

Elephant Polo Is the Moguls' Sport For Both Pros and Novices in Nepal

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MEGHAULI, Nepal — When princes in Mogul India created **elephant polo** in the 18th century, they married two rich South Asian traditions: a reverence for **elephants** and an ancient Persian sport spread across India by descendants of Genghis Khan's marauding Mongol horsemen.

Today, in the jungle foothills of the Himalayas, the Hindu kingdom of Nepal hosts a modern version of the game each winter, but it is played by a different sort of mogul.

Alf Erickson, heir to a bread fortune and a collector of corkscrews, cheers from the sidelines as his team runs up the score against Steven Swig, a wealthy San Francisco lawyer who, when he gets home, plans to blast some of his father-in-law's cremated remains into space on a U.S. rocket. Dropping in shortly will be action-film star Steven Seagal, Hollywood's first reincarnated Tibetan lama. (He was proclaimed such last year by a Tibetan monk.)

The 16th annual World Elephant Polo Association championship is off and running — sort of.

"We need to send in dung control," shouts Maggie McDougal, who works for the event's promoter. Two Nepalese men with burlap bags dash onto the field to collect a jumbo deposit, lest an even bigger pileup occur. Suddenly, the pair, trapped amid flapping ears and thundering feet, are dodging one of the day's few well-hit balls.

Towering overhead, jet-setters in jodhpurs, knee-high leather boots, pith helmets and Harrods riding gloves flail about on four-ton beasts, swinging 8-foot long

bamboo mallets. Some players are touching their first trunk not made by Louis Vuitton.

The spectacle is prime entertainment for barefoot villagers who have gathered six deep around the field to gawk and gamble. They giggle at the awkward teamwork between pachyderm, player and maout, the elephant's lifelong trainer who sits on its neck and drives it with wild hoots, an iron bar, kicks to the ear and the pelvic thrusts of a rodeo champ.

"To play elephant polo," says Jim Edwards, 62 years old and the tournament's founder and promoter, "you need unarthritic hips, a well-padded bottom and a hip flask at all times."

A fellow polo-playing Briton broached the idea for the event over a drink at a club in St. Moritz, Switzerland, in 1981. Mr. Edwards, who has his own elephant herd and has been organizing jungle safaris in Nepal since 1962, thought his pal was joking until he got a telegram from him saying: "Have long sticks and balls. You get elephants ready."

Since then, the eight-team invitational tournament, held in one of the world's poorest countries, has become the haunt of globe-trotters who can afford the \$5,000 entrance fee per team and the post-polo revelry at Mr. Edwards's \$400-a-night jungle lodge. This year's clique boasts aristocrats from Nepal, India and Scotland, an Argentine-German baron and British Prince Edward's private secretary.

As the dung collectors run for their lives on the field, Peter Prentice, a British liquor executive, calls the play-by-play from the announcer's booth. "That's a brilliant shot. It almost killed the cameraman and the pooper-scoopers," he tells the crowd of several hundred. Earlier, he set the tone for the morning's competition by ordering four Bloody Marys over the loudspeaker.

Along with Mr. Edwards, Mr. Prentice has helped revive a game first depicted in Mogul-era miniature paintings of elephant-borne women, possibly royal concubines, hitting balls with mallets. It resurfaced in India 50 years ago when the maharajah of Jaipur organized a match during a pony-polo tournament. "That was just stupid fun. This is serious," says Mr. Prentice, who captains the Chivas Regal team.

First-Timers

Forget the romance of **elephants** in Rudyard Kipling's South Asia. Participants in the weeklong tournament are drawn by the novelty of playing one of the world's fastest games on one of nature's slowest beasts. Most know Mr. Edwards through elite polo or tobogganing circuits.

Not Steven and Mary Swig. These rookies discovered **elephant polo** on the celebrity sports-event circuit. They won their place at a charity auction in Puerto Rico, conducted by onetime child preacher Marjoe Gortner. "As a former evangelist, Marjoe is a fantastic auctioneer," says Mr. Swig.

Among Mr. Swig's other buys, he recalls against the backdrop of 21,000-foot peaks: a Harley-Davidson fitted out by Louis Vuitton. "It's the only one in the world," says Mrs. Swig, a silk-underwear designer.

In a nearby tent sits Floridian Alf Erickson, from Fort Lauderdale, who gave up a law career to indulge his passions: hot-air ballooning, Antarctic expeditions, his corkscrews — a world-class collection of 4,000 — and **elephant polo**. "I don't take this seriously," says Mr. Erickson. "I take it obsessively."

His team, the Screwy Tuskers, is making its fourth appearance, and trying to avoid another last-place finish. This year, Mr. Erickson's four daughters joltily kicked him off the team, scored more goals in one chukker, or 10-minute half, than they had in three previous tournaments combined, and placed seventh, thanks to a sudden-death overtime win.

Strong Incentive

The loser, Mr. Swig, is upset. His **elephant** didn't move in the first half, when he gave up six goals, and Mr. Swig suspects the problem with his mahout is that he has been bought off. This year, hoping to prevent cahoots among the mahouts, tournament organizers gave each driver, in addition to pay and tips, 200 Nepalese rupees (\$3.15) for every chukker he won. That's strong incentive for someone who earns \$35 a month. Mr. Swig isn't consoled.

Elephant-polo rules evolve. At first, the game was played on a 990-foot field, as pony polo is. "But it took half an hour to get from one end to the other," says Mr. Edwards. They tried soccer balls, but the elephants kept crushing them. A second mahout used to ride on

the rump, but "the backswing would knock the rear-gunner off," he adds. To level the playing field, teams swap elephants at half time.

Because of heavy rains, this year's tournament had to be truncated. The field shrank to 70 meters from 100 meters, and each team fielded three players on three elephants instead of the usual four, thus producing more exciting, fluid action.

Showing finesse, Gurpal Singh taps the ball in a dribble as his grunting elephant shuffles toward the goal in the championship game. Mr. Edwards's team, packed with real polo players including Mr. Singh, upsets the defending champs, Nepal's National Parks, 10-8. Knowing polo helps, but it doesn't spare you embarrassing misses. "Horses are level," says Mr. Singh. "Elephants rise two inches when they inhale."

Seagal's Landing

Mahouts insist that their gentle giants love to play. And Megghauli villagers, basking in the celebrity glow, protested when Mr. Edwards considered moving the venue. Their loyalty is rewarded when two helicopters land at the airstrip next to the field.

Out steps Mr. Seagal, the brawny film star. Resplendent in a collarless red-silk tunic, he is shadowed by his nutritionist, who frequently squeezes a mystery fluid from a dropper into his glass. Mr. Seagal swigs, then spits.

The tournament is over, but he wants to play. Mr. Seagal daintily removes his tunic, bead necklaces and rings, hands them to an aide and mounts. Fawning bystanders offer him polo tips, but the martial-arts hero silences them, saying: "I only did one thing in my life, and that was fight. I never did sports."

As the awards ceremony ends, participants are already looking ahead to their next adventure. Mr. Edwards is planning a summer trip to Mongolia to introduce equine polo in Genghis Khan's homeland. Mr. Erickson is ordering leather chaps to upgrade his team uniform. And Mrs. Swig is negotiating to buy her own elephant, which will ply the Nepalese jungle wearing an amulet containing still more of her father's ashes.