

Each summer, in a remote corner of Pakistan rumored to be home base for Osama bin Laden, two rival tribes face off in one of the oldest and most brutal games. That's right—polo. And for 70 years, confining the violence to the pitch has been the best way to keep the peace off it

# Between Heaven And Hell

By Matthew Cole



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAMERON HICKEY & LAUREN TENEY









**At first,** the crowd is silent. From benches, stands and the bare ground, some 40,000 fans crane their necks for a better view of the patchy grass field. Behind them, snow-covered peaks loom, a disconnect from the 80° summer heat. In front of them, Team Chitral's star player, Mohammad Hussain, lies motionless on the dusty goal line, a miniature Koran pendant dangling from his neck, blood pooling from his head. He looks dead. And then the yelling begins.

The crowd: *Get him off the field!*

The players: *Start the game!*

Moments earlier, Hussain had been poised to score. But as he and his horse closed in on the red-and-white goalposts, the animal bucked. Hussain, tossed 15 feet into the air with enough force to rip his helmet off, came down on his head. As the shouting continues, three scrawny medics arrive to drag him off on a tattered white stretcher, wip-

visibly. In the Himalayas, it often seems that fans care about the game more than about the players—and the horses—who play it.

Welcome to polo in northwest Pakistan.

EACH JULY, thousands of pilgrims, almost exclusively male, make the perilous trek through the Shandur Pass, a flat seam of rock near Pakistan's borders with China, India and Afghanistan, to watch one of the world's most violent sports. Add the challenges of altitude—at 12,500 feet, this may be the highest "stadium" in the world—to a virtually lawless match, and you've got something close to the X<sup>2</sup> Games. But today's match is more than a seriously extreme sport. For 70 years, two ancient tribes have used this game to settle disputes without (much) bloodshed. You think Bama-Auburn is heated? Chitral-Gilgit makes that rivalry seem like a post-Thanksgiving-feast round of flag football.

Sports, of course, have always been a proxy for war, but polo's martial pedigree is legit. Central Asian tribes used the game as cavalry practice some 2,500 years ago, making it the oldest team and ball game. (*Polo* means ball in the local Balti language.) Back in the day, animal skulls or enemies' heads served as the ball. Genghis Khan himself organized matches, with the sport passing into Persia and India as his kingdom spread. And when the British colonized the subcontinent, they learned the game from their Indian subjects. By

## Back in the day, animal skulls and enemies' heads served as the ball. Genghis Khan organized matches.

ing away evidence of the accident faster than sweat can be wiped off a basketball court.

In most countries, an injury this severe at a sporting event would cause players and fans to quickly go silent. Strangers would pray together and the hush would end only when the injured man was taken away to the sound of hopeful applause. But here in the brutal mountain region of Central Asia, carnage is such a part of daily life on and off the field that a crumpled player with likely head trauma is no big shake. As religious as fans are in these parts (most are devout Muslims), no one prays for Hussain, at least not

the late 1800s, British army officers had added rules and structure to the game. They exported polo back to the manicured lawns of Victorian England, and it soon became a genteel pursuit in Europe and in North and South America.

But while polo was becoming "civilized" in the West, its Himalayan version was staying true to its roots. In 1936, an English colonel named Eveyln Cobb decided to use the game as a form of diplomacy, and he organized a match between two rival local kingdoms under British rule. The idea was to keep the perpetually warring Chitral and Gilgit—whose territories were neatly divided by the





Out on the pitch, Skander ul Mulk, Chitral's 49-year-old captain and its most experienced player, mounts his horse. Skander, a land-owning prince whose status is indicated by the fact that he is one of the few players to wear a helmet, has played in the festival since 1982. In that time, he has seen six horses and one player die from overexertion. The air is thin up here, and charging 300 yards at full speed is hard on a horse. When one dies, as one of Gilgit's did in 2004, the game is paused and the players turn pallbearers, hoisting the animal above

thing in line. In Pakistan, refs are nonexistent. Not that it's complete anarchy. After one Chitral player died from a mallet to the skull a few years back, both sides agreed to a no-intentionally-swinging-at-your-opponents rule. Then again, the definition of "intentionally" is still up for debate, so mallets start flying from the moment today's match gets under way.

Musharraf, wearing a baseball cap that says "President," throws the ball onto the field to get things going. As he jumps back, 12 mounted players knot in a scrum before the ball eventually flies toward the two-foot-high stone wall that runs the length of the pitch. Players use the wall the same way hockey players use the boards, to direct the ball to teammates or send it to other



Shandur Pass—pacified with an annual tournament that came to be called the Shandur Polo Festival. Locals describe the pass as "between heaven and hell," because so many people have died trying to reach the beautiful but treacherous location. The pass continues to be dangerous, but since the two tribes began settling their disputes with polo, most of the violence has stayed on the field.

Today's marquee match—a culmination of three days of play—begins casually, at least by local standards. Three hundred Pakistani soldiers toting machine guns scan the mountains for terrorists. The show of force is to protest Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf, who arrived earlier by helicopter. When Musharraf came to this part of northwest Pakistan in 2003, suspected al-Qaeda operatives tried to kill him (twice). The area, dubbed "bin Laden's lair" because of the numerous Islamic radicals believed to be hiding here, recently made the news when it was tabbed as a likely hideout for Osama himself.

**Chitral's star is out cold after being thrown from his horse (above left). Despite its genteel rep in the West, polo is the people's game in Pakistan.**

their shoulders, walking 100 yards to a glacial lake behind the stands and tossing in the dead horse.

Skander, an affable Tom Selleck look-alike, leans down and strokes his horse. He says that once play starts, there is no way to know if a horse will hold up: "You cannot tell until just before they collapse." To be safe, Skander (like most players) spent 10 days before the match acclimating his ride to the altitude.

In the Western version of polo, each team has four players, and players can change horses during the match. The game has six periods, or chukkers, which last seven minutes each. In Pakistan, it's six-on-six with two 25-minute chukkers. In the West, a ref and two mounted umpires keep every-

parts of the pitch. Someone hits the ball over the wall, and a player and his horse leap over it. There is no protection for the crowd, so the first three rows scatter.

For good reason.

It's hard to describe the terrifying jolt of adrenaline that shoots through the crowd as the stone-like polo ball rockets toward them and several 1,000-plus-pound horses come close enough to reveal blades of grass wedged in their rough iron shoes and a lingering smell of barn. In pursuit of the ball, three of the massive snorting beasts slam into each other, their riders flailing mallets wildly. A pipe-and-drum band kicks in, providing a shrieking sound track to the chaos.

Izad Manshah, a 26-year-old from Chitral who traveled six hours on foot to lend his support, cracks a smile. The music, he claims, keeps the horses in a trance and helps them perform in the thin air. "If the music were playing yesterday," he says, "no one gets hurt." He is referring to a





and unpredictable animal flesh. As the horses thunder up and down the pitch, spittle flying from their mouths, the ground shakes and rumbles. It's both majestic and scary (the-first-time-you-saw-*Poltergeist* scary) as they reach full speed, necks extended, haunches churning, riders swinging.

Polo was an Olympic sport until 1936, when it began to lose its international appeal. But in Pakistan, the game is as strong as ever. There's a polo pitch in every city and village, and even in

die, and families lose husbands and fathers. Who will raise the animals then?"

Although Chitral takes an early lead after Hussain's accident, Gilgit reels off four unanswered goals before the chukker is over. At halftime, as Gilgit captain Bulbul Jan dismounts, a coach hands him a lit cigarette and a Coke. There's good reason for Jan to relax. Hussain was Chitral's best player and rode its fastest horse. With both sidelined, Gilgit should cruise the rest of the match.

## Later, Hussain will be wheeled to the trophy ceremony unconscious, his day—and his polo career—cut short.



**Another polo casualty (above); veteran Skander ul Mulk (right) hasn't left any blood on Shandur's pitch—so far; President Musharraf (far right) takes in the action.**

second-squad game the day before, when the ball—essentially a carved bamboo root—nailed a Chitral horse in the mouth. The horse reared up, spitting out broken teeth, and tossed the Chitral player to the ground, breaking his femur. Fans in the first rows heard the snap.

It was typical of most polo injuries, which usually involve a hurtful twist on Newton's third law of motion: To every polo action there is an equally violent opposite reaction. (In fact, when Hussain takes his header midway through the first chukker, the accident is rare for not involving another player. He simply wanted his horse to move one way, and the horse wasn't buying.) Even in the West, polo is a full-contact sport. Think hockey without pads, then throw in tons of sweaty



poor towns—as most towns in Pakistan are—the pitch has lights and fences and proper stands. In areas where electricity is scarce, the juice is sent to the pitch first, lighting it for summer evening matches. In many areas, the pitch is just across from the local mosque. So the faithful can pray and play, while God and history keep watch over them. "I see 2,000 years of this game played here," says Sulaiman Shah Asif, a local leader. "I see my ancestors on those horses."

Skander's older brother, Siraj, who helped organize this year's festival, says polo goes beyond national identity. "It is our second religion," he says. And unlike some religions, this one does seem to be lessening hostilities on the planet—at least in this remote high corner of it.

Which is just what Colonel Cobb had planned. Asif tells the story of an episode some years back, when Chitrali villagers stole 60 goats and 40 yaks from a Gilgit village. "That summer," he says, "we played polo, and Gilgit won. Chitral gave the animals back. If there is no polo, then we fight. We

The second half quickly bears this out, as Gilgit scores four more goals to put the game out of reach.

Final score: Gilgit 9, Chitral 6.

Hussain, meanwhile, was lucky. He didn't die from his fall. Turns out he only broke his neck. Later, he'll be wheeled to the trophy ceremony, unconscious and slumped over, a bandage around his bloody head, his day—and his polo career—cut short 10 feet from the goal line.

Head hung low, Skander gets off his horse. "Gilgit has won more than they have lost," he says. "Much more." (During a stretch in the 1980s and '90s, Gilgit took 12 in a row.) But today's loss is still painful for the captain, who now has the proverbial and all-too-literal long ride home down the mountain. He came to Shandur on horseback but will leave by car, under cover of darkness. "All the women and children in the villages are going to come out and throw mud and rocks at us for losing," he says.

The grapefruit-color Himalayan sun begins to set over the icy peaks as Skander sizes up the caravan that is now making its way back down the mountain. Even with Chitral's best player on the permanent DL, Skander manages a wait-'til-next-year moment in the fading light. "We will train someone else to ride Hussain's horse and replace him," he says. "The horses count most."

"The players are not as important." 

Know of a more brutal game?  
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