



With players reaching a top speed of only about 20 kilometres an hour, elephant polo's charms lie not in the action but in the ambience.

Polo with the pachyderms

A blue-blooded elephant polo tournament in Thailand offers cucumber sandwiches and champagne on the sidelines and slow-motion sport on the field

BY JUDITH RITTER, HUA HIN, THAILAND

When Victoria-born John Mackay, an international lawyer, slid off his mount to talk to me, he compared elephant polo to hockey: "The ball is tougher to hit than a puck, and you're farther away from it. And it certainly isn't as dangerous as hockey." One thing it shares with Canada's national obsession, though, is a loyal fan base.

I, for one, jetted 14,000 kilometres for what might be the world's quirkiest sporting event: the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament. This curious event took place in Hua Hin, Thailand, a small beach resort

on the Gulf of Siam, where I experienced a week of sun, spas, shopping, eating and, most importantly, the pachyderm playoffs. This year, the event runs from Sept. 6-12.

The truth is, watching 24 four-tonne Asian elephants and their sweaty pith-helmeted riders lumber after a tiny white ball doesn't make for a keep-you-on-the-edge-of-your-seat sports experience. Elephant polo lacks the breathtaking moments of hockey, football or baseball. Still, it does exude a peculiar charm, redolent of a defunct empire in tropical climes.

The collection of satin-shirted teams was made up of players ranging from expat Brits, Indians, offi-

cers of the King's Royal Hussars (the regiment that led the charge of the Light Brigade), a smattering of Canadians living in Thailand, and the most popular players, an absolutely stunning transgender team of "lady boys." (This eccentric team, aptly named the "Screwless Tuskers," has become a fixture of the King's Cup as a result of the team members' friendship with a prominent and wealthy expat who is a major supporter of the sport.)

During a week of matches, I sat on the edge of the football-sized field under white tents shading me from 35-degree heat and drank icy coconut milk. I watched teams from places such as Australia and Nepal ride elephants that seemed to delight in chasing the ball down the field, sometimes ignoring their riders and kicking the ball themselves with their huge grey feet.

Some of the elephant polo aficionados around me studied the seven-day tournament schedule with the intensity of Las Vegas gamblers.

They follow elephant polo the way Canadians follow the Stanley Cup. And, like Shirley Kennedy, a British expat living in Bangkok, they know the names of players and which teams are strongest.

Kennedy, a follower of horse polo, loves the elephant version for its lumbering suspense. "The elephants are so slow compared to the horses, and you think they'll never get anywhere. But they do, and the surprise is delightful." (The top elephant speed is about 20 kilometres an hour.)

Like some of the mystified tourists around me, I was not familiar with horse polo, so I just let the wacky event unfold. The games even got quite exciting from time to time: The animals bumped up against each other, the riders poked at the tiny ball in the dirt with two-metre bamboo sticks, trying to whack it down to a goal post at the end of the field, and the crowd roared. Between matches there was a chance to talk to the riders. Heroes

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE

Trains run from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station to Hua Hin 10 times a day. For more information, visit www.railway.co.th/httpEng.

WHERE TO STAY

Anantara Resort and Spa Hua Hin: 66 (0) 3252 0250; anantara.com.

MORE INFORMATION

For general information about ele-

phant polo, visit www.thaielephant-polo.com.

For more information on the Elephant Conservation Centre's projects, visit www.changthai.com.

For more information about the upcoming 2004 King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament, visit the website at www.anantara.com.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (in New York): (212) 432-0433; www.tourismthailand.org.

of the sport, such as Angad Kalaan of India, with his Bollywood looks and aristocratic bearing, were mobbed.

Elephant polo is above all a social event. Like an upscale tailgate party, its high-society players have replaced beer and chips with champagne and cucumber sandwiches.

"Any excuse for a party — it just has to be on your calendar," Jim Edwards said. He should know. He's the co-inventor of elephant polo, an idea hatched at the bar of the St. Moritz Tobogganing club and sealed over a champagne lunch at the famed Tiger Tops Resort in Nepal. The "must-do" King's Cup is an opportunity to hobnob with friends who you haven't seen since quail-hunting season. These folks never miss an elephant polo tournament. It's easy not to, since there are only three: one in Nepal, another in Sri Lanka and this one in Thailand.

The King's Cup, in honour of the King of Thailand, is the most stylish of the trio. While the king never actually shows up, he does give his official blessing. That means there is a ceremonial opening parade with dozens of decorated elephants, Thai dancers, musicians shimmering in silk and gold, and polo players bedecked in satin.

The royal parade was an elaborate opening for a game whose rules are as simple as those of ringette. Two teams of three elephants, the polo players strapped onto their backs, face off. The riders tussle over a tiny ball in order to get it past their opponent's goal.

In between matches, which commence with the clang of a giant brass gong, the elephants lolled around on the sidelines, tearing huge branches off trees in the encroaching jungle. Now and then they wandered to the snack tables in search of bananas, until called back by their Thai trainers. I was even invited to climb up and got to ride around. That was more exciting than even the most intense moments of any match I saw.

Though the whole peculiar and entertaining event seemed to be just another indulgence for bored jetsetters, it was really about the elephants. The competition is a fundraiser for the Thailand Elephant Conservation Centre, a group that supports projects to protect elephants. The polo and the charity events surrounding the competition were organized by the Anantara Resort and Spa. Most of the elephant polo aficionados stayed at the six-hectare garden and beach resort, a reproduction of an old Thai village. The accommodation provided many opportunities to meet players around the pool and bar.

The highlight of the social events was a gala dinner and ball, where all the guests had to wear something made of silk. That gave me a chance to go into the small town to explore the silk shops and night market.

Hua Hin is Thailand's oldest beach resort and has an aristocratic history. For anyone longing for a feeling of Indochina, before cell-phones and wall-to-wall condos, this is the place. The town that hosts the royal elephant event has been the summer home of the King since 1926. The streets are lined with illuminated billboard-sized portraits of the beloved Royal Family (His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Her Majesty Queen Sirikit).

The town, once a small fishing village, still has the feel of old Siam. Unlike Thailand's other beach resorts, such as Phuket or Pattaya, which mainly attract foreign tourists, Hua Hin's mainstay, since the 1920s when the railway first came here, is well-to-do Thai tourists looking for a break from the summer swelter of Bangkok. Many have stunning homes along the eight-kilometre stretch of sandy beach — all a perfect backdrop for a week of elephant polo. "Jolly nice, don't you think?" I was asked many times over the week. "Absolutely spiffing," I appropriately answered.

Special to The Globe and Mail