

Founding father: a polo pioneer

Lucy Monro

What began with a long journey in a Saab developed into a polo adventure that put the game on the international map in some of the world's remote regions and re-established polo as a glamorous modern-day sport in the land of its birth. And the story's far from over yet...

aV Jim Edwards, best known today as the co-founder of elephant polo and the Chairman of the World Elephant Polo Association, can rightfully be hailed as the 'Father of polo' on the Asian sub-continent. Elephant polo is just one of his many remarkable achievements.

In 1961 Jim drove a Saab from Stockholm to Nepal. Arriving in Kathmandu in 1962, he made the city his home and went on to pioneer eco-tourism with the development of the Tiger Mountain travel group and dedicate much of his life to the development of the sport he fell in love with in the Himalayan kingdom - polo. The World Elephant Polo Championships that take place every November/December in Nepal have become the stuff of polo legend, but few in today's polo world realise that many other extremely high-profile horse polo tournaments owe their existence and modern-day success to Jim. The Tiger Mountain Prithvi Singh Cup and the J&B Baroda Cup in India were founded by the man from Kathmandu, as was the now world renowned Ghengis Khan Polo Club and camp on the Mongolian Steppe.

Jim has played polo (not of a high standard, Jim immediately confesses) across the land of the old British Empire, from Delhi, to Manipur, to Ladakh, Gilgit, and onwards across the Himalaya to Mongolia... Where the likes of Michael Palin and other travel and polo writers now struggle to reach, Jim explored decades

ago! His story is one of teamwork and determination and, perhaps most importantly, love of the game that is polo in all its incarnations.

Jim's polo career began in the 1960s in Kathmandu where he kept a couple of ponies, for 'stick and ball' but his phenomenal polo exploits really began in the 1980s when his friend, and co-founder of elephant polo, James Manclark put him up on a decent pony at Haddington. "James put me on one of his ponies that he knew would buck me off", recalls Jim with a smile. "It did, but I got back on and I got the bug!" Jim joined Ham Polo Club shortly afterwards (where he is a Life Member) and also began to play polo at the President's Polo Club in Delhi with Col. Raj Kalaan, then captain of the Indian Polo Team, who trained Jim's ponies for him.

Probably with one eye on the future development of the sport, Jim named his ponies after the company he had founded in Nepal, Tiger Mountain - Tiger Snow, Tiger Tops and Tiger Bay numbered among his string and it wasn't long before Tiger Mountain sponsored its first low-goal tournament in India.

Jim and Raj had the ponies and the opportunity, the only thing lacking was international sponsorship for the game... and then along came Peter Prentice. Peter, now also a renowned elephant polo player and captain of the six-time world champion Chivas Scotland squad, was quick to grasp the vision that Jim

AV Jim Edwards with Col. Raj Kalaan (left) and Peter Prentice at WEPA 2007 and playing at the President's Bodyguard Polo Club in Delhi in 1988.

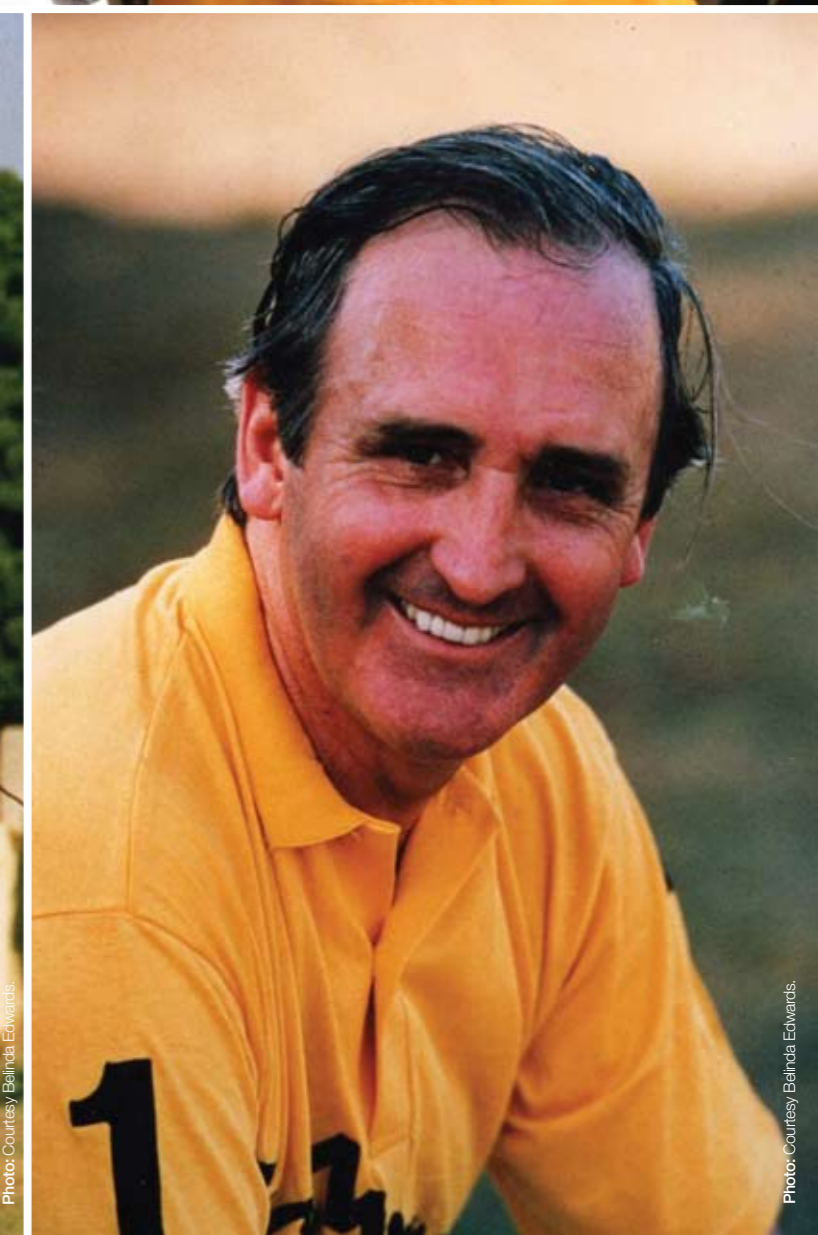




Photo: Courtesy, Tiger Mountain

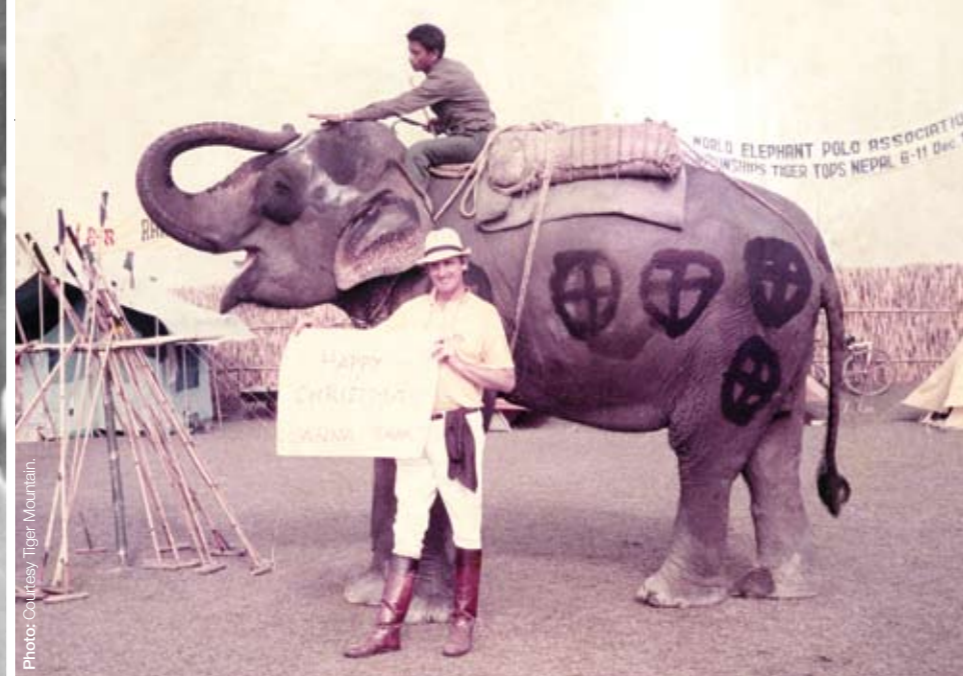


Photo: Courtesy, Tiger Mountain



Photo: Courtesy, Lisa Choegyal



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Jim's son, Kristjan, was the first to organise an actual polo game in Mongolia.
FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jim's tireless work to develop polo in Asia led to support and interest from numerous significant personalities-with HRH The Duke Edinburgh; At an early WEPA tournament; With Tony Hagen and Sir Edmund Hillary; With Hillary Clinton in April 1985; Inspecting the elephant parade at WEPA 2007; With Lucy Monro and Col. Raj Kalaan; Steven Segal in 1997; Playing in the inaugural WEPA tournament in 1982.

and Raj shared and brought sponsorship into the game in India with the backing of his then employer J&B.

In 1986 the Tiger Mountain Prithvi Singh Cup was born followed in 1989 by the J&B Baroda Cup. "It was the first time that commercial sponsorship had been introduced in India", explains Jim. "That early sponsorship started the sponsorship phenomenon in India and re-established polo in the country." Indeed it did do exactly that. Polo in India was, until the 1980s, enduring something of a hiatus in the country and had become essentially a military sport with little social intervention or kudos.

With the invaluable help and support of Indian polo patrons, Rajmata Jaipur, Vikram Aditya Singh Crown Prince of Kashmir and Maharaja 'Bubbles' Jodhpur who brought patronage and a touch of true class to the ventures, Jim and Peter's involvement relaunched the sport and, very quickly, polo in India became synonymous with glamour. The Tiger Mountain Baroda Ball at the Imperial Hotel became the 'must go to' party in Delhi as India's socialites rubbed shoulders with international polo teams from Germany, Australia and South Africa. "We put the glamour back in", says Jim simply of the transformation that Indian polo enjoyed as a result of his efforts. "It was a two-pronged attack, Peter provided the budget for the social side and we provided the polo."

Mindful of the need for the sport to continue to develop, Jim focussed on young players and kept the Tiger Mountain Cup as a six-goal tournament while the Baroda Cup was an international 12-goal event. "Some of the players who played then for us now play for India", he says with evident and deserved pride. Indeed Angad and Uday Kalaan, Raj Kalaan's sons, now play on the Indian national team.

As support for Indian polo gathered momentum Jim was asked to sponsor the first modern venture into polo in Manipur in remote north east India. His eyes light up as he tells of his time spent in the region in which, historically polo was played with seven-a-side, very rough with 'no' rules applied, on very small fast ponies. "It was an opportunity to recreate the first days of polo", he explains with a smile, "the days of the Raj at the end of the 1800s."

Jim's tribal polo adventures took him from Manipur to Ladakh and across into Gilgit (in Pakistan). "We played five a side in Ladakh and Gilgit and seven a side in Manipur", he

explains. "Traditionally polo was played wherever there was fodder for the horses - hence those locations."

And so to Mongolia, believed by many to be the land of polo's birth. "We'd done WEPA, India and Manipur and Ladakh", recalls Jim. "Step four was to move into Mongolia. I'd always wanted to go there because I believe polo was started there. I'd been to museums and libraries and had documents translated, but I still did not find actual proof of polo's origins."

As anyone who has travelled to Gilgit and onwards across the Hindukush and Karakorum knows, the region known as the 'Roof of the World' is remote in the extreme. But Jim was undeterred and ventured onwards. For the first game, Jim's son Kristjan ventured out with their driver to cut willow branches for sticks and to dig up willow roots from which they fashioned the mallet heads. Kristjan was the first to organise an actual game in Mongolia by going out and rounding up Mongolian herdsman to try their hand at polo. The game was held in Karakorum in July 1997, where two red stools stood in for goalposts. "So much for no tactics", says Jim with a smile about the local players' ability when he arrived. "Within two weeks they were better than we were. We gave them tactics and they became superb - but when they thrashed each other with horse whips. I would pull back fast!"

A year later Jim and his cohorts returned to Mongolia, this time with 100 polo shirts and sticks provided by Raj Kalaan, and 20 sponsors. Joining Jim, Kristjan and polo player Hattie Broadhead, were Col Raj, Aimee Junker and Dr. Celia Temple of Edinburgh. "By 1997/98 we had really got things going", Jim says with a smile. Those words are something of an understatement - in reality Jim had founded the Ghengis Khan Polo Club, run today by Christopher Gierke on the Mongolian Steppe, and laid the foundations for the future of modern-day polo in Mongolia.

So, next time you stand sipping Chivas and the best vintages on the edge of the polo field in India, or enjoy the exquisitely remote luxury of the Ghengis Khan Polo Club and camp in Mongolia, or witness the thrill of tribal mountain polo in Ladakh or Manipur, take a moment to think of the men without whom the sport would be very different indeed in these areas: AV Jim Edwards, Kristjan Edwards, Col. Raj Kalaan and Peter Prentice. Appropriately Jim has the last word, "We didn't do it for our egos, we did it for the game"... spoken as only a 'founding father' can.