

Pachyderm Polo

In Nepal, it's serious sport in a stunning setting.

BY J. THALIA CUNNINGHAM

At first glance, the polo scene looks familiar: the field ringed by brightly colored tents and banners representing an international cadre of sponsors; smartly dressed jet-setters striking poses, sipping drinks; players scrutinizing mallets, testing them, selecting the most appropriate. Then, on this bright sunny day in December, with the peaks of the Himalayas glittering in the background, the players proceed to mount the elephants for the next chukker.

Below: The size and dignified pace of the elephants make this sport quite different from the equine version. Opposite: One of the "ponies" draws a bead on the game.

Himalayas? Elephants? Polo?

Yes, on the occasion of the invitation-only World Elephant Polo Association games held every December (December 8-13, 1994) at the Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in southern Nepal. Tiger Tops, an environmentally conscious, meticulously run facility in the Royal Chitwan National Park, offers guests a chance to watch—and in some cases play in—this most unusual sport and to participate in wildlife activities such as game viewing on elephant-back, bird watching and river rafting.

The Tiger Tops lodge was built in 1965, but the resort as it is today is the creation of Jim Edwards, son of a

British adventurer and an avid sportsman in his own right.

In the early 1970s Edwards accepted an invitation from Prince Basundev, brother of the then-king of Nepal, to see the Himalayas, the rhododendrons, met the wonderful people. "I knew I had to be here," he recalls. "It's heaven on earth. Everything I love—the jungle, the mountains, the sense of adventure—is in Nepal."

"Like many great ideas, the idea of elephant polo was conceived in a moment of inspiration," explains James Manclark, Sotheby's landowner, intrepid sportsman, and according to his good friend Edwards, "a bit of a nut case." Manclark



is a pronounced taste for the unconventional, also happens to be a keen polo player. The fearlessness he demonstrated while winning a championship in international powerboat speed racing earned him a spot on the British luge team in the 1968 Grenoble Olympics and on the bobsled team in the 1972 Games in Sapporo.

One February day in 1982, when the two friends were sitting in the bar of the St. Moritz (Switzerland) Toboggan Club, Manclark, knowing Edwards used elephants in his tourist activities, said, "What if I bring out some crazy people and some long sticks and we try playing polo on elephants?"

Edwards, unperturbed, simply asked the hot buttered rum had affected Manclark's reasoning and promptly forgot the conversation. Then, on April 1, he received a six-word telegram from Manclark: "Have long sticks. Get elephants ready."

Was this an April Fool's joke or was Manclark crazy enough to actually go through with it? Edwards arranged for an adequate number of elephants, marked out a playing field and purchased six soccer balls, just in case.

On the occasion of the first elephant polo match, the human and pachyderm participants had marked differences of opinion regarding the object of the game. The elephants began to stomp on the air-filled balls, one after another, apparently delighted by the popping sound.

The humans had other ideas. With some experimentation and after a switch to the traditional three-inch polo ball, Edwards and Manclark discovered the game had some merit.

Determined to apply the same standards to elephant polo as they maintained in their other athletic endeavors, the two devised rules for the new sport, which is now officially recognized by the Nepal Sports Council and the Nepal Olympics Association. With a few exceptions, the rules of equine polo worked for pachyderm polo.

The impracticality of eight five-ton mounts crowding around a three-inch ball was evident. To circumvent congestion, one player from each



team remains on his side of the mid-field at all times. In addition, an arc is marked around the goal itself on each side, and only two players from each team may be within the boundaries of this semicircle. Hooking is not permitted. Nor is riding off (the very real possibility of having one's leg crushed between two mammoth mounts being somewhat disconcerting).

The elephant polo field, at 120 yards by 70 yards, is somewhat smaller than equine polo fields to allow for the elephants' dignified pace. A game consists of two 10-minute chukkers with a 15-minute break at halftime.

Mallets are 98 to 110 inches in length, depending on the height of the elephant, and are quite heavy. Players usually bandage their wrists to provide the additional strength required for those difficult under-the-trunk shots. The original mallets, patterned after traditional polo mallets, were too whippy. New mallets were devised featuring bamboo in the upper portion for stiffness and cane in the lower portion for flexibility. The first year these Indian-made mallets were put into action (1989) marked the first year that a non-Nepali team won the matches.

As to the trusty, muscled steeds themselves, most of the elephants in the "string" for polo range from 20 to 40 years, although some younger (and usually faster) elephants do participate. The strategy involved in the selection of mounts for each position is moderately feminist. The very small elephants are played in the offensive positions, as they are faster. However, if a small male is playing against an older female, he will become intimidated and will be reluctant to go near her. This is the defensive rationale behind putting a large female near the goal.

"An experienced elephant seems to understand some of the strategy involved," observes Siobhan Fitzpatrick, formerly in charge of elephants and staff at the Tiger Tops stables. "I've even seen elephants try to kick the ball with their feet to keep play going. An elephant is easily capable of picking up the ball with his trunk and throwing it in the goal, but of course that is not



Upon command from their mahouts, elephants oblige players by kneeling to be mounted at the start of a polo match.

allowed in the rules. Nor is it permissible to have an elephant lie down in front of the goal to block it, although players have tried that."

A typical day at the World Elephant Polo Tournament is anything but. It's one of those experiences in which getting there is definitely part of the fun. Descending from the lodge, a stilted structure with comfortable guest rooms and a large tree incorporated into its design, guests climb into waiting Land Rovers. The first part of the trip is an enchanted drive through villages of the native Tharu tribe, past fields of taxi-cab-

yellow mustard, ending at a branch of the river. There the transportation becomes long powered by oarsmen. At the end of the day, a second fleet of Land Rovers takes over, delivering guests and players to the polo field.

An early morning mist hangs thickly along the ground. Seemingly through it are hundreds of local colorful native dress who have gathered from villages near and far for the spectacle. Fires are warm, bright against the mist, and concession stands are laden with tangerines, peanuts and sweets. The crowd is vying for the attention and



Curious spectators watch the matches on the polo field at the edge of Royal Chitwan National Park. Teams are expected to play in the 1994 tournament December 8-13, 1994.



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Above: Guests ride elephants past the Tiger Tops lodges in Chitwan, Nepal. Right: The J&B team, a regular in the annual elephant polo championships, lines up for the cameras. J&B chairman James Brunxner was the last year to watch his team win the final over Bavaria Munich International.



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of spectators. Some entrepreneurial villagers even have attached wooden trays of sale snacks to their bicycles, giving new meaning to the term fast food.

Children crowd around as a three-man band of local musicians begins playing atonal music that is vaguely reminiscent of snake charmers and dancing odalisques. It seems that the musicians play until they have been paid enough rupees to stop playing.

Add the dream-like vision of eight gray elephants floating on a sea of mist to this already otherworldly tableau, and you have the setting for an adventure that is exotic beyond belief.

The elephants arrive at the polo field, which is part of the Meghauli Airfield. When a match is about to begin, upon command from the mahouts (handlers), the huge creatures gently kneel to allow the players to mount. Using the elephants' sturdy feet as footstools and crawling up their backs to makeshift saddles and rope stirrups, the players ready themselves for action. The umpire oversees the play from a wooden howdah on the back of the largest elephant, an accommodation roomy enough for a few assorted friends, relatives of the players and the odd journalist or photographer.

In the experience of Robin Bradshaw, the cosmopolitan general manager of Grindley's Bank of Kathmandu, "The secret of elephant polo is getting

a fast elephant and keeping on good terms with your mahout." He should know. His team, Grindley's Maharajahs, won the tournament one year.

The tournament attracts internationally recognized sponsors such as Cartier, British Airways, the Oberoi Hotel Group and J&B Rare Whiskey, as well as teams from Tiger Tops and the Nepal National Parks.

In 1993 teams from J&B, the British Gurkhas, the Munich Polo Club, Tiger Tops, the Nepal National Parks Department, InnerAsia Expeditions, South America and Zimbabwe competed, with J&B Rare beating Bavaria Munich International in a sudden-death playoff.

At the beginning of each season, the teams in the World Elephant Polo Tournament are divided into two leagues by a handicapping committee. Assignment of players' handicaps can be a difficult task, as one can only learn by playing the sport—and maintaining a string of elephants for regular practice is a bit impractical. Each team plays the other teams in its league, and the finalists compete for the championship on the last day of the tournament.

There are a number of idiosyncrasies that differentiate pachyderm polo from garden-variety equine polo: An elephant goes out of bounds for a penalty shot and accidentally kicks and disconnects the wire to the micro-

phone. The game halts until the wiring is restored and the announcer once again can be heard. A player drops his mallet while swinging at the ball. The elephant nonchalantly picks it up with his trunk and hands it back.

According to Raj Kalaan, a former 5-goal Indian polo player, a polo ball once landed between two sizably larger balls of elephant dung. He took aim and swung his mallet, hitting not only the polo ball, but also sending generous portions of elephant dung flying into the face of a member of the opposing team. A complaint was made to the umpire, but apparently there is no rule prohibiting such inadvertent behavior.

The guest list of people who have played elephant polo includes an international set of celebrities, socialites, royalty, polo players and other athletes. Alumni include Sir Edmund Hillary, Bjorn Borg, ex-Beatle Ringo Starr, polo great Antonio Herrera, South African Bruce Fordyce (holder of the world record in long-distance running), actress/polo player/conservationist Stefanie Powers, Christine, Lady de la Rue (whose family home, Scotland's Ayton Castle, welcomes polo players who are participating in clinics there) and members of the British Olympic Equestrian Team.

After the morning matches, an outdoor Nepalese buffet of various curried chicken and vegetable dishes,