

25TH CHIVAS WORLD ELEPHANT POLO CHAMPIONSHIPS
IN NEPAL, 26/11 - 02/12/06

The sport that money can't buy

Lucy Monro

▼ Elephants boast 'go faster' chalk markings throughout the tournament.



IT'S HARD TO THINK of a sport that is more exclusive than elephant polo. In terms of sheer tonnage it is undoubtedly the 'biggest' form of polo and, quite simply, unless you have a jungle home filled with tame and trained elephants it is impossible to put one team of elephants together, let alone enough to hold a week-long polo tournament. All in all, elephant polo is definitely one of the rarest and most exclusive sports of all. It is also incredibly special for many reasons...

Getting the elephants to the polo ground each day involves riding them through a jungle clad in morning mist while looking for tigers. In three out of the last four years of the World Elephant Polo Championships hosted at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in Nepal tigers have been sighted by players on their way to the tournament... that doesn't happen on the way to Guards or Smith's Lawn!

Elephant polo is legendary in polo circles, but few have the good fortune to experience the phenomenon firsthand for the simple reason that doing so involves a lot of travel, more than a degree of 'into the unknown' and not inconsiderable time investment. As extraordinary as it is inaccessible, elephant polo should be on everyone's 'Once in a lifetime' list of must dos.

2006 saw the silver jubilee of this remarkable sport take place under the watchful eye of its co-founder, AV Jim Edwards



Photo: © Lucy Momo & Allan Greenfield.

Photo: © Lucy Momo & Allan Greenfield.



- ▲ Chivas and Tiger Tops Tuskers in action.
- ◀ Col. Raj Kalaan takes an under the trunk shot.
- ▶ The 'Unstoppable Pete Prentice' takes control of the mic!

proprietor of Tiger Tops, and delivered victory for his fellow co-founder James Manclark in his 67th year.

Eight teams contested the 25th World Elephant Polo Championships: two from Scotland, two from Nepal and one each from the UK, Hong Kong, Iceland, and India. Ultimately Manclark's Angus Estates were victorious over the home team, National Parks, in a final that marked the climax of five days of strikingly competitive matches on the edge of the Meghauri airstrip at the jungle-fringe in Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park.

With pith helmets not very firmly in place, and sporting a neon-bright array of designer polo shirts, players climbed aboard elephants emblazoned with 'go faster' chalk markings each morning well before the winter sun had burned the mist off the pitch.

The action began with the British Gurkhas, a dapperly dressed team sporting shirts that were to become highly covered

as the week progressed, thanks to some classy British design, and the shiny smart mirror-bright boots that only the military can produce, lining up against the less stylish, but enormously talented National Parks squad who, being locally based elephant professionals, had the benefit of not only being able to communicate with the mahouts driving their elephants, but also with the elephants themselves!

"And they're off!" Jim Long from Chivas declared over the microphone as the umpire threw the ball in from atop the Umpire Elephant - an imposing 26 year old tusker born and raised at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge who is the largest captive elephant in Asia, and still growing.

Within minutes it became evident that the Gurkhas boasted a formidable talent in the form of Captain Sarah Long. She scored the first goal of the tournament within the first one and a half minutes of the match and was to notch up many, many more during the following days.

The local heroes from National Parks fought back fiercely to retrieve a five-goal Gurkha lead and restore Nepalese honour with some daring under the trunk shots and incredibly nifty elephant footwork from the smaller and speedier 'attack' elephants as a large, and understandably partisan, local crowd gathered at the Gurkha goal. Ultimately, at the final whistle National Parks were the victors and the early morning crowd celebrated as Chopard Hong Kong and Queen Victoria's Own 'saddled up'.

Resplendent in shirts emblazoned with a nuclear-neon yellow logo the Hong Kong contingent, led by Dave Garcia and including Swiss player Roand Buser with a two-goal handicap on the conventional field, faced a team of what could fairly be described as 'rank amateurs'. Owing to the fact that the patron of the Queen Vic squad had failed to make the journey to the jungle, his team comprised a healthy dollop of enthusiasm but absolutely no experience with a photographer, art director, marketing manager, Tibetan Prince and international banker (who was in Nepal on a trekking holiday but had been 'kidnapped' by ele polo enthusiasts) in the 'saddle'.

Chopard established an early lead, whacking more than a few balls past goalie photographer Matt Bird before the 'elephant factor' came into play when teams swapped mounts for the second half. At the final whistle, much to everyone's amazement, the Queen Victoria squad had come into their own to emerge victorious, albeit a little dazed and confused.

The third match of the morning saw Scotland's Angus Estates team, captained by elephant polo founder James Manclark, facing some formidable girl power in the shapely form of the Tigresses, representing India. A savvy and experienced bunch, most of whom had spent a large amount of their adult lives in Nepal and were therefore no strangers to the art of elephant riding and mahout communication, the Tigresses took on the sport's most competitive patron's squad with talented tenacity. Appropriately Manclark scored the first goal and his team went on to beat the ladies 4:3.

The fourth, and last serious game of the morning saw the two favourites for the title, Tiger Tops Tuskers captained by Kristjan Edwards who, born and raised in Nepal, had the advantage of having spent most of his life on the back on an elephant and boasted Nepali as his first language, line up against title holders Chivas Regal Scotland captained by Peter Prentice. The two teams boasted impressive contingents: Edwards' squad including his wife Stine, also an accomplished elephant rider, Chris Stafford - founder of the Kings Cup elephant polo tournament in Thailand and Celia Temple, a GP from Edinburgh who had the distinction of owning her own elephant. The Chivas team, apart from having a captain who had been involved in the game for most of its recent history, included Geoffrey Dobbs, founder of the Sri Lankan elephant polo tournament, Jim Long, PR guru

and elephant polo player extraordinaire from Chivas and lastly, but by no means least, Colonel Raj Kalaan who played with the Indian Polo team for 20 years, founded and owns the Haryana Polo Club near Delhi and commanded India's 61st Cavalry. The man knows how to swing a stick.

Cheered on by his father, AV Jim Edwards, the 'father of elephant polo' and owner of Tiger Tops, Kristjan was the first to score and did so at high speed from a nippy little elephant zipped down the field in elephant top gear. It was a goal that set the tone of a match that delivered something of a shock and threw



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.

▲ Angus Estates and National Parks prepare to do battle.

▶ James Manclark, one of the 'Founding Fathers' of elephant polo, led the team to victory.



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.



Photo: © Lucy Momo & Allan Greenfield.

defending title holders, Chivas Regal Scotland, into a huddle to plan match strategy for the rest of the tournament.

Once those who knew how to do it had done their stuff it was the time of those who knew more or less nothing to have a go. The Genghis Khan Polo Team climbed aboard to attempt to do battle with the Gurkha Wives. This spectacle, the first of a daily series of 'guest matches', saw founder and owner of the Ghengis Khan Polo Club in Mongolia, film maker Christopher Gierke - a man who knows how to play polo - captain a team that included not only Yours Truly, but fellow utterly unknown elephant polo players Dean Nelson from the Scottish Sunday Times, and Equestrian photographer Allan Greenfield. Thanks largely to the fact that Gierke knew how to hit a ball, and absolutely not in anyway thanks to the dubious skills of his media team mates, Gierke's squad emerged suitably victorious over the army wives 2:0.

Notably Nelson had penned a critical piece about cruelty to elephants following an elephant polo match in Jaipur that attracted animal activist attention and was in Meghauli anticipating discovery of similar alleged mistreatment. Not only did he find none and end up 'in the saddle' as a player, but his subsequent story reported that, "The elephants do appear to be well-tended and loved by their owners." He went on to write, "Compared with working elephants throughout India, these are pachyderm royalty." Whatever mistreatment may or may not take place elsewhere, the elephants at Tiger Tops are extremely well cared for and evidently love playing polo. They are domestic elephants specially trained to play polo who enjoy pristine living conditions cared for by experts. Indeed their day to day lives are the elephant equivalent of the pampered lifestyles enjoyed by racehorses, top-flight polo ponies and competition horses around



Photo: © Lucy Momo & Allan Greenfield.

the world. During tournaments their diets are supplemented with vitamins and minerals to ensure that they are fit for play and not metabolically stressed by the demands of a week of competition. The Nepal tournament, like the other World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA) affiliated events in Sri Lanka (CEPA) and Thailand (TEPA), directs considerable funds towards elephant conservation and has the species' welfare and preservation as a primary motivation.

Day two dawned misty and magical as only a new jungle day can as players and supporters rode match bound behind mahouts through the jungle on freshly 'chalked up' elephants.

▲▲ Jim Long from Chivas Regal Scotland reaches across Kristjan Edwards for possession.

▲ Col. Raj Kalaan, 'The Silver Fox' is a man who knows how to swing a stick.

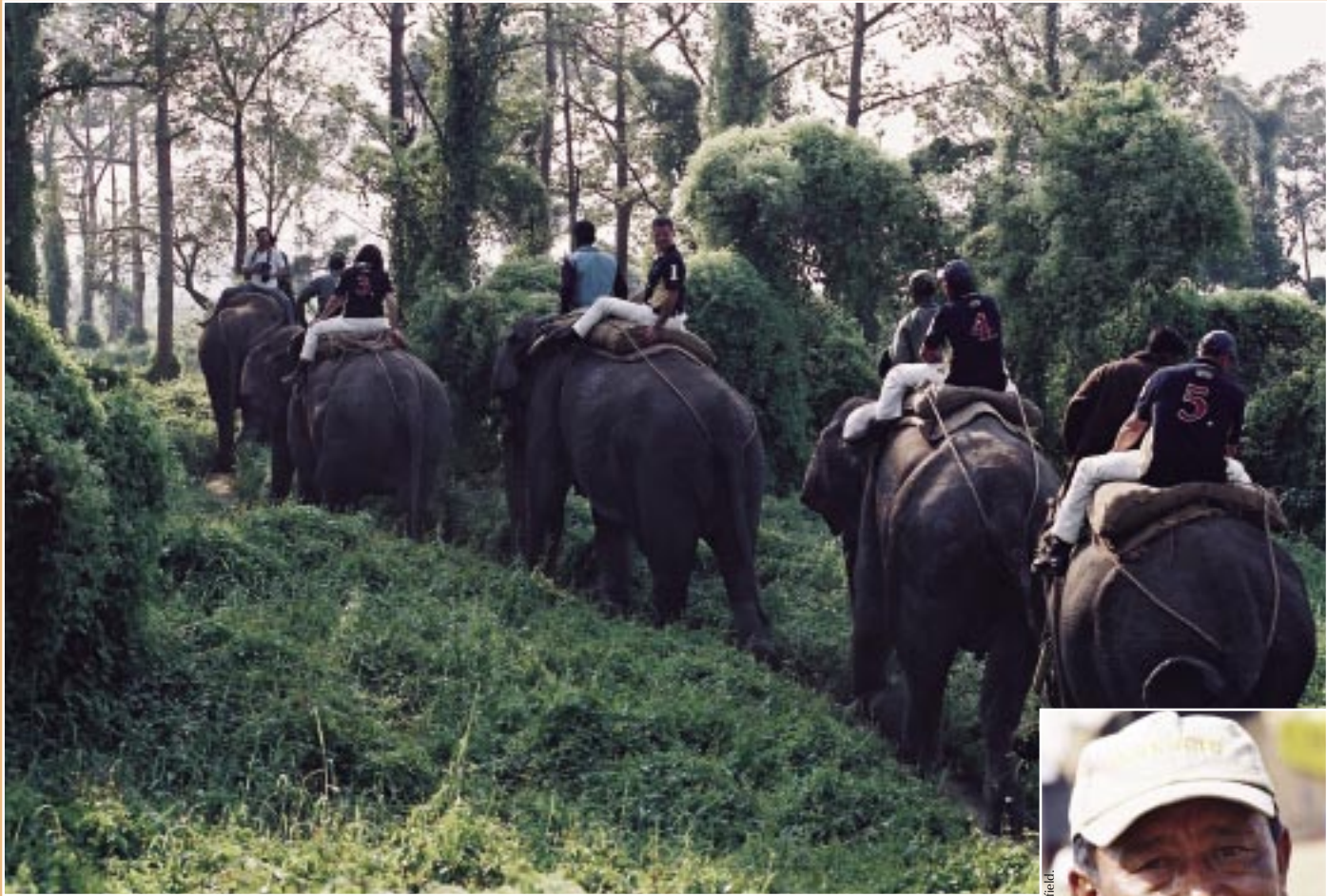


Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.

- ▲ The British Gurkhas ride their elephants home through the jungle.
- ▲ Danni, elephant expert and the man behind the elephants' welfare at Tiger Tops.
- ◀ Capt. Sarah Long proved to be the Gurkhas top scorer.
- ▼ Tiger Tops Tuskers versus Queen Victoria's own.



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.



Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.

- ▼ The Tigresses fight Chopard for possession.
- ▶ Players relax and watch the action.
- ▶▶ Kristjan Edwards, Capt. of Tiger Tops Tuskers, is a man practically born on the back of an elephant!
- ▶▶ Rinchen Choegyal proved to be an accomplished player and Capt. of the Queen Victoria squad.



Photo: © Lucy Momro & Allan Greenfield.



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The Chivas squad had everything to play for in the day's opener against Chopard and had, most uncharacteristically got an early night the previous evening - such was the pressure to defend their title. The extra hours in bed proved worthwhile as the reigning World Champions dealt swiftly with their jeweller rivals to establish a 10:2 lead by half time following a remarkable flurry of accurate strikes by their captain, Prentice, who clocked up a record number of goals in a matter of minutes to earn the title, 'The Unstoppable Peter Prentice'. While the Chivas boys refuelled their mahouts with Cokes at half time the Chopard contingent resorted to fortified tomato juice and appeared to be wishing they too had retired early the previous evening. Ultimately, after a further series of smashers from the 'Unstoppable Peter Prentice', Chivas honour was restored as the Scottish squad dispatched their rivals 15:6 at full time.

With the pressure off them for the day and honour restored Chivas retired to the refreshment corner as the Tigresses climbed aboard their painted pachyderms to do battle with the military in the form of the British Gurkhas. As if to prove that it was the 'Day of the Prentices' Sam, wife of 'The Unstoppable Peter', scored the first goal for her Tigress companions followed by a second more or less immediately. As the exciting news came in that the last player contingent to make their way through the jungle had spotted a tiger on the way to the match, Gurkha striker Captain Sarah Long did her stuff in fine style to bring the score level at the final whistle.

Third up for the day were Tiger Tops Tuskers and Queen Victoria's own. Since the Queen Vic squad had just won the biggest prize of all with their tiger sighting it seemed only fair that they should get thrashed by the Tuskers... which they did, but not until after some determined play from their stand-in captain, Rinchin Choegyal from Tibet, and Chris Johnson, the banker from Hong Kong who had been 'kidnapped' from his trekking holiday.

The day's serious play closed with National Parks taking on Angus Estates. The local boys led 7:4 at half-time as Jim Long welcomed Chitwan TV to the Umpire Elephant and two school buses emptied hundreds of school children at the jungle's edge to join an ever-increasing crowd of spectators. Undeterred by the distractions around him the ever-competitive Manclark

Photo: © Lucy Monro & Allan Greenfield.



Photo: © Matt Bird.



- ▲ ▲ ▲ Riding elephants through a mist-clad jungle at dawn looking for tigers.
- ▲ ▲ ▲ AV Jim Edwards with Andrei Trofimov, Ambassador of the Russian Federation.
- ▲ ▲ Elephants are fed 'sandwiches' filled with molasses and rock salt at half time.
- ▲ Equestrian photographer Allan Greenfield celebrates his first ever goal as an elephant polo player!

smashed the ball more than half way down the length of the field to score a memorable strike as the final whistle blew at the end of a hard match.

By the end of the third day of play it was hard to predict which team would become the silver jubilee World Champions. But as the day of the finals dawned misty and expectation-filled the sport's co-founder James Manclark had his chance as his squad squared up to Nepal's National Parks in front of a 2000-strong crowd. Playing the first half on an elephant he owns, Manclark notched up four goals and dominated throughout, ably supported by his team members The Honorable Jamie Douglas and his wife Anne from Edinburgh and David Wildridge.



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THE HISTORY OF ELEPHANT POLO

Elephant polo is now 25 years young. The sport was dreamt up 26 years ago in a watering hole in St. Moritz by a Scotsman and a British expat: James Manclark, a former British Olympic tobogganner, and AV Jim Edwards who had made his home in Nepal.

The World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA) was formed in 1982 at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge in the Royal Chitwan National Park in south west Nepal. The game that Manclark and Edwards developed is a modern version of the one played in India around the turn of the century by members of the British aristocracy and WEPA is the first, and paramount, organisation to host the sport in modern times.

The rules are similar to horse polo, but the pitch is $\frac{3}{4}$ of the length (because elephants are slower than horses), the sticks are longer, and there are some necessary specific rules - for instance it is a penalty for an elephant to lie down in front of the goal

line. Players are secured in rope harnesses, with a rope across their thighs, and rope stirrups.

The primary difference between elephant and horse polo, apart from the substitution of an elephant for a horse, is that the elephants are 'driven' by their trainers (mahouts). The mahout controls the elephant with verbal commands and by applying pressure to the back of the elephant's ears with his bare feet. The player's responsibility is to communicate to the mahout where he wishes to go - which is easier said than done considering that most of the mahouts, and ALL the elephants, only understand Nepali.

The WEPA tournament has been hosted by Tiger Tops since 1982 and takes place at Meghauri each December.

www.elephantpolo.com

The second half saw the ubiquitous elephant factor come into play once again when the teams swapped mounts. Led by Ram Pritt Yadav, the National Parks squad of Kala Kamal, Sri Mangal and Rameshwor Chaudhary showed the brilliance that only comes from year-round work with elephants, but Manclark's determination remained undimmed as the local heroes scored.

Storming into the fray Manclark took personal responsibility for his team's fortunes as he raced from defence to attack from one end of the field to the other. Kamal's squad closed the gap to just two goals, but it wasn't enough to stop the storming Scotsman and at the final whistle Angus Estates secured an 8:6 victory that Manclark described afterwards as, "A magnificent way to complete 25 years", and went on to say was his, "Most exciting sporting moment" that he "would treasure forever".

Defending champions Chivas Regal Scotland may have relinquished their world title when they lost their semi-final to National Parks, but the boys in the smart orange and black shirts took third place by beating Tiger Tops Tuskers 10:9 and notched up a record 40 goals in the process, most of which were scored by the 'Unstoppable Peter Prentice'.

In the Chivas Regal Olympic Quaich, (contested by those who do not qualify for the World Championship playoffs) Queen Victoria's Own surprised everyone, including themselves, with a 7:2 win over Chopard Hong Kong. Lead player Choegyul won the up-front battle with the skilful Swiss player Roland Buser who showed flashes of brilliance when allowed to break away, but superior teamwork meant the Queen Vic squad's first half lead was defended and even extended in the second half to seal their unexpected victory.

In an action packed day one of the great treats for spectators was the All Nepal Challenge for mahouts, who both control their elephant and play. As expected the match generated the anticipated fast and colourful display of elephant polo and was watched by an excited and knowledgeable crowd. Tiger Tops used their team work and positional play to good effect and leapt to an early lead 4:2 lead in the first half. The second half saw National Parks try to reduce the gap with long shots, but they were unable to close the gap and Tiger Tops finished the victors with the final score at 6:4.

As the international players said a reluctant farewell to the magic of the jungle that had been their home for a week and boarded their Yeti Airlines flight back to Kathmandu the chalk was washed off the elephants as residents of Meghauri said goodbye to their visitors. It had been a magical week made all the more memorable by the magnificent animals upon whom the sport is played. Money can buy many things, but it can't buy the magic that is elephant polo. 🐘

► Stine and Kristjan Edwards.

▼ Sumster Gug 'Young Boy', the Umpire Elephant is the largest captive elephant in Asia. Born at Tiger Tops, the 26 year old elephant is still growing!



Photo: © Lucy Monroe & Allan Greenfield.

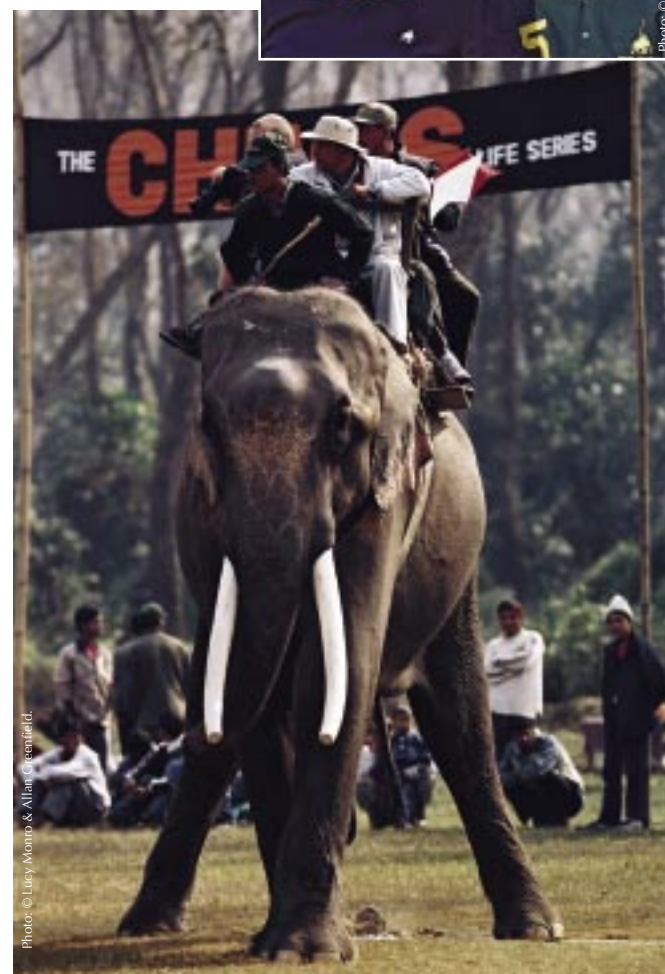


Photo: © Lucy Monroe & Allan Greenfield.

TEAMS

Tiger Tops Tuskers, Iceland



Kristjan Edwards (Capt), Stine Heiselberg
Celia Temple, Chris Stafford, Will Cook.

British Gurkhas, Nepal



Billy Thomson, Julie Maynard, Sarah Marshall (Capt)
Gavin O'Keefe, Richard Bell, Steve Marsh, Phil Lannon
Jim Thornhill, Wes Hughes, Fritz Frazer

National Parks, Nepal



Ram Pritt (Capt), Rameshwor PD. Chaudhary
America PD. Chaudhary, Chandra Man Tamang
Sri Mangal Chaudhary, Kala Kumal, Thaja Pajiyaar

Chopard, Hong Kong



Dave (Capt) and Celia Garcia, Roland Buser and
Wei Shan, Ricky Smith, Jon Tittley

Queen Victoria's Own, UK



Rinchen Choegyal (Capt), Richard Davis,
Chris Johnson, Verity Davis, Matthew Bird

Angus Estates, Scotland



Hon. Jamie Douglas, James Manclark (Capt)
David Wildridge, Anne Douglas, Patricia Manclark

Chivas Regal, Scotland



Jim Long, Geoffrey Dobbs, Raj Kalaan
Peter Prentice (Capt)

Tigresses, India



Sam Prentice, Tia Rongsen (Capt)
Carolyn Syangbo, Marsha Nazarova