

JUMBO CHUKKAS

by VICTORIA STUDD

The fans scream, the elephants trumpet, excitement runs at fever pitch at the annual World Elephant Polo Association Championships in Nepal.

"GET off the ball! GET OFF that wretched ball! Expletives are nothing new at polo matches. But when your mount weighs 3½ tons there is a certain added piquancy to the situation, as General Sir Peter Duffell is only too aware. "Please, get off the wretched ball!" he says as he watches his chances of winning the Annual World Elephant Polo Association Championships in southern Nepal disappear under a huge pair of tusker's feet.

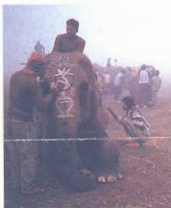
The championships, which take place every December in the Royal Chitwan National Park, 100 miles south west of Kathmandu, were dreamed up 51 years ago in the mountainous ranges of Mt. Moriri at the infamous Tolonggaming Club. A. V. Jim Edwards—an inveterate "Crest" man and co-owner of the Nepalese jungle retreat Tiger Tops—recalls how "a friend of mine came up to me and said: 'You play polo, you have elephants, let's play elephant polo.' He thought no more about it until a telegram arrived on April 1: "Have long sticks, get elephants ready." But this was no joke, for since then, sticks and elephants have been "ready" every December for teams which fly in from all over the world for this Nepalese jamboree.

This December, players from India, America, Great Britain and Germany gathered to match their skills against home teams. For the majority of the year, the polo fields are a grassy playing ground for the local village, but during polo week it is transformed into a buzzing, pounding arena.

Elephant polo is the second cousin twice removed of horse polo. The ball is the same size, but the field is half the size of Smith's Lawn, and only two, 10-minute "chukkas" are played. Chestnut-polished bridles and saddles are exchanged for skin-chaffing stirrups and scratchy rush mats, and instead of sugar lumps the steeds are rewarded with sticks of raw sugar cane and beer.

Players sit pillion-style behind their drivers, the mahouts, secured only by a length of coarse, thick-burning rope. The indispensable mahouts are the reins and the spurs for the player. Their bare feet punch away at the elephants' ears while hollow "whacks" echo from the back of their heads as they charge down the field. Players direct their drivers with bullseye precision as best position their mounts for a strike: "Dead ahead, faster, faster! Left a bit, back a bit."

"Don't just sit there like a stuffed mallet, do something!" bellows one purple-



The mahouts paint their elephants every morning for extra luck.

hours' polo is tiring, but no more so than the animals' daily safari excursions.

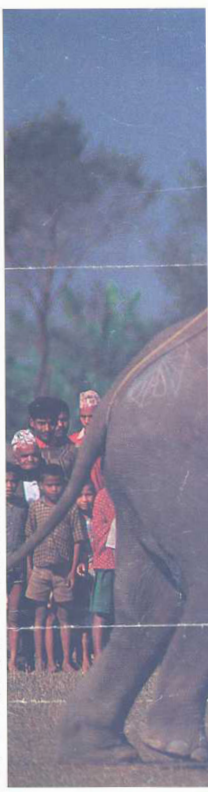
Kate, a spy septuagenarian from the United States, had flown over from New England to take part in her first tournament. "I had a bit of trouble getting up onto the elephant the first time but now I've got the knack—I just hang on to the tail and heave myself up the back legs." A head for heights and legs supple enough to circumnavigate the width of an elephant's girth are what is required out here. But swinging the extra long polo stick takes enormous strength; only one or two male players are able to complete the arc without dislocating their shoulders, and women are allowed to hold the stick with two hands. "For the past few weeks I've been hanging over my balcony at home," Kate says, "hitting a tennis ball with a broom to get into practice."

Women have, according to Major Kakesh Passey of the Indian Army, been playing the game for the past 500 or 600 years. Manuscripts and drawings show how the Magad men (queens) used to pitch their skills against their kings. Major Passey, looking every inch a king himself, is thrilled to see the tradition revived. "It is a very, very pretty sight seeing one of those long, leggy girls right up there on the elephant wielding a stick."

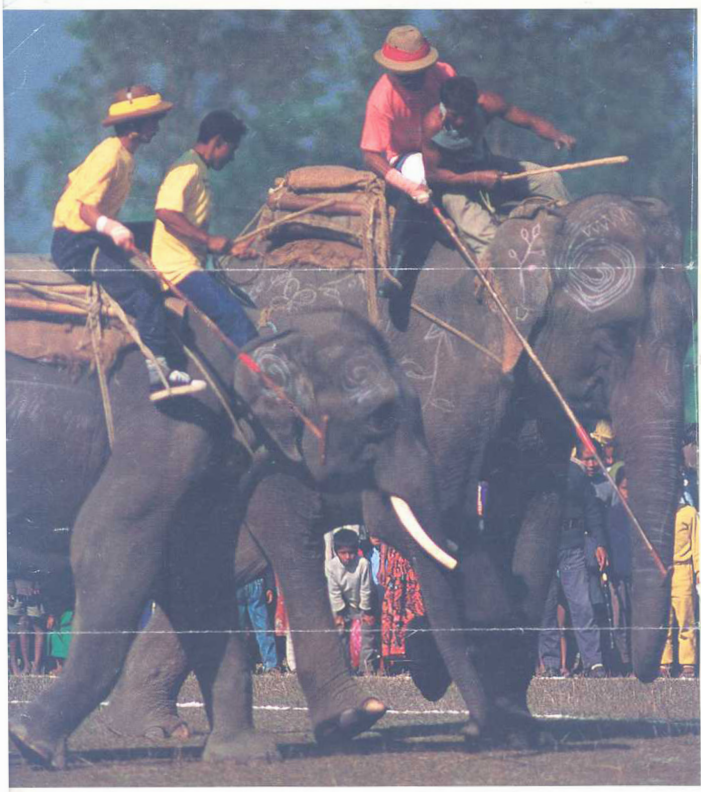
Ex-Gurkha John Tuley, captain of the Haathi Sathus, believes the event is run with the relaxed feel of a Kenyan polo club. "Nobody takes it very seriously, everybody wants to win, but not desperately." The locals, however, do take it seriously.

Fans, friends and relations flock to Chitwan for what has become an annual festival. The elephants play an important part in forest life. Locals will bustle for best position on the touch-line and stay rooted to the spot from the start of the match, waiting for the last soaring clunka of the day. Rupees change hands, peanut stalls pop up

and musicians work themselves into a fren as the tension mounts. But the excitement reaches "Super Bowl" proportions when the Tiger Tops meet the Nepal National Parks team. Foreigners are allowed to sit back of the crowd as fans watch the mahouts drive and strike their way through the gan defying gravity and strength. Meanwhile the "slat-pickers" dodge rinks, feet and wing sticks to collect sackfuls of steam



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The mahouts, or drivers, act as reins and spurs—the players need all their strength for swinging the enormously long mallets

dung to add to their growing mound. By the afternoon of day five, broken polo sticks, discarded peanut shells and shredded sugar cane scatter the grounds. The elephants return triumphantly from the last match of the season and parade like kings in front of the hospitaly tents. Trestle-tables dressed with blinding white tablecloths

display elephantine trophies and the crowds surge forward for the prize-giving. Suddenly the event takes on the atmosphere of regular Smith's Lawn polo. But here in Nepal, it is Princess Jitdhana who wears white gloves and daintily shakes hands with the teams. The J & B All Nepal Trophy played for only by mahouts on their own elephants,

went to the Tiger Tops and the J & B team, captained by Peter Prentice, beat the Germans to take the championship cup.

Everyone is in joyful mood—except, that is, for one wretched-looking white goat which the Princess presents to the mahouts. He, sadly, will not be back next year.

Photographs: Nic Barlow.