

POLO

IN INDIA



J A I S A L S I N G H

P R I Y A K A P O O R

FOREWORD

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The Fourth Chukker: Army Days

After the Independence of India, and the horrors of Partition were over, polo gradually started being played again. Maharaja Sawai Man Singh was instrumental in getting the Indian Polo Association active once again and just ten years after, in 1957, India achieved one of its most significant wins – the World Cup at Deauville, in France. The team lead by the redoubtable Rao Raja Hanut, consisted of Bijai, one of his sons, Maharaj Prem Singh, and Maharaja Sawai Man Singh of Jaipur, who could not play the finals because of an injury and was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Thakur Kishen Singh. The team brought glory to India and the feat of 1957 has, unfortunately, not yet been repeated even though more than half a century has gone by since.

By the late 1950s, Jaipur had slowed down considerably and it was 'Ratanada', Rao Raja Hanut's family team, named after a part of Jodhpur where he lived and also home to a number of other polo greats. Sawai Man Singh also played with the team regularly, and it became Indian polo's superpower. Like Jaipur and Jodhpur before them, the 'Ratanada' team was extremely successful both at home and abroad. They played the English season every summer on the picturesque fields of Cowdray Park and Windsor. The reputation and success of Indian players was still high at this point and they found themselves in demand from other teams as well.

However, Indian polo did not long remain restricted to royalty. By the 1960s, another force was gearing up to make its presence felt in the polo world – the Indian Army.

Lieutenant Colonel Thakur Kishen Singh, formerly of The Durga Horse (a cavalry unit of the Jodhpur forces), serving with the 61st Cavalry after Independence, was playing off a handicap of +5 and it was he who led a team of youngsters to beat 'Ratanada', hitherto unvanquished in India, in 1961.

The team consisted of the young 'Billy' Sodhi +1, V.P. Singh +3, Kishen Singh +5 and Gaje Singh +5. The evening before the final, Gaje Singh was

heard complaining, or rather 'shamming' by his captain that he did not have any good horses, possibly because he was nervous. Colonel Kishen dropped him immediately, and replaced him with Pradeep Mehra, who was a young subaltern in the Cavalry at the time. Despite this, the team won the IPA Championship, or the Indian Open as it is commonly referred to. This ushered in a new era for Indian polo, and brought a new breed of players who possessed the skill, expertise, and know-how but were from diverse backgrounds. From that day onwards it was also the Indian Army's day in the sun.

Colonel Kishen Singh's reputation for being an extremely gifted horseman was well known. He was able to train some superb ponies for the Army and bring up several young players. Civilian polo was down to pretty much nil, compared to the pre-Partition, pre-War days. The princely states had acceded to India and ceased to be forces to be reckoned with, and the British had left India. The two main patrons of the sport had practically vanished. In such a bleak scenario, it was only an institution like the Indian Army which possessed the requisite infrastructure and discipline needed to keep the game alive. This was a responsibility they discharged superbly, dominating polo for the next few decades and creating enough publicity to buoy the interest of a newly independent nation. There was no shortage of horses for the Army as the Remount and Veterinary Corps (RVC) maintained, and still do, vast breeding centres in Saharanpur and Hampur, and it was this abundance of ponies was a major factor that ensured that a number of teams were playing competitively at the low-goal to medium goal levels. In addition to the Cavalry which fielded a number of teams, The Army Service Corps, the RVC, The President's Bodyguard and other regiments also competed on the circuit at this level. The National Defence Academy and the Indian Military Academy fielded their own teams in a few tournaments too with polo being part of the sports curriculum at both the Academies. Polo clubs from around the country also fielded teams at this level and the Army helped them along with allowing them to buy horses at subsidized rates from the RVC.

At the high-goal level the Army fielded a couple of teams, with the Sodhi

brothers, Billy and Pickles, V.P. Singh the highest handicapped player in post-Independence India, Rupī Brar, Kuldeep Garcha, Hesky Baig, Pradeep Mehra, Raj Kalaan, Gaje Singh, and of course Kishen Singh, all of whom attained at least +5 goal handicaps. At times, the Army teams were built around a few Generals, like General 'Wad' Wadalia and General Varma. Along with this, a few civilian teams of a high calibre were still playing, namely 'Ratanada' and a couple of teams from Calcutta, built around Maharaj Prem Singh, a Calcutta businessman Rasik Jetha, and 'Bhaiyya', the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. They also brought in leading players from abroad to boost their teams' morale and also give them the edge to succeed against all odds.

Colonel Maharaj Prem Singh was one of India's best players at the time and among the hardest hitters too – playing a match at Windsor, he launched a 'hit-in', a massive shot that reached the half-way mark, close to the Royal Box, and following it up at flat-out gallop, hit another whopper, right through the goal-post. A record that to date is unbeaten, he covered 300 yards with two shots and converted it into a goal. 'Ratanada' consisted also of the indefatigable Hanut, his sons Bijai and Hari and on occasion, even his grandson 'Bunny' Laxman Singh, who went on to become a very successful professional golfer. It was these three or four teams that played against each other, with different permutations and combinations, right through the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. When Hanut finally retired from polo at the ripe old age of 73, 'Ratanada' too stopped playing as a team. Calcutta was possibly the only civilian team of any standard that was competing and it was mainly Army versus Army until the late 1980s. Had it not been for the generous patronage and dedication of the Indian Army, polo, as we know it today, would surely have died out in India. It was encouraged in all ranks and even in non-Cavalry regiments – the Infantry and Artillery regiments have fielded teams and contributed talented players too. An infantry officer of the Balluch Regiment, who subsequently transferred to the Corkhās post-partition, Major General D.K. Palit, VtC, a keen equestrian,

played polo regularly, even after he retired from the service. He was perhaps the oldest player in the world before he stopped playing once well into his eighties – and remains actively involved with the sport even today, albeit from the sidelines. There was an instance of an Army Chief who played and fielded his own team 'Army House' – General P.P. Kumaramangalam, a 'Gunner' (an officer from the Artillery) and also a great patron of polo. His daughter Roshan went on to become one of India's top equestrians and his son-in-law Col. H.S. 'Billy' Sodhi, one of the best polo players that India has produced in recent times.

Officers' children were encouraged to play the sport – for example, Uday and Angad, the sons of Colonel Raaj Kalaan, Manupal and Dhruvpāl Godara, sons of Lt. Col. Godara, Vishal Singh, the son Lt. Col. Y.K. Singh and Samir, son of Major General Bhim Suhag, are the country's highest handicapped professionals today – and this has formed the backbone of polo in modern India. Today, it is not uncommon to see an army team clash with a civilian team, powered by an officer's sons, sponsored by a luxury brand.

The maintenance of various polo clubs and fields around India also became the Army's responsibility, a duty that has been honoured without any hesitation or compromise. Their patronage of Polo clubs encouraged civilians to take up the sport, like the President's Estate Polo Club, which was run by the President's Bodyguard. It helped many of its members to play actively and compete in tournaments. 'Club Polo' was a stepping stone for the young generation that dominates polo in India today. The President's Estate Polo Club was wound up due to unfortunate circumstances but the 61st Cavalry offered to take the club and its members on, and so it continues with its new name – the Army Polo and Riding Club at the Nicholson Ranges adjoining the Delhi Cantonment.

For more than three decades, Indian polo was predominantly funded, nurtured and kept alive by the Indian Army.





ARMY DAYS

Visit of HRH The Prince of Wales to India, 1901. 'The Ashoka Lion' (left) were represented by (l. to r.) Lt. Pradip Mohan, Capt. K.S. Gargha, Capt. R.S. Bhan, Maj. Billy' Sallis, Lt.-Col. Krishen Singh, Lt.-Col. Gaurand Singh; in 'The Plumed Cavaliers' represented by HRH The Prince of Wales, Capt. R.S. Sallis, Capt. Farroq Bily, Maj. V.P. Singh.

Above: The crest of the Army and Polo Riding Club, New Delhi. The Club, one of the premier equestrian establishments of the country, has some of the top polo players as its members.



The 61st Cavalry polo family picture with Rajmata Gayatri Devi (centre) after winning the Indian Open Polo Championship. Kuldeep Garcha (second from left), Col. 'Billy' Sodhi (fourth from left), Raaj Kalaan (third from right) and Pickles Sodhi (extreme right) with their wives and children. Uday and Angad Kalaan, currently India's top players as toddlers (sitting right), 1979. Also in the picture is another cavalry officer Rupinder Brar (extreme left) who won a gold medal for tent-pegging at the 1982 Asian Games.





(L to R): Prem Sirohi, Vijai Singh, P.R.S. Oberoi (the sponsor), Maharaj Prem Singh, M.S. Sandhu and R.S. Brar are seen before a match in Brunei, 1989. Maharaj Prem Singh was the umpire for the tournament.



Left: P.R.S. Oberoi presenting the Northern India Championship sponsored by his company to the 61st Cavalry team. (L to R): Bhawani Singh, Kuldeep Garcha, R.S. 'Pickles' Sodhi and R.S. Brar.



One of Indian polo's most colourful figures and stalwarts, Col. Kuldeep Singh Garcha still going strong. A five-goal player in his time, he has now set up a top-class polo facility, The Jaipur Polo and Riding Club at Bindaika, outside Jaipur, where he hosts tournaments every year including an all-ladies tournament which attracts players from around the world. His son, Satinder, runs one of India's leading teams – originally called 'Zara', the name changed to 'Maajara' and recently to 'Elevation'.