training session, wrestlers brush their teeth and wash off the sticky red mud under open-air communal showers