



Great galloping pachyderms!

Against a background of fierce rivalry, bribery, big-money sponsorship and the noisy clashing of celebrity egos, the world elephant polo championships became—in the words of one contestant—“kinda bizarre.” From the Himalayan footholds of Nepal, Frightfully Pakka Lee Wilson provides the commentary.

“Elephant polo is kinda bizarre,” said a tall American, waving a cigar at the distant Himalayas. “Probably fewer people have played it than have gone up in the space shuttle. You gotta admit, it captures the imagination.”

Which is putting it modestly. In years to come the Fourth World Elephant Polo Championship in Nepal will be venerated as an event of cosmic social importance, if nothing else.

Never before have so many rich and influential people gathered in the middle of nowhere in conditions of such extreme deprivation. The view is splendid but there is no telephone, no electricity, and multi-millionaires, including Ringo Starr, the former Beatle, have to race each other to the bath before the hot water runs out.

At night they burp into each other in the pre-electric gloom of the communal rest rooms, roundhouse or stare pensively at the smoke curling up through the hole in the conical roof, while balancing their dinner on their laps.

By day they haul themselves out on elephants to a stick of sitting-rooms to whack a small ball with a size as long as a barge pole. This activity leads to blistered hands, chapped thighs and unmentionable stomach disorders. Most go to bed early with exhaustion, although a banker from Washington ran up a drinks bill of £2,800 in five days. It didn't help him hit the ball.

There are certain romantic attractions. The sunset is pretty, turning the snow-capped Himalayas into strawberry mousses. Menkeys caw in the trees outside the tent-lines, where lesser tycoons are encamped, and there is the stimulating possibility of being eaten by a marauding tiger or flattened by a rhinoceros.

Still, these excitements hardly explain the almost universal *joie de vivre*, nor to say *esprit de corps*, which distinguish this otherwise ludicrous event.

It must be the elephants. These come in one, two and three-storey sizes. The smallest, with a saddle (or *guddi*, as we professionals call it) about seven feet above its toes, is especially favoured for its speed and all-round manoeuvrability.

Generally, the larger the elephant the harder it is to steer, a disability which reaches its nadir in a shambling giant known to the irreverent *hai poollai* as the “prime minister”, on account of her inability to accomplish any useful movement in any meaningful direction.

Inseparable from the elephants, unfortunately, are their mahoots, or drivers, a generally surly lot, and who can blame them?

The way you control an elephant is to kick it behind its ears with your feet, leading to broken toenails, dhoti itch, and goodness knows what other tropical disabilities.

At a hot resort you can hit the beast on the head with a stick. This strikes some nervous observers as unsporting, despite assurances that elephants have thick heads and can't feel a thing, and if they did they would probably wrap their trunk around the offending mahoot and drop-kick him into India. Some of us wonder why you should bother to hit the elephant at all, when it might be more efficacious to hit the mahoot. I regret to say that this view does little to enhance the bond between some players and their drivers.

Which brings me to the players. The bulk of these are local Nepalese of various social standing, from the learned head of a nearby nature reserve to a pachwa, a sort of elephant driver's guard, who sits on the rear-end watching for tigers.

Imports include a show-business quartet invited to

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