

**T**HE Northern Areas of Pakistan are recipients of the generosity of nature in the form of Chitral, Gilgit, and Sandur valleys. In these sky-high mountains when the glaciers melt, the music of streams and gorges make the atmosphere romantic.

Fragrance of flowers, tile air. Life here in the proximity of nature, is very hard but simple and elegant. Here three majestic mountain ranges. Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindukush, embrace each other. Transparent water lakes of Devsai, Yadpara, S'handur, Kichura and Bhindar surge in the lap of these mountains. It fills the heart of onlookers with peace and joy. People here are gallant, hardworking and hospitable. At a distance of 600 kilometres from Islamabad, Gilgit is surrounded by rocky mountains and snow conversed peaks. It is connected with other parts of country by Karakoram Highway. And being the ancient sport of this region, Polo is the passion of everyone here.

In 1981, the population of Northern Areas was about six hundred thousand people with the growth rate of 3.8 per cent.

# The majesty of Polo

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**POLO FOR ALL: Passion of the North**

Now the population has gone up to more than one million. Ethnically people are of great diversity. With the construction of Karakoram Highway, this area has become an emerg-

ing market.

Polo is the symbol of grandeur of these areas. This sport has unique position in Northern Areas as compared to other parts of world. Its ancient

regulations are still maintained and it resembles more with the ancient form of Polo. It can be called 'Wild Polo' or free-style Polo. There is no foul in this brand of Polo and no referee during the game, though there are two judges. Players during the game don't play at particular positions, but keep on changing their positions. Striking the stick and obstructing the opponent from taking a shot is permissible. After scoring a goal, the player of that team takes the ball in his hand at central line, throws it in the air and then hits it. It is a peculiar feature of this variety of Polo, which is unprecedented around the world.

According to a research, Polo started in Egypt about 6000 years ago. It was a religious ritual for ancient Egyptians. The present form of polo came to Arabia from Egypt and from there it reached Iran. Some historical evidence suggests that about 2500 years back, during the reign of King Gustap, polo was a familiar sport for Iranians. They called it *Chogan*

*Bazi*. Primarily polo was a training sport for the cavalry units of elite troops of Persia. Development of polo in Northern Areas of Pakistan is attributed to a British political agent, Major E H Cob.

He himself was a good player of polo. At Shandur, he used to play polo on the bank of a beautiful lake during full moon nights. That polo ground is called *Mast Jonali* meaning Moon Polo Ground. Although half of this Polo ground has gone under the lake water, its remnants are still there.

Major Cob had a strong passion for the sport. He ordered the construction of polo grounds in every village. Today every town of Northern Areas has a polo ground. Gilgit city has two where local teams practice. Construction of the Royal Polo Ground will further develop Polo sport in this area. The widespread popularity of polo can be witnessed when children with sticks play polo in the streets. Every polo sportsman decorates his horse well with the ornaments before entering in a match. Even the poor have horses.

Chitral is an isolated place in the country. Its inhabitants call it Chitral whereas people of Dir district named it Kashkar which is perhaps the phonetic variation of Chinese city

Kashghar. The district of Chitral is spread over 5000 square miles having three hundred thousand people. With a mountainous terrain, no house in this area is below four thousand feet above sea level. Chitral consists of 12 valleys, big and small. Chitral River flow in the midst of city, bisecting the city. Treasure of natural beauty in Kelash valleys entices the tourists world over.

Kelash comprises of three closely located hamlets: Ramboor, Barir and Bomborait. Kelash civilization in these valleys is an all time fascination. It is the common belief that these people came with the army of Alexander the great, but settled here for good, though for what reason, it is still not known.

Like in Gilgit, polo is also a popular sport here. About 25 polo teams are active here. Chitral Polo Ground is marvellous and perhaps the biggest in this area. Like Gilgit, ancient polo brand is played here.

The only principle of polo here is to win. Drummers and pipers too have an essential role in this sport. At the end of match and during the break, players in the company of excited spectators sing and dance. With all its peculiarities polo in Northern Areas is an exclusive excitement. ■