

# THE HEART OF POLO IN PAKISTAN

Ishaq Khakwani describes how Lahore Polo Club has remained  
a world hub of polo for almost a millennium



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When I was asked to write about polo in Lahore, my dilemma was how I would reduce a thousand years of history into 1,200 words – and yet keep it interesting. Not only Lahore, the entire subcontinent was introduced to Chovgan by the central Asian armies, who invaded it. Lahore's recorded history shows that in 1210 AD, Sultan Qutb-al-Din Aibak died while playing polo here. His tomb is in a bazaar in the centre of Lahore.

Polo must have been played long before. Mughal ladies played at night with florescent balls. Persian painters have depicted men and women playing polo. Many famous poets have described polo in their verses eloquently. Within the precincts of the old walled City of Lahore there are still signs of stables, water troughs, residences of artisans connected with manufacturing saddlery and allied articles for the cavalry. The horse has remained a prized possession of rulers and conquerors. Even to this day it hasn't lost its significance the world over, though now in different fields such as horse racing, tent pegging, fox hunting, horse dancing, bull fights on horseback, horse jumping and dressage. And no one has traced the history of polo better than my friend Hamzeh Ilkhanizadeh, president of the Iran Polo Federation.

With the creation of Pakistan in 1947, a small cavalry regiment captioned as the President's Bodyguard was transferred to the new country. Luckily, the horse breeding areas remained part of present Pakistan and were under the control of the army, as such our horse industry survived. Polo remained under the supervision and patronage of the army. Polo thrived in the breeding depots, army services corps, armoured corps, the ranger's teams, the police team and the president's bodyguard. Lahore Polo Club was the only civilian club with very good facilities, enthusiastic public participation, and, above all, the ever-ready corporate sector sponsoring the tournaments. The well-to-do civilian polo

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families entertained the visiting teams and a lot of festivities took place during the polo season. Thus, Lahore has remained a hub of polo ever since.

It was in 1886 that British Army Surgeon Major Perry, with his own money, purchased 62 acres of land for 600 Rupees (present-day \$4), and is where Lahore's present polo club's three grounds, its club house and 300 stables stand. He, very cleverly by law, bound the future members to confine the use of this asset to only promote the cause of polo. In 1986, on the Club's centennial, I tried to locate his descendants, to participate in the festivities, but couldn't. I wish they could see their forefather's contribution.

LPC is part of our rich heritage and we have not only preserved it; it has rather excelled over the many decades. Every head of the state, member of government or dignitary who came to Lahore automatically became the guest of honour at the games. Some of the most prominent being: HM Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip, Sultan Azlan Shah of Perak King of Malaysia, Queen Sirikit of Thailand, HM Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi King of Iran, HH King Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan President of UAE, First Lady Jackie Kennedy of USA, HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan (he played here), President of Djibouti and many others.

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M FAWAD ASGHAR

Opposite: Jackie Kennedy with President Ayub Khan at Lahore Polo Club in 1962. Left: Diamond Paints' Mir Shoaib Ahmed in the final of the Ambassadors Cup

From top: Mir Huzaifa Ahmed on the ball and Abdul Haye Mehta (left) followed by Atif Yar Tiwana; Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth at The Lahore Polo Club in 1961 after witnessing an exhibition polo match where HRH Prince Philip played with the members of the club



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In the city of Lahore, the general public has admiration for the game. These people have never played themselves but possess knowledge of the game and know the rules. They throng the polo grounds whenever there is an international event, or high-goal games. These folk are a better judge of player's handicaps than the official committee. We have had many international team exchanges. Besides the LPC, the Pakistan Army has added an outstanding new club with three grounds, a pavilion, and stables. This is beside the army garrison polo ground.

Since the advent of FIP [Federation of International Polo] three decades ago, our team has participated in all the eight zonal playoffs, and the three World Cups in France, Argentina and Chile when we qualified for it. Since our first WC playoffs in November 2003 at LPC, it had a remarkable effect in increasing sponsorships, new young players joining the game and a huge influx of Argentine polo ponies and professional players coming every season.

In 2001, President General Musharraf decided to send a PPA (Polo Players Association) delegation to put in a bid for zonal playoffs for Zone D. PPA Chairman Major General Naeem Khalid and myself as President LPC & FIP Ambassador, attended the annual meeting of December in Buenos Aires. In those days Zone D was all the three continents of Asia, Africa and Australia/New Zealand. Unfortunately 9/11 had thrown the whole area around Pakistan into upheaval. Thus, convincing the FIP was not an easy task, its two main concerns being security and fair distribution of horses.

The first was handled with the assurance of the President of Pakistan, who was also The Army Chief. For the second, I gave a personal assurance to Ambassador Glen Holden, the FIP President and his other associates, that if the visiting teams complain about the home team being better mounted, the Tournament Director will have full authority to swap the entire pool of horses with that of the team who complained. This being a very fair proposal, the FIP President

and his associates accepted the PPA bid to host its first WC playoffs in November/December 2003. It was the first step towards the resurgence of interest in polo whereby Pakistan participation in FIP events has increased. The tournament was a great success.

Credit must be given to the FIP for its innovation of introducing a very popular event: The Ambassador's Cup. The LPC has had the privilege of hosting it twice. First in 1995 when Roland Sadoun, Marcos Uranga, Amb Ignacio Arcaya and others played. More recently, the 104th Ambassador's Cup was played in October/November 2019, where 12 foreign players from six countries participated, besides Pakistan.

Two senior players from Iran and Australia came to support the event. Not to forget the three wives of players whom we were delighted to host. The contingent was Mr and Mrs Francisco Escobar, Mr and Mrs Ronald Zürcher from Costa Rica, Mr and Mrs Joseph Meyer, Dr Tanweer Khan from USA, David Payne, Mike Egan from Canada, Roderick Vere Nicoll, Andy Cork, Nick Gerard, and Jason Crane from the UK, Kaveh Atrak from Sweden, and Iqbal Jumabhoy from Singapore. My personal guests were Hamzeh Ilkhanizadeh from Iran and Peter Yunghanns from Australia.

The Cup was to create an awareness campaign for breast cancer and was sponsored by fashion house Gul Ahmed. All 17 guests were received and seen off by polo players from LPC. The guests were socially entertained; shown the army horse-breeding facility, Mona Depot, two hours' drive from Lahore, and were guests at the flag-lowering ceremony at the Pakistani-India border. They all enjoyed a private Halloween party by an LPC member.

The final match was witnessed by the President of Pakistan, who met all the players and gave away the prizes, before a large crowd of spectators. A display of tent pegging teams, bike riders, an aeronautical show and a cavalcade of young boys and girls performed to raise awareness of breast cancer, showing true conviviality.

## CREDIT MUST BE GIVEN TO THE FIP FOR ITS INNOVATION INTRODUCING THE AMBASSADOR'S CUP

From left: Ishhaq Khakwani, Iqbal Jumabhoy, Mir Shoaib Ahmed, Atif Yar Tiwana, Dr Arif Alvi (President of Pakistan), Mike Egan, Mir Huzaifa Ahmed and Mr Jahangir Tareen (Ex Federal Minister)

