

A JUMBO KIND OF SPORT

It looks like the most bizarre sport ever invented. Instead of fleet-footed ponies the players lumber about a smaller field on elephants, using 8ft-long mallets. But all you need to do it is about £1,000 and a 'plane ticket to Kathmandu

It is early morning in Nepal. Suddenly eight elephants, each with a mahout and another man on its back, charge through the early morning mist. One of the players swings his 8ft-long stick at a small orange ball and connects. The Third International World Elephant Polo Championship meeting has begun.

The idea for what is one of the most bizarre sports ever invented came from a conversation between James Manclark, an enthusiastic polo player – on normal polo ponies – and Jim Edwards, who runs Tiger Tops, one of Nepal's leading wildlife holiday hotels, when they met in Switzerland for the Cresta Run.

They decided that if ordinary polo was exciting, polo on elephants might be even more interesting and adventurous.

They based their game on polo, using two teams of four, the players carrying elongated polo mallets to try to hit the ball through the opponents' goal.

But with top speeds down from a gallop to lumbering trot, they decided to use a smaller pitch, with wider goals. The polo mallets had to be over 8ft long. First attempts using footballs had to be abandoned because the elephants enjoyed treading on them, so ordinary three-and-a-half-inch polo balls were used instead.

During the two ten-minute chukkers each player sits behind his Nepalese mahout, who controls the animal with feet, goad and spoken commands. It is said that elephants understand about 30 words of Nepalese, while mahouts understand rather less English, so a simple shouted code is used between players and their "drivers". Smaller elephants about 10ft tall are preferred, because of their speed and manoeuvrability, but it is the player's co-ordination of hand and eye which counts.

As one enthusiast put it: "It's like playing golf with a fishing rod from the top of a moving Land Rover".

With the referee sitting on the biggest bull elephant, each match is



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quite fast despite the elephants' speed. Short bursts of dribbling are followed by passes to well-placed team mates. But in the heat of a game subtle strategy tends to be forgotten as the elephants thunder through the flailing sticks driven on by the goads of the mahouts.

As an extremely British mixture of fun, stunt and solemnity, elephant polo does its best to be egalitarian: anyone can enter – provided they have a plane ticket to Kathmandu, a spare £1,000 and access to an elephant.

Tiger Tops hosts the championships near its jungle lodge in Royal Chitwan National Park, and puts up two home teams, Tuskers and Tigresses. For the last tournament, players flew in from all over the world to make up a total of eight teams, which included Manclark's Pan-Am-sponsored Jumbos from Britain, a stylish U.S. Ladies' side backed by Oberoi Hotels, and a Nepalese team from the King Bahendra Trust for National Conservation.

Officers of the British Gurkha Regiment formed the Gladiators, while Danes, Swedes and Kenyans made up The Visitors, led with great verve by the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava.

The elephants and their mahouts seemed just as keen as the players as tension built up during the heats to the last day's matches. Riding animals decorated with chalk for good luck, the Tiger Tops Tigresses proved their experience in a close fought match, even if their 1-0 victory over the Oberoi U.S. Ladies came from an accidental goal by 24-year-old Gyanendra Kali – an elephant, not a player.

The final, appropriately enough, was between Manclark's Pan-Am Jumbos and Edwards' Tuskers, with Canadian Marc Payne scoring in the first chukker for the home side and Fred Reid from the U.S. equalising in the second. In a play-off, it was a goal by Tuskers' captain Jim Edwards which sealed the Championship. ©



Pachydermic polo is the name of this exciting game, also known officially as the Third International World Elephant Polo Championship. That is the Tiger Tops Tuskers team (top) waiting for the action to start. Things hot up almost immediately (far left) as James Manclark of the British team takes a fall. The Tiger Tops Tigresses mount up (above left) during a pause in the proceedings. The U.S. Oberoi Ladies' team (left) – Betsy Henshaw, Marion Hunt, Efafe McFarland and Martha Lydden – was alas, defeated. But then, of course, it was time (above) for a much-needed cup of tea