



The author (center rear, blue shirt) moves in on the action. Photos courtesy Jeff Bollerman except as noted.

Rumble in the Jungle

Strap on your pith helmet, grab your mallet and lace up your blue Chuck Taylors. It's time to join the New York Blue on its spirited quest for the World Elephant Polo Championship.

BY JEFFREY C. BOLLERMAN

IF YOU'VE STOOD next to me at a cocktail party during the last six months — or if you're one of the five million Americans who tuned in to “CBS Sunday Morning” on January 11 — you know that two seconds and two inches deprive me of being a world champion athlete.

This is quite a claim for a thirtysomething finance executive and former lawyer whose intramural career during his Furman days (1993-97) can best be described as “competitive slapstick.” You see, I'm a member of the New York Blue, only the fourth American team ever to play elephant polo. And I'm a proud holder of the silver medal in the 2008 World Elephant Polo World Championship Chivas Olympic Quaiach.

Try saying that three times real fast. Better yet, try saying that without sounding like a pretentious jackass. You can't. I try. Incessantly.

For the past 27 years the noblemen, diplomats and industrialists who constitute the leading lights of the sport have spent a week in Royal Chitwan National Park in southwest Nepal determining the finest elephant polo team in the world. The yearly spectacle was always coordinated under the watchful eye of A.V. Jim Edwards, the 74-year-old, ascotied proprietor of nearby Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge who first entered Nepal in 1962 when he drove his Saab from Stockholm to Kathmandu.

With James Manclark, a Scottish adventurer and Olympic tobogganer, Edwards devised the idea for the tournament in a bar in St. Moritz. Over the course of three decades it has gone from oddity to novelty to full-fledged sport — all while retaining its distinctly aristocratic, and eccentric, pedigree.

On March 23, Edwards succumbed to a stroke while fishing in Karnataka. He leaves behind a girlfriend, three ex-wives, four children, and the admiration of the international elephant polo fraternity.

Once a favorite pastime of British officers in the days of the raj, world elephant polo is a truly international competition. Teams from Nepal, India, Ireland, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Norway, Hong Kong and the Bahamas have taken part in recent tournaments. The contests can attract upwards of 2,000 spectators, including ambassadors from a variety of competing countries and, at various times, such celebrities as Ringo Starr and Sir Edmund Hillary.

To play the sport you need, among other things, a tuxedo (I'll explain), gloves (I learned the hard way) and a robust appreciation for the absurd. You must also be willing to permit yourself to be lashed with a fraying rope to a 7,000-pound elephant with nothing but a pith helmet, a bamboo mallet and a Nepali *mahout* (elephant driver) with whom you don't share a language or, in most cases, a concern for your well-being.

Furthermore, prevailing social mores demand that players maintain a steady diet of Chivas Regal, the tournament's corporate sponsor and the *lingua franca* of elephant polo. Indeed, breeches of this etiquette and others are likely to be noticed by the captain of the Scottish National Team, Torquihill Campbell, who as the 13th Duke of Argyll holds 81,000 acres and 51 of the most prestigious inherited titles in the United Kingdom. But in elephant polo circles, His Grace is revered for one distinction above all others.

He is a Chivas executive.

ELEPHANT POLO resembles horse polo in most important ways. It's played on a “pitch” measuring 100 meters by 70 meters. Each side has four players. At each end of the field, two stakes standing five feet apart serve as goals; you score by knocking a polo ball through the stakes, using a stick made of bamboo with a standard polo mallet attached to the end. The length of the stick — anywhere from 6 to 12 feet — depends on the size of the elephant.

A match features two 10-minute periods, or *chukkahs*. Elephants are categorized as “offensive” or “defensive.” Offensive elephants are small and fast, and can be half the size of the defensive elephants. As a result, while one player might wield a modest mallet several feet from the ground, another might find himself 12 feet in the air on a 10,000-pounder, sporting a mallet that weighs roughly the same as a Studebaker. Because the elephants have differing temperaments and intelligence, teams swap rides midway through a match so that neither side has a monopoly on superior beasts.

New York Blue got involved because team captain Bill Keith had covered the sport as a journalist in 2005, and Melanie Brandman signed on as team manager to help Bill realize his goal of returning with a team of his own. As proprietor of a 30-person public relations firm specializing in all things “luxury,” Melanie brought considerable organizational aplomb and unfailing Australian good humor to “the lads,” the six of us who, as representatives of New York's hometown industries — media and finance — were invited to be the Blue.

Following a year of planning and wrangling sponsors, we arrived in Delhi on November 28 — the morning after the Mumbai attacks. After spending a few days acquainting ourselves with the splendors of Kathmandu, we boarded a 12-seat prop plane provided by Yeti Airlines and landed in southwestern Nepal, on a grass airstrip that doubled as the tournament playing pitch.

Only Bill had played the sport, and that was three years earlier, for all of five minutes. Now we were one of eight international teams competing for the world title.

We didn't know the rules. We had no feel for the game.

So we asked for a rulebook before we mounted our elephants for the first practice session. The Scottish National team, ranked No. 1 in the world, included such leading lights as the last surviving member of India's 61st mounted cavalry, Col. R.K.S. Kalaan; His Grace, the Duke of Argyll; and Peter "Powerhouse" Prentice, a renowned horse polo player. They kept assuring us a tutorial was forthcoming.

It never came.

Watching the other teams pull their custom-made chaps over their leather riding boots and slip their polo gloves over their ace-bandaged hands, we realized we were woefully short on gear. We wore our official team uniform: blue shirts (purchased in Chinatown) with our names and numbers screen-printed on, white Levi jeans, and blue Converse Chuck Taylor sneakers.

We looked like an aging boy band.

By the end of the week, we'd be accepting ceremonial Gurkha knives from the British ambassador for winning the Best Dressed award.

OUR FIRST PRACTICE session was a lesson in humility. I ripped my hand open in four spots because I didn't tape it. I watched my teammates flail at the ball, whiffing or barely connecting. Most insulting, we kept hitting the ground before the ball, sending huge chunks of grass and mud flying.

Back in New York we had practiced atop sport utility vehicles at a desolate parking lot in Queens. It became apparent that our Suburbans and retrofitted paint rollers were poor substitutes for elephants and mallets. We were doing no favors for American pride.

Meanwhile, our competitors were profiles in subdued self-control. The Aussies and Brits, known as the Pukkah Chukkahs, had no trouble hitting the ball. The Air Tuskers, representing England, Nepal and Dubai, were menacing in black uniforms. The Chivas Regal team, to my memory, didn't even practice. Nor did the all-Nepali National Parks team or the local Tiger Tops squad. Why bother? They'd been competing for years.

The Indian Tigers did practice, and looked competent. The British Gurkhas, the famed Nepali-British military regiment, also exhibited their command of the pitch. But despite the "special relationship" between our countries, the British Gurkhas would become our mortal enemies the following day when their captain trash-talked us via loudspeaker while she did color commentary for a match.

She would regret this. We're New Yorkers.

That night, as was the case every night, there was a black



tie dinner and a party at the lodge, a grass-thatched retreat where players, diplomats, generals, government ministers and an honest-to-goodness Duke would gather around the elegant bar and regale each other with play-by-plays over iced tumblers of Chivas.

We drank liberally, per unspoken tournament policy. A tournament born in a bar is played feet from a bar with an after party nestled next to a bar. But it's all for a good cause. The proceeds from the tournament support medical clinics, schools and conservation efforts in South Asia.

Before we stumbled off to bed at midnight, we had devised a strategy and were looking forward to testing it the next morning.

THE TOURNAMENT: DAY 1

The one-hour journey to the pitch from our lodge consists of a Range Rover ride through the jungle to a long gondola. We pass a family of boars, and our boat crosses a crocodile-infested river to another Range Rover, more jungle, deer grazing and monkeys barking, then the expanse of the airfield. To our eyes, southwestern Nepal resembles an ersatz Central Park.

Our first match is an impossible draw — top-ranked Chivas, the Scottish National Team.

We're given a five-goal handicap, so we start with a 5-0 lead. The night before, all the teams were handicapped. Chivas and the National Parks teams were required to concede five goals to the amateur teams — like us.

We unleash our strategy. Borrowing from American pickup basketball, we employ a defensive approach in which we "muddle" as much as possible and clog the pitch with our elephants. Amazingly, we're able to hold the defending world champions scoreless in the second *chukkah*, and though we lose 6-5, we feel as if we've pulled off a stunning upset. And we've successfully introduced the "pick and roll" to world elephant polo.

"Powerhouse," regarded as one of the best players on Earth, doffs his cap to us.

Practice makes perfect? SUVs, paint rollers and parking lots don't quite match up to the real thing. Right: The ride to and from the pitch is beautiful, even if the river isn't ideal for swimming.

During the match, one of our guys, Chip Frazier, a mild-mannered hedge-fund trader by day, suddenly exhibits a preternatural skill for the game. He has learned to dribble the ball on the fly, give it a tap, chase, tap again. He's sending beautiful balls all over the field.

Just two weeks earlier we were holding on for dear life atop Chevrolets in Queens, using paint rollers to whack softballs. Now Chip is actually using the sideline to his advantage, sending balls along the white line and blocking the opposition's efforts.

All of us play hard, slash and hack at the ball, and obstruct the opposition as often as possible. We pester, scream and spit, learning as we go. Such graceless but energetic exertion, peppered with a singularly New Yorkish species of profanity, will become our trademark.

That evening, the last dignitary to toast New York Blue does so at 2 a.m.



DAY 2

Another cruel twist. Today's foe is National Parks, the all-Nepali team. Here we are, the most inexperienced team in the tournament, drawing the world's two best teams in the first two days.

The first half is terrifying. These guys absolutely crush the ball from one end of the pitch to the other. They send balls along the white line, chase them down, and center them to a charging offensive striker. And they swing hard. With no fear of whiffing, they go for broke. Conveniently, they also speak the same language as their *mahout*.

But the real problem comes during one of our rare offensive opportunities in the first *chukkah*. Chip lunges for a shot just as their defenseman winds up to clear the ball from their end. His mallet comes crashing down on Chip's skull.

A whistle blows from atop the referee elephant, a moun-

tainous bull with glorious crescent tusks, where the official perches in a wooden box. Chip is released from his rope girdle and helped off his elephant. His knees buckle as his head swells, a golf ball growing from his right temple.

We later learn it's a concussion. Chip will play the rest of the tournament in a half-haze of dull pain. He'll suffer from chills, headaches and nausea, all common post-concussion symptoms. He'll steel himself with the strongest medicine offered by the first aid tent: Chivas.

Yet he gets back on his elephant and play resumes, with a newfound urgency on our part. This is no joke — National Parks will not go easy on us just because we're newcomers. Nor will any other team.

We chase National Parks all over the pitch. We challenge every shot, slash and hook and grab and lunge and wheel. We begin to pick up on the art of the "lean" — using your free hand to hold the rope while you come off your elephant as far as humanly possible to poke the ball away from an opponent.

National Parks wins 6-5. It will turn out to be their lowest goal output of the tournament, and a defining moment for New York Blue. We suddenly realize we can compete.

That night, Chip's swollen face a symbol of our commitment, a chorus of ambassadors raise their glasses to honor our grit. Bedtime is 3 a.m. The monkeys offer a shrieking lullaby from the massive trees surrounding our encampment.

DAY 3

No time to nurse hangovers. Today's match is against our mortal enemies, the British Gurkhas.

From the opening face-off, something feels different. We're on the attack, passing, leading elephants with long balls. We have a one-goal handicap, but we don't need it. We are playing spirited, dominating polo.

Chip scores twice in the first *chukkah*, and corporate lawyer Rob Forster's epic defensive effort during a lengthy battle in front of our goal is a turning point in the match. We stymie the Gurkhas with timely chops and by hooking their mallets so that right before they strike the ball, we pop their mallets up with our own. This infuriates their captain, she of trash-talking infamy.

Then disaster strikes again. During an aggressive two-elephant muddle, Rob gets his toe caught in the other guy's



Blue players demonstrate their muddle strategy; local children, whose schools benefit from the event's proceeds, turn out in droves for the matches. Right: America's stylishly dressed team poses with dignitaries — and the silver medal trophy. From left, Rob Forster, Andrew Hall (British ambassador to Nepal), Chip Frazier, Josh Dean, captain Bill Keith, Jeff Bollerman, manager Melanie Brandman, Bryan Abrams and Peter "The Powerhouse" Prentice.

ropes. The laws of physics and human anatomy sentence him to a painful fate. As the two elephants move in opposite directions, Rob's knee is twisted like a wet rag being rung out.

And then comes the sound. Over the stampeding elephants, the screaming fans and teammates, a declarative pop is heard.

He yells in pain. Somehow he manages to free himself, then slumps over onto his *mahout*, who immediately signals for play to be stopped. Rob is helped off his elephant and crumples to the feces-covered pitch.

A strange thing happens while Rob is writhing in agony. The collective consciousness that overtakes you when you travel to distant lands with friends, as a team, and spend every day together — it all congeals in this moment. We offer Rob support, assuring him that his health is our primary concern.

But below this, sub-verbally, we will Rob to do what is right . . . to choose the foolhardy path over the merely prudent . . . to ignore reason and safety and sanity in the name of a higher calling. Rob writhes beneath a Chivas billboard festooned with its new marketing slogan — "Live with Chivalry" — and makes his decision.

He climbs back aboard his elephant. Through intense pain, he finishes the *chukkah*.

He won't play again in the tournament. When he returns to New York, on crutches, he'll go to his doctor and get the results: a torn MCL and severe patella crack. National Football League players don't finish games with this injury.

With the Blue ahead 3-1 in the second *chukkah*, Bryan Abrams goes on the offensive. Bryan, a diminutive and

supremely neurotic researcher for *Playboy* magazine, fancies himself the Jackie Robinson of elephant polo because, he says, he is the only identifiable Jew ever to play the sport.

A ball deep in our end is cleared by free-lance journalist Josh Dean. Captain Bill Keith screams from the sidelines that Bryan has an advantage. I locate the ball tumbling into midfield and tap my *mahout* on the shoulder. We rumble into action.

My elephant is deceptively fast for his size. He's pounding his way toward the ball, which is rolling toward the offensive zone known as the "D." (The D, a semi-circular space roughly analogous to the area inside the 3-point line in basketball, rings the goal sticks approximately 20 feet out.)

A Gurkha is hot on Bryan's tail. The rules limit the number of elephants a team can have in the D, so I have to stand sentry as Bryan taps the ball toward the goal. The Gurkha is gaining, his elephant right behind me.

Bryan winds up for a shot as years of athletic humiliation crowd his mind like ghoulish spectators — the missed shots, the strikeouts, the dropped passes. We hear the glorious "cluck" of a well-struck ball. Goal! Time stretches out like the folds of an accordion.

We win, 4-1.

That night, bedtime is 4 a.m. Bryan sleeps soundly for the first time all week, confident he has secured immortality in the annals of Jewish sportsmanship.



DAY 4

Because of a three-way tie among teams with 1-2 records, there's a penalty shootout between the Blue, the Gurkhas and Scotland to determine which squad will advance to the Professional Quaich, the elephant polo term for bracket.

We line up at the top of the D. The other teams and hundreds of Nepali kids are watching, as are many more who have read the international press reports about the New York Blue. The pressure is intense.

Josh Dean scores our only goal, but that's one more than the Gurkhas can manage. The top-ranked Scots, surprised to find themselves in the shootout, muster only two goals, but that's enough to advance into the Professional Quaich for the top four teams. We move into the Olympic Quaich (the amateur group) to play a semifinal against the Indian Tigers.

We're still riding high after shutting up (and down) the Gurkhas, and our confidence shows. Chip and Josh go on an early scoring spree, and we win 6-1.

That night, I sneak off to bed at 10 p.m. to be ready for the next day's gold medal game against Tiger Tops, who very well could (and should) be playing in the Professional Quaich.



DAY 5: CHAMPIONSHIPS

Tiger Tops is a local team. Its captain, Kristjan, has played for 15 years, his wife for five, his brother for 10, and their Nepali teammate, Ishwor Rana, for another 10.

The New York Blue has five days of experience.

The first *chukkah* is promising. With our five-goal handicap, we battle the Tiger Tops like mad, holding them scoreless. But the second *chukkah* is different, and their elephants, who seem quicker and more alert, help them notch one, then two, then three and four goals.

We're up 5-4 with 10 seconds left, hanging on, gold medal within reach. But Kristjan pokes the ball into our D as the seconds count down.

The rules state that the clock does not expire as long as the ball is inside the D. For what seems an eternity, Josh and Kristjan slash and hack at the ball as the clock counts to zero, and then beyond. Josh whacks the ball, thinking he's cleared it, but it smacks off his elephant's leg and rolls right in front of Kristjan, who easily scores the tying goal to force overtime.

After five minutes, and some valiant charges by the Blue, Tiger Tops gets a clear ball and Ishwor has it on his stick. He dribbles it past Chip, whose elephant is too tired to mount a comeback.

It's just Ishwor and Bryan now. Ishwor goes for his shot. Bryan can't reach him.

The Blue settles for second place.

Later that night, at the black tie gala, golden Chivas splashes in our glasses, but our minds are all silver.

AFTERMATH

Much has changed in the weeks since the British ambassador sent us home with silver medals and shining knives.

We left a Southeast Asia that is adjusting to the all too familiar fact that Islamic terrorism is now a feature of urban life. We returned to a city for which the "new normal" includes mass layoffs and conspicuous retail vacancies. News of tournament founder Jim Edwards' sudden death confirms what we already suspected — that we will never be able to replicate this adventure.

But we don't rest.

Captain Bill Keith continues to entice sponsors to underwrite New York Blue, and he's quick to remind us that "Elephant polo isn't something you did. It's something you do."

I've started a fascinating new job that the economic dislocation only makes more exciting. And most importantly, the incomparable Hattie O'Neill '95 has accepted my marriage proposal.

Today, when I can steal a rare moment to reflect, I marvel at how a kid from outside of Hackensack, N.J. (think Tony Soprano) ended up on Wall Street (think Gordon Gekko) only to rub elbows with colonels and aristocrats (think Evelyn Waugh). And if my life unfolds as I hope it will — and if we're lucky enough to have one of those storied Furman marriages (think the Plylers, the Blackwells, the Johnses, the Shis) — then the former Hattie O'Neill may one day have to answer this question from an enterprising grandchild wielding a Gurkha knife in a dusty attic:

"Grandma, what's a Quaich?" |F|

The author, a 1997 Furman graduate, is director of limited partnership interests at SecondMarket, a leading intermediary of illiquid assets. To learn more about the 2008 World Elephant Polo Championships, visit www.elephantpolo.com. The 2009 championships are scheduled November 29-December 5. New York Blue is planning a triumphant return.