



Above: the teams assemble for a friendly group photograph before the fierce competition that has gone before. Below: in a cool prelude to the heated battle to come, the elephants cross the river at dawn on route to the polo ground



championships, the result of trying too hard to beat his chief rival, Jim Edwards.

Mr Edwards is part-owner of 'Tiger Tops Lodge, and effectively host of the championships. Towards the end of the week a small cell of malcontents, thought to be taking a lead from Billy Connolly ('These people are the sort of people you'd go out of your way to avoid in a wine bar'), is praying Mr Manclark will fall off his elephant again, this time on top of Mr Edwards. This does not happen.

The rules for elephant polo are basically the same as for ordinary polo. However, the game calls for one essential superhumanity you are unlikely to see at Smith's Lawn. This man is armed with a sack bag which he pulls behind him on ropes, like a grounded parachute. His job is to counter the obstructive effects of the pachyderm family's volcanic digestive system.

I rate this man the true hero of the games. He is allowed to keep the spoils of his labours, and most evenings he can be seen riding off into the sunset with a fully-laden bullock cart, to the obvious envy of many of the local spectators.

We wake each morning to the rhythmic swish of brush on leather, as the British Gharukas encamped

opposite polish their boots. They are, without doubt, the smartest team in the championships, although they have already withdrawn from the race for the best-dressed competitors on the sporting grounds of having won it last year.

'Look at 'im!' says Alain Perrin, captain of the Cartier team, as the brigadier strides past one morning. 'This is very British is it, not this ambience? It is very good.' For business? For polo? M Perrin glances at the watch which sits on his wrist like a limpet mine.

'This is the Pasha,' he says. 'It was waterproof to a depth of 330ft and is made of 18-carat gold. It costs £3,700 with a crocodile strap. There might not be many rich people in a poor country, but the few there are tend to be very rich indeed.'

The king, who is probably the richest man in Nepal, and the only known old Etonian credited with super-terrestrial powers – he is a fully qualified God – can't attend the championships but is believed to be sending two of the crown prizes.

After breakfast we lurch through the jungle in a fleet of battered Land Rovers, many of them ex-British army. The Nepalese warriors all switched to Japanese rifles with riot. It is seven miles to the polo ground, most of the route >

< along jungle tracks. This seems disappointingly tame. We get buttocks of deer, an occasional hog, and several monkeys. These fall out of the trees as we pass, possibly with excitement.

The sweet part of the journey is when we transfer to flat-bottomed boats and get punted across a broad river. Herons look at us imperiously over their breakfast, sand martins flit across the air flares and puffs of mist hover on the water, as if the crocodiles have been smoking.

'The competitive angle of this little junket is low-key, frankly. The aim is to play with conviction and lose with grace,' Colin Morris had said earlier to the British Airways team.

He is a Concorde captain who persuaded Lord King that the world's favourite airline ought to fly the flag on a polo-playing jumbo, after hearing that Pan Am planned to do the same.

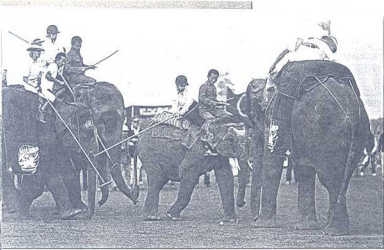
What he really wanted to do was fly his Concorde into Kathmandu but Lord King said no. This might be why Captain Morris is philosophical about the team's chances of winning. Another reason might be that they haven't a hope.

Elephant polo is a game of skill, determination and bribery. Mrs Green and Miss Holgate offered 'her mahoots cigarettes and bottles of cola. They practised saying 'baya' and 'daya', which is Nepali for left and right.

Luxada thought she had cracked it when one of the mahoots called her a 'pukka cement job'. This happened in the first half of a game against James Manclark's team, after British Airways had scored two glorious and totally unexpected goals. In the second half Mr Manclark equalised, having clearly come over with the necessary. Alternatively, the mahoots might have realised which side their paratiba was buttered.

It was a sticky moment. If there is one thing Mr Manclark cannot bear it is losing. 'Unfortunately James has none of this "competition-is-fun" attitude,' warned his wife sweetly. He got his revenge later when BA went down 3-0 to the American women, but not before he had been overheard selling his soul to a wild elephant breeding programme. 'I will promise you anything, anything you want. Just beat British Airways,' he pleaded.

The celebrity side didn't fare much better. Ringo's elephant was suffering from an attack of flatulence as well as the usual digestive hazards. This naturally affected his aim. They went down 2-0 in their first match and 3-0 in their second.



The jumbos of the British Airways equestrians take on the fearsome American ladies' team

Meanwhile, the doyen of the game, the man with the crocodile smile, Jim Edwards, is quietly tapping his way to victory. It is rumoured that the mahoots are on his side, which would be a sensible precaution since he employs most of them.

As the final draws near, Mr Edwards becomes more and more a walking impersonation of *Sonnet of the River*. The gleaming brown-towen riding boots, the pressed haddock jacket, the rakish angle of the straw sun-umbrella. This man possibly isn't! Not if he can help it.

The last day Billy Connolly has spent the night dancing, at least once with Max Boyce. Ringo Starr drops the superstar mask to play leap-frog with the children of Bobbie from North Carolina, who owns his own corporation sorta like General Motors if you know what I mean?.

A Gharuka grandfather of 89 strides out of the hills to introduce himself to the brigadier, having heard he was in town. He looks like a well-seasoned dog.

The trophies and prizes are lined up on a table: brass ashtray cast from the paw-print of a tiger, kukris, and little silver elephants stuck on blocks of wood. Cartier, who had put £65,000 into the championships in sponsorship money, donated their standard polo trophy, a winged horse.

The final is undoubtedly the tensest game of the tournament. There are scurries and feints and blocks. The elephants rotate in genteel swoons, like a formation team from the House of Lords. The winning goal finally comes from one of Mr Edwards's £20-a-month retainers, a backhand from 15 yards out. The captain raises his polo stick above his head in a victory salute.

The prizes are presented by a retired Nepalese general, since neither of the two crown prizes turn up. Ringo gets a brass ashtray. The mahoots get cigarette lighters. Swiss Army penknives and long, white envelops.

Betsy from Massachusetts collects a kukri for looking so smart, proving the virtues of the holistic way of life. Mr Manclark gets an ashtray. Mr Edwards gets the winged horse. Lucinda, Ginny and the rest of the BA squad get guide-books to Nepal. No one gets a free Cartier watch.

I sit on an elephant and get an unmentionable stomach disorder. As the brigadier says: 'Mustn't complain. It's been a jolly nice week.'

YOU

< by the event's principal sponsors, the Paris jeweller Cartier, comprising Ringo Starr, his wife Barbara Bach, Billy Connolly, the Glasgow wit (and on this occasion, manic depressive), and bubbling Max Boyce, the Welsh comedian.

Mr Connolly was sad for three reasons. In chronological order these were: 1. He had to leave Pamela Stephenson and his small daughter on the other side of the world; 2. He lost his luggage in the Hogarthian confusion of Delhi airport; 3. He arrived to find Max Boyce had brought his own television crew. 'I'll not be an extra in any comedian's film,' announced Mr Connolly darkly.

Mr Starr was also unhappy, but only for the first day or two. He had seen the dawn come up in the transit lounge at Delhi airport while Mr Connolly was losing his shirt. This experience gave him a rather jaundiced view of the travel arrangements.

He might have saved himself angst by flying with the British Airways team, a jolly bunch made up of the cream of the British equestria stable – Lucinda (Prier-Palmer) Green, the current world champion three-day eventer, Virginia Holgate, European champion and the 1983 Horsewoman of the Year, David Green, Lucinda's husband and Olympic hopeful, and Hamish Leng, an investment consultant who qualified by marrying Miss Holgate the day before she left for Nepal.

There are some capitalists from the more speculative side of newsworld, a troil of genuine polo players, a contingent from the British Gharukas, and some remarkable American women who seem capable of eating elephants for breakfast. Their captain, a blonde divorcee who was hit by a truck in Kathmandu ten years ago and had to be re-built from the feet up, plans to start a wild-elfant nursery in the nearby jungle as soon as the tournament is over.

A team-mate climbed to the base camp at Everest, only to be struck by a concept\* which led her to start a profitable business selling Nepalese gurgles in New York, and another is an expert on holistic medicine. When the going gets tough, Betsy leads the team in deep meditation.

Which leads me to the game. This was developed by James Manclark, a Scottish farmer and property developer (late of Harrow and the Lifeguards) who is the only player to have fallen off his elephant in the history of the