



included Baschir Ali, one of only two Indians to be handicapped at +6 and Samir Suhag, the only Indian with a +5 handicap. (All players are handicapped or rated: beginners start at -2 and a handful of top professionals can reach a high of +10.) Unlike jerky, foul-ridden games involving lower handicapped players, this was a free-flowing saga, punctuated only by goals as the advantage swung from one team to the other. A last gasp goal helped the Kothari Chargers clinch a pulsating game that had all the trimmings of a sport steeped in grit and royal tradition.

Yes, once upon a time not so long ago, the exploits of the polo-playing maharajas of India were legendary. In 1933, the Jaipur Tigers — which included Maharaja Mansingh of Jaipur and Maharaja Raoraja Hanut Singh of Jodhpur — toured Britain and Europe. They won every tournament on the circuit and never lost a single game. Indian royalty not only lent their glamour to the game, but they were also some of the best players of their time.

The polo-playing maharajas were an admittedly glorious chapter in the country's rich polo heritage. India, however, has been the chief custodian of the sport, tracing its origins back to the cavalry of Genghis Khan (AD 1162–1227) that played the game to hone their equestrian skills. Tamerlane (AD 1336–1405) added barbaric dimensions to the sport — he reportedly encouraged his army to play it across battlefields with the decapitated heads of vanquished foes! At the time, the only rule that governed the game was winning.

RULING THE WORLD
The British first saw it played in the mid-19th century by tribal horsemen in the north-eastern state of Manipur, and immediately set about 'civilising' it. The first set of rules of modern polo was set down by the Englishmen's Planters' Club in Lalong Valley in Manipur. By 1861, the Brits had established the Calcutta Polo Club, which is, today, the oldest polo club in the world. At that time, the game was played with up to eight players and the rules varied from club to club. In 1872, the Hurlingham Polo Association in the United Kingdom restricted the number of players in a team to four and gave polo its first set of formal rules.

The rules are relatively simple. All players must be right handed. The player whose horse is travelling in the same line of the ball has the right of way. However, an opposing player may ride him off the line by nudging or bumping his mount, as long as the angle of attack is

Riding the Wind

Clockwise from above:
Chasing the ball at a polo match in Mumbai.
A player prepares before the game at the Jaipur Polo Grounds.
Feats performed at the Jaipur Polo Grounds included a rider swooping down to pick up a hanky while moving at an incredible speed.
Players and ponies thunder across the field at the Jaipur Polo Grounds.

It was a classic ride-off: two polo ponies galloping shoulder to shoulder as they thundered down the field, one nudging the other off its line. It was a brilliantly executed manoeuvre, and as one player took the other away from his trajectory, his teammate swept in from behind and swatted the ball even as his mount was airborne in mid-stride. "Thwack!" The contact of polo stick and ball echoed across the field like a thunderclap.

each one of them accomplished horsemen, and their mounts with knotted tails tore across the field in waves, swatting a plastic ball with telling effect. In many ways, it was more than just a tally of goals scored; it was a demonstration of riding skills par excellence, the perfect understanding between man and animal.

THE SPORT OF KINGS
The game between the Kothari Chargers and Golechha Warriors at the Jaipur Polo Grounds brought together eight of the best of the current crop of Indian players. This

It did not result in a goal, but it captured the sheer power and poetry of the game. Players,



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riders on sweaty horses with muscled rumps thunder across the playing field. The party, egged on by live bands, rages on long after the players have received their medals and the horses have been stabled.

Indeed, a polo game is often enveloped in a buzz of activity with a number of other equestrian events where horsemen display their riding skills picking up pegs with lances and bare hands, shooting at targets on the gallop, and performing other hair-raising stunts.

A polo carnival held in Mumbai a few years ago culminated with a parade of antique cars and a fashion show by a leading designer, in which the showstopper appeared on a prancing horse! But at the end of the day, it is the images of snorting horses, flaying polo sticks and the grit and grime of a fast-flowing polo game that linger on.

A POLO CARNIVAL HELD IN MUMBAI A FEW YEARS AGO CULMINATED WITH A PARADE OF ANTIQUE CARS.

no more than 45 degrees. Or he can hook his opponent's mallet with his own without making contact with the rider or the horse.

What is not stated in the rule books is that polo is the sport of beautiful people, a celebration of the good life. White-gloved waiters balancing trays loaded with glasses of bubbly and savoury canapés weave their way through spectators filling the stands; elaborate buffet spreads brim in tented shamianas and socialites greet each other with air kisses as

Clockwise from above:
A ceremonial guard of honour at the Jaipur Polo Grounds before the match commences.
Antique cars and a fashion show were entertaining additions to a polo carnival in Mumbai.
Two players in action at a polo match in Mumbai.
The prize in sight: The winning trophy displayed at a polo match in Mumbai.



THE POLO CARNIVAL
• The polo carnival is a road show of sorts in India. It starts around September/October and moves across the country. Important centres include Jaipur, Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, Jodhpur, Lucknow and Meerut. The cities of Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Ladakh and Manipur also host polo events.
• For more information, visit the Indian Polo Association at www.ipa.co.in.



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