

A feat to trumpet about

It's not the fastest game in the world, but it's competitive – and a Scot dreamt it up. *Kirsty Walker* explains the arcane rules of elephant polo, an extreme sport that for 21 years has been raising funds for charity



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There can have been few more surreal moments in the sporting history of the nation than when the reigning world elephant polo champions, Chivas Regal Scotland, took on the home team in Nepal recently. With several tonnes of young male elephant thundering around the pitch at up to 15 miles an hour, it was a close-run game until the final trumpet.

"There's a muddle in the middle, four elephants jostling for a piece of the action – can James Manclark reach down through that tangle of trunks and get the ball rolling for Scotland?" asked the commentator.

Sadly, the Scottish champions lost their crown in the 21st World Elephant Polo Championships, losing 6-5 to National Parks Nepal. Scottish national pride can be salvaged, however, by the knowledge that the world would never have witnessed such an amazing spectacle as that in the Royal Chitwan National Park but for the inventiveness of a Scot.

The World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA) was born over a whisky in the bar of Switzerland's St Moritz Tobogganing Club in February 1982 when Jim Edwards, a pioneer of eco-tourism in Nepal, was approached by Scottish bobbed champion, James Manclark. "Your elephants have got to learn to play polo," Manclark said. Edwards put the conversation down to the effects of the amber nectar until a

telegram arrived on 1 April that year, reading: "Have long sticks. Get elephants ready."

Part of the airfield at Meghauly near Edwards's five-star jungle lodge, Tiger Tops, was duly marked out as a pitch. It was assumed that the larger-than-average polo mounts would require a bigger playing area and equipment. But the elephants took great delight in popping the footballs and their slow pace made the game interminable – one goal was scored.

Over the 21-year history of the sport, the rules have been refined and games have become much faster and more skilful – so much so that elephant polo has been recognized as an Olympic sport by the Nepal Olympics Association.

The pitch is 120 metres by 70 metres – smaller than a horse polo pitch – and standard polo balls are used. Teams are made up of four players, each roped on behind the mahout, who acts as an intermediary between player and elephant. The game consists of two ten-minute chukkers with a 15-minute interval. Elephants and ends are changed at half time. The elephants, which are normally used for safaris, can kick the ball, but may not pick it up or sit in front of a goal to block it.

On match days, preparations begin in the elephant camp at five am when the animals are woken and lumber through the mist of the jungle to the river, mahouts stand-



TOP: The Tiger Tops Tuskers and the Tiger Mountain team in Meghauly, Nepal. **ABOVE:** Members of the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee team; below left, a game in progress. **Picture (top): PA**

ing on their grey, leathery backs like ships' captains. On command, the elephants collapse into the water for their morning bath.

The novelty of the sport means it attracts plenty of attention, and even royal patronage. "I must confess I thought watching the game would be boring, but I have never been more wrong," says Nepalese princess Rama Malla, as the two smallest elephants race trunk-to-trunk towards the goal. Ambassadors from Russia, Britain, Australia and Sweden, as well as the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, were among the VIP guests at the recent finals.

In previous years many celebrities – including Billy Connolly, Ringo Starr and Mick Jagger – have tried their hand at the game, although teams are vetted before they can take part. Not surprisingly, entry to this elite sport does not come cheap. An elephant can cost up to £15,000, although the animals are supplied for the tournament. However, it costs around £2,000 a head for the week-long event. Most of the money goes to charity and at the recent event auctions raised money for the fledgling

Mongolian Polo Federation, the Gurkha Welfare Trust and the House of Hope orphanage in Kathmandu.

The newest recruits to the sport were six London stock brokers calling themselves HM Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Team. They received permission from the Queen to include her name in their team title on condition that they raised money for her chosen jubilee charities.

Teams have come from Mongolia, Iceland and South Africa, but this year the majority of players in the eight teams were British and Nepalese.

Polo skills are undoubtedly an advantage, but good communication between player, mahout and elephant can make up for lack of horseplay experience. Elephants can understand up to 35 commands and driving is done by touch and voice; the elephants will only respond to the voices of the men who train and look after them. As Peter Prentice, captain of the Scottish team, says, "No other sport offers more scope for discussing

tactics. After all, there are 24 very different minds on that pitch."

The team players are of mixed ability, ranging from world-class polo players to those who have never ridden so much as a donkey. Like the elephants, many players are larger than life. Manclark, at 63, has hurled himself down icy slopes in every conceivable position – nearly killing himself twice – and has read power boats, dabbled in ballooning and prospected for treasure in Equador.

Before 1982, he had only ridden an elephant in the zoo, but had played polo in 33 different countries. American Laurie Jones of the all-women International Tigress Team is not a horse polo player, but a sky-diver.

The long-standing Maoist rebel threat to an already unstable government has put many people off travelling to Nepal. In fact the troubles are largely confined to the west of the country, but the downturn in tourism is damaging Nepal's fragile economy and wildlife. Army posts which normally guard the national park have been reduced and poaching has increased.

There are other dangers involved too. The elephants may seem to live up to their reputation as gentle giants, but they must be treated with respect, especially during the summer months when the males come into season, a period known as "musth". At last year's championships, Nepal's largest domestic elephant, Samsher, the nine-foot three tuskler being used as the umpire's mount, killed a mahout who was teasing him. Mostly, though, the mahouts know how to handle their charges and the games continue without serious incident. According to Kristian Edwards, Jim Edwards's son who got his own elephant when he was three, this is partly because the elephants would not play ball if they didn't enjoy it. The excited trumpeting during a fast play-off testifies to this.

Now that the tournament is over for another year, there won't be much opportunity for playing the game. It's not quite pukka, but no doubt the elephants and the Scottish team will be packing their trunks again in December for another crack at the world elephant polo title.

