

Elephant polo, an innovation of eccentric imagination

Lucy Monro



"COME AND TALK TO ME!" The clipped English accent was authoritative and welcoming and came from beneath an immaculate Panama hat. AV Jim Edwards had no intention of letting a journalist walk past him, no matter how dazed and confused she may have been after a Yeti Airlines flight across the Himalaya. I was summoned immediately upon arrival at Meghauli by the man who can aptly be described as 'the Father of elephant polo'. Together with James Manclark, Edwards created the sport that has become legendary in polo circles and proudly presides over the game's greatest tournament, the Elephant Polo World Championships with justified authority and more than a splash of well-earned celebrity.

◀ AV Jim Edwards.



Photo: © Lucy Morton & Allan Greenfield.

▲ James and Patricia Manclark.

In 1961 Edwards drove a Saab from Stockholm to Nepal, arriving in Kathmandu in May 1962. He made his home in the city and, shortly afterwards founded Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge, one of the best jungle resorts in the world, in the Royal Chitwan National Park. It was in a watering hole in St Moritz 20 years later that he and James Manclark, a former Olympic tobogganer, hatched their plan to resurrect the sport of elephant polo that had once been played by aristocracy in British India.

It was Manclark's wife Patricia who discovered that Edwards owned domesticated elephants - their normal day to day job being to carry tourists on jungle safaris. A polo enthusiast who had played in more than 35 countries, Manclark suggested that they should teach Edwards' elephants to play polo. "I went to play in the Gold Cup in Jaipur", says Manclark of the time. "I got some long sticks made while I was there and sent a telegram to Jim saying 'Arriving April 1st with long sticks, have elephants ready.'"

By the time Manclark arrived in Nepal Edwards did indeed have his elephants ready - but not really ready, or trained, to play polo! "It took us five years to get close to any semblance of an ordered game and ten years to perfect it", says Edwards with a smile and the modesty of a man who ultimately succeeded. "The first year was a disaster", he says of the first attempt to hold a match. "The pitch was too big and it took half an hour to get from one end to the other! The sticks kept breaking and the elephants burst the balls."

The ball bursting exploits of elephants has become the stuff of elephant polo legend. Believing that conventional polo balls would not be suitable for elephant polo, Manclark had arrived in Nepal with small footballs. "I came with two balls, not unlike those used today in arena polo", says Manclark of the incident that is recounted at every turn in elephant polo circles. "I tapped the mahout on the shoulder and, I don't know what command he gave the elephant, but it picked its foot up and stood on the ball - which burst." Manclark's next command resulted in the same action. No one is quite sure why elephants like bursting footballs - it could be that they like the feel of the air releasing beneath their feet, or it could be that they like the noise. But

the simple fact is that elephants like standing on footballs! "We tried again with a conventional polo ball", Manclark continues. "The elephant stood on it again and immediately picked its foot up in disgust when it didn't burst - so we played with hard balls after that!"

Edwards had created a polo field on the Meghauli airstrip that serves his jungle lodge. The first field was far too big, so a reduced area - 3/4 the size of a conventional polo field - was created at the edge of the airstrip. Since elephants are slower, less manoeuvrable and somewhat larger than horses the rules of polo had to be adapted for elephant polo. Elephants are not allowed to lie down in front of the goal (for obvious reasons!) and are not allowed to pick the ball up with their trunk - either action constitutes a foul. Soft drinks must be provided to the mahouts at half-time and the WEPA Elephant Polo Rulebook states that 'sugar cane or rice balls packed with vitamins (molasses and rock salt) shall be given to the elephants at the end of the match'. Each match is played using two teams of four elephants each and teams swap elephants at half time to compensate for the 'elephant factor' - which basically translates as some elephants being better than others. The facts that the elephants are all related and that a mother elephant on an opposing team can stop baby's progress with a single trumpet, and that the mahouts may be rooting for a team other than the one for which they are driving the elephants also contribute to the elephant factor!

Manclark and Edwards not only created, but have been the driving forces behind the game for 25 years. They founded the World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA), produced a rule book for the game they developed and inspired others to follow suit. Edwards, who recently suffered a stroke, did not compete in the 2006 World Championships, although he had plans to do so had his son's team made it to the final, but was at the edge of the field every day giving instructions throughout to the Tiger Tops Tuskers with the voracity of a much younger man. Manclark described himself as "Still the hit man at 67", and played like a demon throughout the silver jubilee tournament in which he ultimately led his team to victory.

▼ Christopher Gierke with Geoffrey Dobbs.



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Both men are passionate about the sport and, talking to them, it's clear that elephant polo rates highly on the long list of their personal achievements. Elephant polo is not just about sport, the Nepal tournament is important to the local economy and Tiger Tops supports, and in many cases founded, some 22 local charities and conservation projects. Edwards and Manclark's enthusiasm is infectious and their sport has been taken up in Sri Lanka and Thailand where, with WEPA's support, Geoffrey Dobbs and Chris Stafford founded the Ceylon Elephant Polo Association (CEPA) and the Thailand Elephant Polo Association (TEPA).

Dobbs and Stafford are as passionate about the game as their mentors. "The great thing about elephant polo", says Stafford, "is that it's a sport anyone can do that involves the indigenous population and raises a heap of money for charity." As Stafford joins the conversation a further busload of school children joins the already 20-deep crowd at the side of the Meghauli polo field. "You can do a LOT for the local people through this sport", says Stafford as he gestures to the ever-increasing crowd of enthusiastic spectators. "Elephant polo has become a national symbol in

Nepal and in Thailand the elephant is the symbol of the King. It's hugely powerful in these communities." Dobbs shares Stafford's view and quotes a line he 'borrowed' from one of his hotels' guestbooks. "It's the innovation of an eccentric imagination", he says with a broad smile. "When I read that I thought it was best suited to elephant polo!"

Eccentric it may be, but elephant polo is an established sport developed by creative and determined men that is not only extremely good fun, but injects much needed capital and support into the communities in which it takes place. 🐘

www.elephantpolo.com

- ▲ James Manclark in competitive action.
- ▲ ◀ AV Jim Edwards discusses tactics with his son Kristjan, Captain of Tiger Tops Tuskers.
- ▼ Chris Stafford and Jim Long square up amicably for action!



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