

Tent Pegging: A Game Of War

A wind from the east whipped the regimental pennants on the open field in the north of India. The cavalry horses in the distance were held back, every muscle in their eager bodies tensed for action. At the signal, the three steeds shot toward rows of tent pegs in the ground at the hypothetical site of an "enemy" camp. I thrilled to the sight of the red-coated cavalymen, leaning low to the right of their saddles, their lances gripped firmly in the curl of their arms.

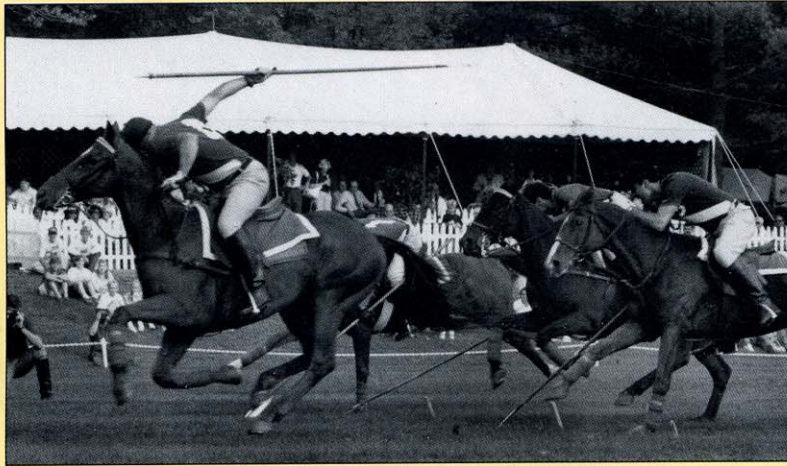
This was my first experience of tent pegging. I was in New Delhi to play polo as a guest of the Commandant of the President of India's Body Guard. Tent pegging was something a little extra they'd planned for my education and entertainment.

Now the thundering hoofs rose in crescendo and as the horsemen came abreast of their assigned targets they thrust their lances to impale the tent pegs in their rows. Some made it, some didn't. Five points were awarded riders who speared the pegs and carried them 15 meters; three points were awarded those who hit the pegs but did not make off with them; points were deducted from riders who missed entirely or were thrown from their mounts.

If the pegs that were removed had been attached to the tent ropes, the canvas would have collapsed upon a possible squad of sleeping adversaries in a time of war.

The origin of tent pegging is still the subject of debate. The popular explanation suggests that it began among Central Asian Turks and Pathans of the Northwest Frontier.

Yet tradition among the Indian soldiery (not British Indian, but In-



Members of the Equestrian Federation of India in action during a tent pegging exhibition in Gladstone, New Jersey.

Catherine Tyler

such a formidable adversary, the Muslim horsemen devised a new tactic. Quite aware that the elephants' hide was impervious to sword and spear, three or four lancers would charge the elephant, aiming at the toenails and surrounding, softer flesh. The pain would bring the un-

fortunate beast to its knees. Indeed, along with their artillery and matchlocks, Muslim lancers broke the Rajput army at the battle of Kanua by reversing the elephants into their own army. After this decisive battle, the Muslim leader, Babur, eventually destroyed the reigning Rajput armies and founded the Mogul dynasty.

British officers and civil servants eagerly adopted the sport as an excellent way to train lancers. Since almost all of the cavalry regiments of the Indian army were lancers, tent pegging was an essential part of their equestrian training. The Corps of Guides, however, did not carry lances. They did their tent pegging in a more difficult fashion with swords.

The President of India's Body Guard has regular tent pegging competitions. I picked up the basic movements of the sport but found it quite difficult to lance the peg. Hitting it off balance or missing it entirely may cause the lancer to fall off or, in extreme cases, dislocate his shoulder.

Fortunately, I rode and lanced with some prudence that day.

dian cavalymen who fought before the time of the British conquest) argues that the Pathan tribes of the frontier were not given to equine sport because of the mountainous nature of the terrain. Instead, Indian cavalymen believe that the sport evolved from Muslim horsemen aiming at the forelegs of Rajput elephants with lances.

More than 1,000 years ago Turkish horsemen from Central Asia and Afghanistan swept into India. For 500 years these Muslim invaders waged a relentless war against the Hindu sub-continent, their conquest eventually culminating in the famous Muslim Mogul dynasty that existed from 1525 to 1857. One of the Mogul emperors, Akbar, played polo in the dark with an ignited ball. Another Mogul, Shah Jahan, built the famous Taj Mahal as a mausoleum for his favorite wife. But what has this to do with tent pegging? Possibly every-

thing. Resistance against the Muslims was organized by the Hindu Rajputs, an exclusive aristocracy representing the highest ideals of Hinduism and its warrior caste, the Kshatriyas. The Rajputs employed elephants on the battleground in much the same way as tanks are now used. Faced with

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