



KINGS FOR A DAY

THE FAVOURED SPORT OF THE ELITE FOR CENTURIES, POLO IS FINDING A NEW GLOBAL AUDIENCE THANKS TO A PAIR OF ENTREPRENEURIAL EX-SOLDIERS. PAUL KAY TRAVELS TO HENLEY-ON-THAMES TO DISCOVER WHY **BRITISH POLO DAY** IS CONQUERING THE WORLD, ONE CHUKKA AT A TIME



SADDLE UP
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 Members of the the British Exiles polo team lead the charge
CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT
 Players chase the ball; the Land Rover Jodhpur Polo Team; Alastair Laurie-Walker and Eddie Miller

IT'S THE LAST SATURDAY IN JUNE AND A SUN-KISSED London is in the grip of its annual Wimbledon fever. But while the crowds at Centre Court are enjoying strawberries and cream and a tournament that will ultimately result in a historic Andy Murray victory, another quintessentially British sporting event is taking place 50kms away under glorious blue skies at Henley-on-Thames.

From a white marquee, a dapper crowd dressed in their finest summer attire looks out across a gorgeous expanse of perfectly manicured lawn that is every bit as well tended as the famous courts at the All England Club. Champagne is quaffed and canapés are nibbled as an array of lords and ladies, counts and countesses, and marquises and marchionesses mingle with socialites and fashionistas under the beatific summer sunshine to a soundtrack of thundering hooves and the occasional thwack of a mallet finding its target.

Polo, or “the sport of kings” as it is often known, is a game that has become synonymous with the upper echelons of society, and the Black Bears’ River Ground is one of the most

picturesque venues in the world at which to experience it. Just a short canter from where the famed Henley Royal Regatta rowing event takes place each July, and set amid the private 260-hectare Culham Court owned by Swiss billionaire Urs Schwarzenbach, the ground is usually the home of the aforementioned finance and property tycoon’s Black Bears polo team, but today it is the setting for British Polo Day, a stylish celebration of the sport that is fast becoming a global phenomenon.

Begun in Dubai in 2009 by former British Army men Edward Olver and Tom Hudson, British Polo Day has since taken place in India, China, Thailand, Singapore, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany and the UK,

with plans afoot to launch in Russia, Brazil, Australia, the US and South Korea by the end of 2014. Combining glamorous locations with superlative hospitality and top-class facilities, the event allows polo aficionados and neophytes alike to experience the sport at its best, and draws an affluent, sophisticated and often royal crowd wherever it lays its helmet.

Prince Harry was among those displaying their polo skills at the previous edition of the event in the UK, held at Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Watership Down Estate in Hampshire in 2011, and it is typical to see familiar faces from famous families lining up alongside some of the finest polo players in the world in full-blooded encounters in which no quarter is asked or given. It certainly makes for an exhilarating spectacle, but, as Hudson is quick to point out, “Polo is really all about the social part.”

A keen polo player since his time in a cavalry regiment of the British Army, Hudson also happens to be the great grandson of Mark Aitchison Young, the governor of Hong Kong immediately before and after the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. As we stomp the divots made by the horses’ hooves back into the field between matches, a long-standing polo tradition, Hudson tells me that, for him, the event is all about “walking around with mates, being out in the sunshine, having a nice

time – and every so often seeing ponies charging past you. For us, it’s an excuse to get 500 people together when it’s not a wedding, and create that environment of a wedding that you really want to go to.”

It’s an apt comparison, and the day flows in seamless fashion, as any good wedding should. Following a champagne reception and welcome speeches in the marquee, guests – including Schwarzenbach, the Maharaja of Jodhpur and Queen Elizabeth II’s cousin George Mountbatten – sit down to a lunch created by celebrated chef Theo Randall and wines courtesy of Justerini & Brooks. Then, after a silent auction that raises £70,000 for charities including Head Injury Through Sport and WheelPower, it’s time to stroll outside for the main event while the irrepressible “Voice of British Polo Day,” Lieutenant Colonel Simon Ledger, commentates over a loudspeaker from the sidelines.

It is, says Ed Olver, not only a great day out, but also a platform for people around the world to relate to and participate in British culture, and to encourage investment in Britain and British brands. An instantly likeable chap with an infectious upbeatness, Olver grew up all over the



Aron Harilela inspires his team to a last-gasp 6-5 victory and is named Most Valuable Player for his exertions



world in an itinerant childhood that included stints in Hong Kong, the Middle East, the US and Switzerland. After joining the British Army, he served in Iraq before rising to the post of Adjutant of the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment in Knightsbridge, running the Queen's birthday parades and being responsible for 300 men and 275 horses in London. Although he does not play polo himself, Olver is a fan of the sport, a keen rider, and an advocate of the horse as a form of "international language" that can connect cultures. "We like to create a bridge," he says of the British Polo Day events he hosts around the world. "We like to create a cultural bridge, we like to create a philanthropic bridge and we like to create a commercial bridge."

At Black Bears this year, there is a bridge to Hong Kong, as the first match of the day sees Aron Harilela line up for the Commonwealth team against a British Exiles side that includes fellow Hong Kong denizen Max Gottschalk, while Veronica Chou and Evgeny Klyucharev are among the fashionable crowd watching the

action unfold from the sidelines. In a thrilling match, Harilela inspires the Commonwealth to a last-gasp 6-5 victory and is named Most Valuable Player for his exertions. Fresh from the field, I ask him how today compares to his other experiences of playing polo, and he is effusive in his praise of both the venue and the event. "The fields are spectacular – truly [some] of the best in the world," he says as he slips into a pair of Union Jack Harrys of London loafers that are among the spoils of victory. "And it's obviously great for the charities, but to rally people on a day like this with a quintessentially English background, it's just ideal."

Gottschalk, a financier and entrepreneur who has been playing polo for 25 years, is similarly impressed by the venue, and adds that the event is "great in terms of raising awareness for polo and bringing people together to enjoy the sport."

Both Harilela and Gottschalk lament the lack of polo in Hong Kong, and would welcome the launch of British Polo Day here. It's an opportunity that Olver and Hudson would jump at. "We're very excited by the idea of doing

something in Hong Kong," says Olver, "but at the moment the cost of importing the horses is too prohibitive to justify doing an event." Olver points out that the British Army used to play polo in the city and says that he hopes it's "not too far away before some Hong Kong people say, 'Well, why don't we have polo in Hong Kong any more?' And as soon as that happens, we'd love to hold a British Polo Day there."

Back on the field, the second and final match of the day sees an Eton team containing Schwarzenbach's son Guy and British Polo Day managing director Ben Vestey defeat a Jodhpur side containing Maharaj Raghav Raj Singh, Maharaj Sahib of Shivrati, by the odd goal in 11, before the players and the crowd gather on the grass for the trophy presentation. Schwarzenbach senior and the Maharaja of Jodhpur hand out the gongs to the winners while the crowd show their appreciation for the players and their ponies. It's a jubilant moment, and the resemblance to a wedding atmosphere is so strong that I half-expect to see a bouquet flying into the crowd.

As the horses are led to the stables, a hot-air balloon is inflated on the field and the guests return to the marquee in high spirits. A jazz trio bursts into life, and there's a Roaring Twenties-inspired dance performance before more bright young things take to the dance floor to join the fun. Delicious barbecue aromas waft across from an Argentinean-style *asado* that has been slow-roasting all day in the far corner of the grounds and the air is filled with cheerful chatter and the clinking of glasses. The polo may be over for today, but the social part has only just begun. ■

IMAGES: SAM CHURCHILL



PUKKA CHUKKAS



THERE MAY BE no concrete plans for British Polo Day to come to Hong Kong, but there are plenty of other opportunities to experience the event around the world. The inaugural Russian edition takes place at The Moscow Polo Club on September 7 before the event returns to the Sunny Times Polo Club, near Beijing, on September 21. The Lion City then gets another dose of equine action at the 127-year-old Singapore Polo Club on September 28, while The Balvanera Polo & Country Club hosts the second Mexican installment of the event on November 23. A two-day polo extravaganza (including elephant polo) awaits at The Maharaja Private Polo Club in Jodhpur, India, on December 14 and 15, before the event heads to Brazil in February and Abu Dhabi and Dubai in March. See www.britishpoloday.com or www.abercrombiekent.co.uk for more details.

**SEE AND
BE SEEN
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT**

Princess Anna zu Oettingen-Wallerstein, HH Maharaja of Jodhpur Gaj Singh and Yoanna Otto; Vanessa Arelle and Harvey Newton-Haydon; Veronica Chou and Natalie Lord; the GAM Eton Polo Team; the British Polo Day at the Sunny Times Polo Club in China; Aron Harilela with his team