



WORLD ELEPHANT POLO  
CHAMPIONSHIP, NEPAL

# PACKING OUR TRUNK

EQUESTRIO ARABIA HAS ALWAYS HAD A STRONG ASSOCIATION WITH THE WORLD OF ELEPHANT POLO, AND SO WE HEADED TO NEPAL TO CELEBRATE AN ENDURING SPORT, PACKING OUR WHITES, POLO BOOTS AND PASSPORT, BUT LEAVING OUR 52 POLO STICKS SAFELY AT HOME.

WORDS: Marie Stissing Jensen  
PHOTOGRAPHY: Johnny Fenn

**T**he 2015 World Elephant Polo Championship were held at the spectacular venue of Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge, nestled on the edge of Nepal's Chitwan National Park in late November. The ambience was great – for players, guests and not least for the elephants themselves.

This year saw the Tigresses Arabia defend their World Championship, though it was clear from the outset that it would be a tough challenge from the first throw-in. The other top-seed was EFG (who shared a 5 goal handicap with the Tigresses), and they counted players such as Peter Prentice, the Chairman of the World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA), and two-time MVP winner, Sangjay Choegyial. Other teams on the roster were host, Kristjan Edwards' 4 goal Tiger Tops Tuskers; Rusty Kukiris, Pukka Chukkas and Gal Oya Lodge all on 2 goals; and Tharu Tigers and the rookie team St. Paul Griffins USA, both on 1 goal.

Before their first match, the Tigresses called for a minute's silence in memory of their team member and former *Equestrio Arabia* Editor-in-Chief, Lucy Monro, who sadly lost her life in a bicycle accident in Dubai in early 2015.

When the match got underway, the Tigresses gave the Rusty ▶





Kukiris a lead of three goals, but the Tigresses were not quite prepared for the onslaught of the former Gurkhas and it ended in a defeat to the reigning champs. In their next two league face-offs, the Tigresses managed to claw their way back into the game to make the Semi Finals.

The other strong contender EFG, were strong from the very beginning and in the group play, they faced no real challenges. They comfortably made their way into the Semi Finals, winning all the league games.

For Tiger Tops Tuskers, Kristjan Edwards had enrolled support from his long-time friend, Matt Idiens, with whom he won the World Championships in 2003. Together they made for a very strong line-up and were ably backed by Alf Idiens and Amir Nawab. The Tiger Tops Tuskers looked very solid indeed and the only slight bump on their way to the semis was a loss to EFG.

Spectators and players alike confirmed that the Semi Finals

were some of the best elephant polo seen in a long time. The match between the Rusty Kukiris and the Tiger Tops Tuskers had everyone on the edge of their seats; it was intense from start to finish. Rusty Kukiris played to win and the teamwork between Johnny Fenn and Tristan Forster was extraordinary. But in the end the Tiger Tops Tuskers (and in particular Kristjan Edwards) played out of their skins and managed to win by one goal. The Tigresses had their Semi Final match against their nemesis EFG, and, following the tournament's pattern, couldn't beat them into securing a place in the Final.

The World Championship deciding game was understandably much anticipated, with Sanjay Choegyal and Kristjan Edwards poised against each other in the bully-offs resulting in a hard fought match. Kristjan Edwards played another stormer of a game and at half-time, the Championships could go to either team. In the end though, the experience of the EFG side pulled

“Lucy Monro started the prize for the Best Playing Elephant, because they are the most important part of the game and so it was decided to continue this award in her memory.”





them through and they victoriously raised the 2015 WEPA World Cup. However, the strong effort put in by Kristjan Edwards earned him the MVP accolade.

In the WEPA Olympic Quaich Finals, Gal Oya Lodge managed to deservedly clinch the title over the Pukka Chukkas. The latter played valiantly, but the entire Gal Oya team and Milli Wiseman, in particular, outshone their opposition and will prove to be an accomplished side for future tournaments.

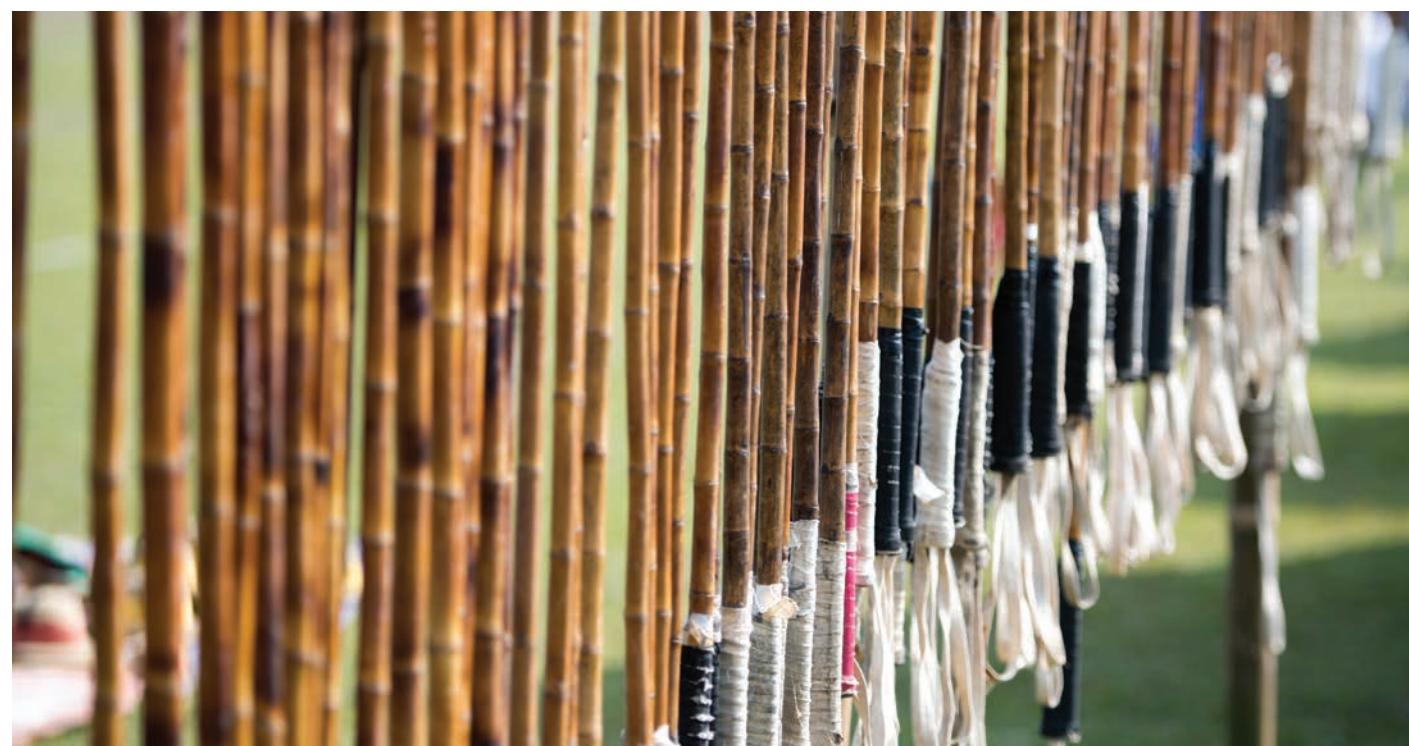
Sadly for the St. Paul Griffins USA Captain Georg Kapaz he and his side were out of the running and he contemplated at the end of the tournament: "We were unable to even win the wooden spoon outright!"

At the end of the day, elephant polo is about the animals, raising awareness for these majestic elephants, getting to

know them and their lives. It was further emphasised by having the event at Tiger Tops Tharu Lodge with the recently opened Elephant Camp, which is all about living with and among elephants, and to experience the special relationship between them and their drivers, the Mahouts.

Lucy Monro started the prize for the Best Playing Elephant, because they are the most important part of the game and so it was decided to continue this award in her memory and present the prize to Hom Bahadur on Durga Kali. It was both their first time at WEPA, but they both showed a remarkable progress over the tournament both in the terms of speed, positioning and understanding of the game.

As ever, the tournament was deemed a huge success' one which bought together friends from across the globe for a notable cause. **E**



## Q&A WITH SANGJAY CHOEGYAL

*Equestrio Arabia* sat down with experienced Elephant polo player, Sangjay Choegyal as he was basking in his well-deserved championship glory to get his views on the 2015 WEPA tournament.

At 28-years-old, Choegyal is the star player of the reigning World Champions EFG and has twice won the MVP award. Off-pitch he is owner and director at Galoya Lodge in Sri Lanka, partnering with several of his elephant polo comrades. He has an exotic pedigree with an English mother and a Tibetan father and grew up in Nepal.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED IN ELEPHANT POLO AND WHAT OR WHO FIRST PIQUED YOUR INTEREST?

I have been involved my whole life by coming to Tiger Tops as a child and spending my time playing around and with elephants. I first started playing in 2008 in Thailand and my first WEPA was the following year, when I represented Thailand.

Jim Edwards, the co-founder of elephant polo and a very dear family friend inspired

me through his stories, and was very generous by always allowing us to join him at Tiger Tops.

And of course the elephants were always a major attraction. I have always loved the elephants and have had the privilege of growing up with them. It was a natural progression to move to elephant polo.

### TELL US ABOUT THE WORK OF WEPA.

WEPA raises awareness of the elephants and conservation, the tournament – the

ethos of our venue this year, Tiger Tops is all about elephant welfare. WEPA, Tiger Tops and the event is a showcase of how elephant welfare should be managed and how it can be promoted to the benefit of all. Everyone involved has done a tremendous job in raising money for charity.

### WE'RE SURE THERE HAVE BEEN SOME MISHAPS AND TALES OVER THE SEASONS – AND AS AN ELEPHANT

### NEVER FORGETS – CAN YOU SHARE SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE OR HILARIOUS MOMENTS FROM THE TOURNAMENT?

Personally, my biggest moment was winning the World Championships in 2010 with the EFG team. Winning the Championship in any sport is a major feat, but given the experience and skill required in elephant polo, this was an even bigger victory – and one made even more special by how close the cause is to my heart.

There are many special moments, but one happened today [on the day of the Finals]. We were getting ready for the last match; I had the nervous jitters and butterflies racing around my stomach. After we all followed the piper onto the pitch as part of the processions, we were waiting

for the talk from the chief guest – and as we took off our helmets, I dropped mine to the ground. See, once you're on the elephant you cannot easily get off, but the mahout and the elephant saved me. By gingerly maneuvering the elephant, the mahout asked the elephant to pick up my hat with its trunk!

### TELL US ABOUT THE SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES YOU MUST HAVE TO PLAY. WHAT IS THE HARDEST ASPECT?

It really all comes down to the relationship between the mahout and the elephant.

It is crucial to be able to position the elephant and find space on the pitch. As you can imagine, it is very difficult to find a small polo ball from the top of an elephant,

so it is all about finding the time and the space. The bigger the elephant, the more challenging it gets.

The hardest aspect is that one player cannot win the tournament. All players have to be on the same wavelength from number one to number four. Getting the teamwork going takes all players to know each other, the elephants to know each other and the mahouts to understand the game. It is very difficult to get all the components to line-up!

### WHY DOES THE SPORT HOLD YOUR INTEREST?

The main attractions, which keep drawing people back to elephant polo and WEPA in particular, is the elephant itself, and because you get to spend time in the jungle in an amazing place such as Nepal.