

Teaching National Sports in Higher Education: The Experience of Ulok (Kupkari)



Ismatov Pulatjon Abdumannobovich

Associate Professor, Department of Theory and Methodology of Sports, Andijan State University, Uzbekistan

Received: 18 March 2026; **Accepted:** 05 April 2026; **Published:** 30 April 2026

Abstract: This article examines the pedagogical potential and practical experience of teaching national sports in higher education, with a particular focus on ulok (kupkari) as a traditional equestrian team sport. The relevance of the study is underscored by the growing need to integrate culturally grounded practices into modern university curricula in order to foster holistic student development and preserve national heritage within a globalized educational environment. The research explores theoretical frameworks underpinning the inclusion of traditional sports in formal education, including experiential learning, constructivist pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. Ulok is analyzed as a complex educational tool that promotes not only physical fitness but also higher-order competencies such as strategic thinking, rapid decision-making, teamwork, and resilience. The study also considers the historical evolution of ulok competitions and their gradual institutionalization, which has enabled the sport to be adapted for structured instructional settings.

Keywords: Ulok (Kupkari), national sports, higher education, physical education, sport pedagogy, experiential learning, cultural heritage, traditional games, student engagement, competency-based education, teamwork, strategic thinking.

Introduction: In the context of accelerating globalization and the intensification of digital transformation across higher education systems, the reconfiguration of curricula toward culturally grounded, competency-based, and student-centered paradigms has become a strategic imperative. Within this framework, the integration of indigenous physical practices into formal educational settings is increasingly recognized not merely as a matter of cultural preservation, but as a pedagogically potent mechanism for fostering holistic student development. Among such practices, ulok (kupkari)—a traditional equestrian team sport deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of Central Asia—presents a particularly rich, yet under-theorized, domain for scholarly inquiry in higher education pedagogy.

Contemporary higher education is tasked with cultivating not only disciplinary expertise but also transversal competencies, including critical thinking,

collaborative problem-solving, adaptive decision-making, and socio-emotional intelligence. Traditional sports such as ulok inherently operationalize these competencies within authentic, high-stakes, and dynamically evolving contexts. The sport requires participants to engage in rapid situational analysis, strategic coordination, and embodied cognition under conditions of uncertainty and competition. From a pedagogical standpoint, these characteristics align closely with experiential learning theories and constructivist epistemologies, wherein knowledge is actively constructed through interaction with complex environments rather than passively received.

However, despite its pedagogical potential, ulok remains largely marginalized within formal higher education curricula, often confined to extracurricular or ethnographic discourse. This marginalization can be attributed to several factors, including the absence of standardized instructional frameworks, limited

empirical research on its educational outcomes, and challenges associated with safety, logistics, and assessment. Consequently, there exists a critical gap between the cultural significance of ulok and its systematic pedagogical application in academic settings. Recent developments in educational theory—particularly those emphasizing culturally responsive pedagogy and the decolonization of curricula—underscore the necessity of integrating local knowledge systems and practices into higher education. In this regard, ulok can be conceptualized not only as a sport but as a multidimensional pedagogical resource that encapsulates historical memory, ethical norms, and collective identity. Its incorporation into university-level instruction offers a unique opportunity to bridge the dichotomy between global academic standards and local cultural epistemologies.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the pedagogical efficacy of teaching ulok within higher education institutions. Specifically, it aims to (1) conceptualize ulok as an educational tool within contemporary pedagogical frameworks, (2) develop and implement an instructional model tailored to its unique characteristics, and (3) empirically evaluate its impact on students' physical, cognitive, and socio-cultural competencies. By situating ulok at the intersection of sport science, pedagogy, and cultural studies, this research contributes to the broader discourse on innovative and culturally grounded approaches to higher education.

Ultimately, this study posits that the systematic integration of ulok into higher education curricula can serve as a catalyst for enhancing educational relevance, fostering student engagement, and reinforcing cultural identity in an increasingly homogenized academic landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pedagogical integration of traditional sports into higher education has increasingly attracted scholarly attention within the broader discourse of culturally responsive and competency-based education. Empirical and theoretical studies suggest that indigenous physical practices function not only as tools of physical development but also as complex socio-cultural systems that facilitate cognitive, affective, and social learning outcomes [1]. In this regard, ulok (kupkari), as

a traditional equestrian team sport, embodies a multidimensional pedagogical resource that aligns with contemporary educational paradigms emphasizing experiential and embodied learning.

From a theoretical perspective, the foundations of learning through physical activity can be traced to constructivist frameworks, particularly those advanced by Lev Vygotsky, who emphasized the role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development [2]. Within this paradigm, ulok can be interpreted as a socially mediated learning environment where participants engage in collaborative problem-solving, strategic communication, and adaptive decision-making. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of the sport creates what Vygotsky conceptualized as the “zone of proximal development,” wherein learners extend their capabilities through interaction with more experienced peers.

Complementing this view, experiential learning theory, most prominently articulated by David Kolb, posits that knowledge is constructed through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [3]. Ulok inherently operationalizes this cycle: participants engage in real-time physical interaction (experience), evaluate outcomes (reflection), adjust strategies (conceptualization), and reapply them in subsequent play (experimentation). Empirical studies in sport pedagogy have demonstrated that such experiential frameworks significantly enhance skill acquisition, tactical awareness, and metacognitive development [4].

Recent research in sport science further substantiates the cognitive benefits of complex, team-based physical activities. Studies indicate that participation in cognitively demanding sports enhances executive functions, including working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility [5]. Given that ulok requires rapid decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, spatial awareness, and coordinated group action, it can be inferred that its pedagogical application may yield similar neurocognitive benefits. This is consistent with findings that equestrian and team-based sports improve attentional control and situational adaptability among participants [6].

Moreover, the integration of traditional sports into

formal education aligns with the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which advocates for the incorporation of students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process. Scholars argue that such integration enhances student engagement, identity formation, and academic motivation [7]. In this context, ulok serves as a culturally embedded practice that transmits values such as courage, cooperation, and resilience, thereby contributing to the holistic development of students. Empirical evidence suggests that culturally grounded curricula significantly improve both academic outcomes and socio-emotional competencies [8].

Despite these advantages, the literature also highlights several challenges associated with the institutionalization of traditional sports in higher education. These include the lack of standardized curricula, insufficient methodological frameworks for assessment, and concerns related to safety and resource allocation [9]. Furthermore, some scholars caution that without proper pedagogical structuring, traditional practices may fail to achieve desired educational outcomes, emphasizing the necessity of integrating them within scientifically grounded instructional models [10].

In summary, the reviewed literature provides strong theoretical and empirical support for the pedagogical potential of ulok within higher education. It demonstrates that the sport aligns with key educational theories—constructivism, experiential learning, and culturally responsive pedagogy—while also offering measurable cognitive, physical, and socio-cultural benefits. However, the existing research remains fragmented, with limited studies specifically addressing ulok as a structured educational intervention. This underscores the need for systematic, evidence-based investigations to fully realize its potential within modern higher education systems.

DISCUSSION

The historical trajectory and contemporary institutionalization of ulok (kupkari) competitions provide a substantive empirical basis for interpreting the sport's pedagogical value within higher education. Across different periods, ulok has evolved from a locally organized, community-based practice into a more structured, nationally and internationally recognized sport. This transformation is not merely organizational;

it reflects a shift toward formalization, standardization, and educational applicability.

Historically, ulok competitions were conducted during seasonal festivities such as Navruz, weddings, and regional celebrations, particularly throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. These events functioned as informal but highly effective learning environments in which participants acquired tactical thinking, physical endurance, and social coordination through immersive experience. Although lacking codified rules, these early competitions embodied what contemporary pedagogy would define as situated learning, where knowledge is constructed within authentic cultural contexts [1]. The absence of rigid structure did not hinder learning; rather, it enhanced adaptability and divergent problem-solving, as participants navigated unpredictable and competitive scenarios.

During the Soviet period (approximately 1920s–1980s), ulok competitions continued to exist but were often marginalized in favor of standardized Olympic sports. Nevertheless, ethnographic records indicate that regional tournaments persisted in rural areas, particularly in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. These competitions, though less visible institutionally, maintained the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems and embodied skills [2]. From a pedagogical standpoint, this period illustrates the resilience of informal learning ecosystems, where knowledge transfer occurred through apprenticeship models and intergenerational participation.

A significant transformation occurred after the independence of Central Asian states in the 1990s. In Uzbekistan, ulok began to receive formal recognition as part of national cultural heritage. Organized competitions were increasingly incorporated into state-sponsored events and regional championships. By the 2000s and 2010s, ulok tournaments were regularly held at national festivals and sporting events, with emerging efforts to codify rules, improve safety standards, and introduce refereeing systems. This institutionalization aligns with modern pedagogical frameworks, as it enables the sport to be systematically integrated into educational curricula and assessed using standardized criteria [3].

In recent years, ulok has gained international visibility through large-scale events such as the World Nomad

Games (first held in 2014). These competitions have played a crucial role in transforming ulok from a regional tradition into a globally recognized sport. The inclusion of ulok in such events necessitated the development of unified regulations, time limits, team structures, and scoring systems. From an educational perspective, this standardization is critical, as it allows ulok to be taught within formal institutional settings, including universities, using measurable learning outcomes and competency-based assessment models [4].

Empirical observations from these competitions reveal that participants demonstrate high levels of cognitive flexibility, rapid decision-making, and collaborative coordination—skills that are central to contemporary educational objectives. Moreover, the competitive environment fosters intrinsic motivation, resilience, and strategic thinking, all of which are essential components of higher-order learning. Studies of traditional sports competitions indicate that such environments significantly enhance both physical and cognitive performance, particularly when combined with reflective and analytical pedagogical approaches [5].

Furthermore, the evolution of ulok competitions over time highlights the interplay between tradition and modernity. While early forms emphasized spontaneity and cultural expression, contemporary tournaments increasingly incorporate elements of sports science, safety protocols, and organizational management. This hybridization creates a unique pedagogical space where students can engage with both traditional knowledge and modern analytical frameworks. It also supports the development of interdisciplinary competencies, bridging physical education, cultural studies, and sport management.

In conclusion, the analysis of ulok competitions across historical periods demonstrates that the sport possesses a dynamic and adaptable structure that is highly compatible with modern pedagogical models. Its evolution from informal cultural practice to structured competitive sport provides a strong foundation for its integration into higher education. When contextualized within scientific and methodological frameworks, ulok competitions serve not only as athletic events but also as powerful educational platforms that facilitate experiential, collaborative, and culturally grounded learning.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of ulok (kupkari) competitions across different historical periods demonstrates that this traditional sport possesses substantial pedagogical potential within the context of higher education. From its origins as an informal, community-based activity to its current status as a semi-formalized and internationally recognized sport, ulok has continuously functioned as a dynamic environment for the development of physical, cognitive, and socio-cultural competencies.

The evidence suggests that participation in ulok competitions fosters key higher-order skills, including rapid decision-making, strategic thinking, adaptability, and collaborative coordination. These competencies align closely with contemporary educational objectives, particularly those associated with experiential and competency-based learning models. Moreover, the competitive and culturally embedded nature of ulok enhances intrinsic motivation and supports the formation of identity, resilience, and social responsibility among participants.

The gradual institutionalization and standardization of ulok competitions—especially in the post-independence period and through international platforms such as the World Nomad Games—have created favorable conditions for its integration into formal educational systems. This transformation enables the sport to be incorporated into higher education curricula through structured methodologies, assessment criteria, and safety frameworks.

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