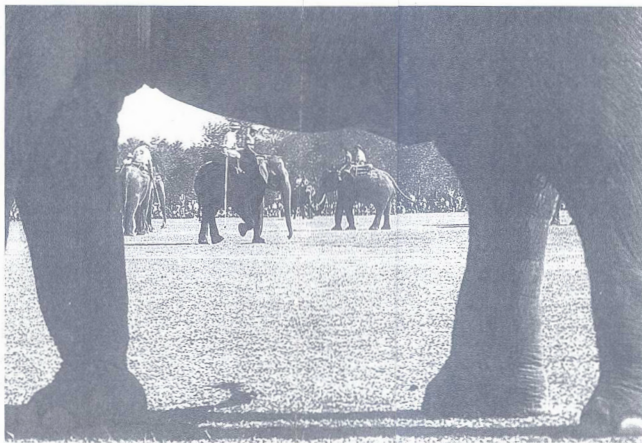


Each year the jet set descend on Nepal for a few chukkas of a very different kind. Ed Peters dons the jodphurs and climbs aboard



Participants describe the Annual World Elephant Polo Championships as "a bit like playing polo from a tractor with flat tyres and the handbrake on". What started as a wild, one-off weekend has evolved into a seriously fun fixture on the local calendar.

Photo: Ed Peters

THE OLYMPIC GAMES may be over, but this year's biggest – and weekie – sporting event has yet to take place.

In the run-up to Christmas, 10 steely-eyed, do-or-die teams from as far afield as Switzerland, Singapore and the US will fly into Meghali in the jungles of southern Nepal with a single aim: to get their rivals as drunk as possible the night before and to enhance their own chances in the Annual World Elephant Polo Championships.

While Olympic creed stresses the importance of taking part rather than winning, at jumbo polo the idea is to take your opponents apart so you can win.

Beginning life in 1981 as a one-off *jeu d'esprit* by former bobbed champion and one-time tiger hunter Jim Edwards, elephant polo took off with a vengeance and for the past two decades *Homo sapiens* and *Elephas maximus* have come together to celebrate the bizarre ritual in Chitwan National Park.

Sportsmanship plays a part. Low cunning comes a close second.

Alcohol pervades the air. It is the almost-politically correct jet set shorthand and booze, atop thundering pachyderms in a setting straight out of *The Jewel In The Crown*.

And with an entry fee of US\$7,000 (about HK\$54,000) per team, this is certainly not a cheap sport, but there is no doubt about the quality. Royalty and aristocracy fly in and polo posers fix their egos, but the Most Valuable Player award always goes to the elephants.

Long noted for their intelligence, they catch on remarkably quickly. Keeping daintily to avoid the ball, lumbering for-

Tally-ho, jumbo

ward with alacrity in pursuit of a good shot and – if they feel nobody is looking – discreetly hooting a goal.

It's like an aircraft with three pilots as the player bawls frantically and the mahout kicks in vain while their mount heads determinedly along what it considers the right line of attack.

And it's not just the visitors who have a part to play. For the mahouts, it's a chance to gain a superstar reputation and stake a month's wages on the outcome of a single match; the village idiot self-importantly chases away stray mongrels, snake

charmers – *sens snakes* – ham it up for the cameras; and the two-man "Ely Poop Commando" searches its moment of glory scuffling on to the pitch to shove it away dang – elephants can eat up to 200kg of fodder a day – the size of a small road block.

Christopher Lavender, an ardent jumbo polo fan and director of the Kadoorie Charitable Foundations in Hong Kong, said: "I won't be playing this year as my usual team is not attending which is sad because it's tremendous fun. Everyone enters into the spirit of the game and usually raise a lot of money for charity too."

Elephant Polo is a leisurely affair, stretching over five mornings, with afternoons given over to safaris and evenings to strategy and the serious business of setting up the opposition.

The rules of the game are simple – it's putting them into practice that is difficult. "It's not as exhilarating as playing on ponies," commented British polo international Mark Parmenter.

"But that's connected by being three metres off the ground, with a stick twice as long as a normal mallet and you're wondering how the hell

you're going to hit the standard-sized ball. It's a bit like playing polo from a tractor with flat tyres and the handbrake on."

Teams play four elephants a side, and games are divided into two 10-minute chukkas separated by a 15-minute interval when opposing teams swap some mildly malicious banter, ends and mounts. Smaller elephants are better in attack, the larger ones are unrivalled for blocking tactics. Apart from dangerous play, the major no-no likely to excite the referee's whistle is when more than two elephants from the same team stray into

the "D" surrounding their goal. Lining up a quarter of elephants to wall up a goal mouth is, well, just not cricket.

Climbing on board is half the battle. Accommodating beasts offer a leg, otherwise mounting entails a scramble over its back-side. Once your feet are tucked into a rope on either side, somebody presses a hidden button and the lift rises slowly skywards. It's a feeling of pure power, as the 5,000kg quadruped ambles forward, stately and unstoppable.

Wise novice passengers make friends with the mahout, who

like his charge, has a fondness for beer and knows which way the game is likely to turn out.

As play begins there is a feeling of floppiness from trying to win a two-metre long stick which wreathelessly demands every effort to connect with a distant ball. There is a delicious, tingling fear too, as swooping opponents canter in range intent on stealing the ball; there's the exhilaration of connecting; the double joy of a goal scored; sweat and nagging pain from torn blouses and a throat hoarse from shouts of defiance and encouragement; and always the solid bulk beneath, now loping, now still, always master of the pitch. Sticks clatter at a throw-in and the dust flies.

Grey bulks scrimmage together then break loose and lumber godward as the thrilled crowd yelps in exultation. Tally-ho, jumbo!

Play speeds up in the final days, when the mahouts and National Park staff ride the elephants solo in the fast-scoring All Nepal Shield match, and in the Ladies Challenge, when the female of the species usually proves just as deadly as the male.

In the end of course, it doesn't really matter who wins.

To the popping of champagne corks, guests roar off to the rickety. Elephants troop back to their quarters, And Meghali – the scene of gladiatorial arenas – relapses into solitude for another 12 months, with the snow-capped peak of Ganesht Himal – named for the elephant-headed Hindu deity – glistening faintly on the horizon.

This year's Elephant Polo Championships take place from December 11 to 16.