

By Fakir Syed Aitzaz Uddin

# Polo — seeking greener pastures

A great deal has been written on polo — this game of "kings", and periodically a number of interviews have been published on this subject. But very seldom do we hear, about the current state of affairs and the steps being taken by the management about securing the future of the game.

For the past 45 years, polo has been played by a handful of the elite; who have unfortunately throttled the scope of development of the game at the national level. Were it not for the tremendous effort being put in by the Pakistan Army to keep the game going by the generous allocation of polo ponies to anyone asking for them — by allowing officers as much leave as they desire, so that these persons can play in tournaments up and down the country — by holding, arranging and funding all the polo tournaments being played at Rawalpindi, Kharian, Multan and Quetta; then it can truly be said, that, we would have seen the demise of polo in our country.

Lahore, is the centre of high goal polo in Pakistan; but with their limited grounds, they cannot, neither increase the membership of players nor make any further increase in the number of tournaments. Although, in the past two years, the excellent arrangements made by the hard-working, capable and talented Asif Yar Tiwana, as the secretary, ably supported by the President, Mr Hamid Ali Noon, have brought about a number of welcome changes in the club's playing schedule, but even their efforts cannot make any dent on the national level.

We have only to glance at our neighbour, India, who had a great number of players, the grounds, the tremendous facilities of yesteryears left as legacy to them at Partition, have all gone abegging. India today, can only produce two or three teams of about 12 goals, and after that, they cannot even make two 6 goal teams. The world of polo has taken a page from the charter of the most popular sports in the world of today, golf, football (soccer) and tennis.

In the USA, South American countries and in England, the custodians of the game of polo have introduced cash prize money; this, in their respective countries, has changed the complete format of the game. The game is more competitive, faster and more people are entering into the ranks of the beginner, today, than at any stage over the last 20 years. Because, if only a few talented big names

are playing, regularly, even the die-hard supporters will stop coming to watch the matches. People want to see a few new stars — the more that come forth the more the attraction to the spectators. For the spectator or enthusiasts if you wish, there is the insane, surreptitious desire to witness the conquest of "the old king" by the upstart protege. It is sight of the upsets which bring them flocking to

case in tennis, badminton etc; but cricket is different. With the vast amount of prize money being offered and the fringe benefits of the game, no one can say that the game will ever decline, as there are countless young Wasim Akram's and the Inzamam's coming up. But not in polo.

Here, one will only see, the progeny of the old war horse, retired senior army officer's son coming forward. Except for

## Polo through the centuries

*"Let other men play at other things. The king of games is still the game of kings."*

Polo is believed to be the oldest organised team sport in the world, dating back 2500 years. It was an integral part of the court life of the Caliphs of Baghdad and the rulers of Persia, India and China. Though the centuries have clouded the precise origins of the game, Persian manuscripts and miniatures, particularly Firdousi's *Shahnamah*, indicate that polo began in ancient Persia in the 4th century. From there it spread to China during the Tang Dynasty in the late 7th or early 8th century. Though basically "the game of kings," polo was also played by queens and noblewomen of Persia, China and India. The Slave King Qutubudin Albak died while playing polo as did the legendary 9-goaler, 'Jai' the Maharajah of Jaipur, hundreds of years later, in England in 1970.

Polo has inspired writers and artists since time immemorial and probably the greatest homage was paid to this majestic sport by Shah Abbas of Persia, when he had the city of Isphahan built around the royal polo ground. The game was brought into India by the invading Muslim conquerors and remained an important part of court life till the fall of the Mughal Empire. It was during the days of the British Raj, when polo was made compulsory for all cavalry units, that the game once again regained its prominence and lost glory. The fact that today polo is an international sport is due entirely to the British who carried it back to England, which became the centre, and thus onto the Americas, Europe, Australia and Australia. Now the game has spread to unlikely places, like Nigeria and Brunei.

Gilgit is perhaps the only place where polo is still played in its primitive form. No Hurlingham Club rules here! Against the backdrop of the Karakoram, the tribesmen play a rough game on mountain ponies, in a long narrow field bordered by jagged stone walls, to the tune of wild tribal music. The pace of the game is so fast and the casualty rate so high, that on many occasions just one player is left in both teams.

The trophy is still the traditional richly decorated ram and fittingly enough, it is here that the stone tablet with J.K. Stephen's immortal words has been erected. "Let other people.....kings" ■ Courtesy — Herald

the gates.

Though the handicapping system in polo makes it possible to witness some great games within the framework of 16-24 goal polo, which in polo hierarchy is called, medium goal polo, it still is not enough to attract the same number of spectators as soccer or golf do.

But, in Pakistan, we are not only bereft of spectators but also of the cash prize sponsorship in polo. The same is the

Karachi, where the management has ensured that, a nursery of young and aspiring polo players are inducted into the game each year; no other town in Pakistan boasts of a similar coaching plan nor any comparable number of students in the past years. It is therefore, high time, that, serious thought be given to the establishment of polo teaching centres in the country, before it reaches the point of no return.



PIA is the only other major contributor to the sponsorship of polo — but only in the provinces of Gilgit, Skardu and Chitral. Thus, the game is and can only be witnessed during the annual festivals at Gilgit and at Shandur. The latter boast of having people playing polo at the highest altitude in the whole world. And this, is a tribute to the courage, stamina and the fitness of the competitors who go to play there and who win there. Again, it is the Pakistan Army, who is keeping polo alive,

there, in the form of the Gilgit Scouts, the Chitral Scouts, the Northern Scouts and a private team, which is run by the ruling family of Chitral. But at all other places in the Baltistan Areas, polo has been wiped out.

In conclusion, it is only fair that we hope for the return of the era of the Hesky Baig's, the famous Tiwana family team, the resurrection of the Darveshes and the Salt Rangers. The need of the hour demands, that, we go with the times and copy what the successful clubs in the

other parts of the world are doing, to make the sport of polo attractive to the spectators and by that one cause — to the big sponsors, who will then finance the capital to make polo a big game in the country. Our stagnation of the standard of polo within the country must end, and new formats be introduced, so that, we produce high goal players within our own country, and no one has to go abroad and settle there, in order to go to 5-goals and above. ■ The writer is the President of the Karachi Polo Club.

## COVER STORY

By Adil Ahmad

# Shandur — polo in paradise



*Glory for Gilgit*



*"Smartly turned out in breeches and boots,  
Forgive me oh Lord, but I am proud of my roots"*

Life at twelve thousand feet is tough. It is almost non-existent. The Chitral Scout, and certain four-legged species, are about the only beneficiaries here of Nature's largesse, and abrupt, vicious moods. But once a year the mood, both Nature's and man's, turns festive. East of the Hindukush, south of the Pamir, and West of the Himalayas lies the mightiest chain of mountains in the world, the Karakoram. The Shandur area has an awesome magnificence. Some one hundred and fifty kilometers from Chitral, the rock and shale ridden trail which winds along the precipitous edge of the Mastuj river leaves the poor mortal traveler feeling stunted and insignificant.

The people of Chitral and Gilgit are a friendly, contented lot, given to living in splendid isolation. Their needs are few and far between, and catered to amply by their immediate environment. The beauty of their backyard makes up more than enough for a lack of social calendar. The elements here are both generous and hostile, and involve the locals in reaping the harvest of wheat, rice and fruit, and preparing for their wrath as winter approaches. But once a year the tribesmen of Chitral and Gilgit turn to each other for recreation and inspiration. They ease work and travel the treacherous incline to the Shandur pass. And in the midst of towering, snow-capped peaks, they came together. Brave, strong, noble folk, they share a common passion for horses, and polo.

Shanduri polo brooks no meddling from an "impartial" referee. It is freestyle polo. There IS NO referee. Only each player's commitment to excel in a game in which there are no holds barred. Polo ponies here are a different breed altogether. Playing a twenty-five minutes



**Apres polo!**

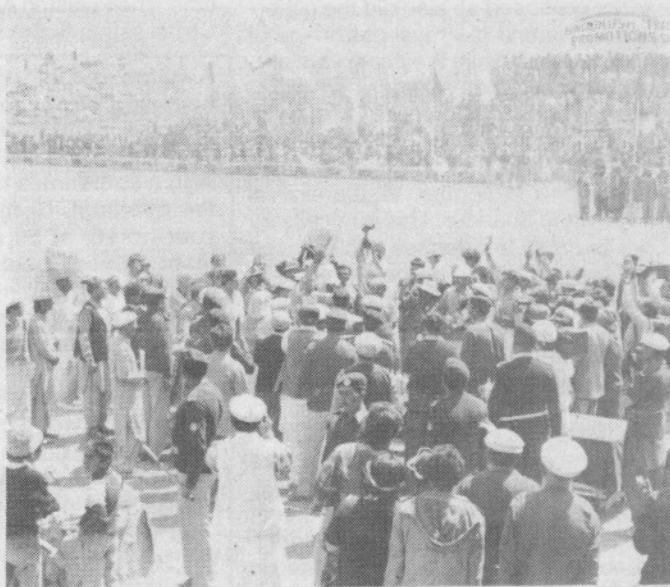
single 'chakkar' at twelve thousand two hundred and fifty feet requires a herculean effort. Yet these miraculous creatures of Nature do it effortlessly — or so it seems until they die at the end of a flat gallop.

The Shanduri player is a breed apart as well. Hailing either from Chitral or Gilgit, he is the ultimate knight in shining armour — totally fearless, honourable, and modest. His horsemanship is unreal. Never before has there existed such a keen rapport between man and beast. And during the two twenty-five minute 'chakkars' both give their all for the prestige of their respective teams. Colonel Schomberg has summed up the spirit of Shanduri polo in the following words "..... it is a wonderfully democratic game. It is a curious paradox in a land of autocracy to see

the raja, his sons and wazir all jostling and crashing together with any peasant who has a horse and cares to play". The raja's wazirs (advisers) were accomplished horsemen who play polo with a zest and daring the raja himself could seldom match. Wazir Ghulam Abbas, son of the legendary last Wazir of Nagar, now plays for the Gilgit Public Works Department. Together with Darwesh Ali, Bulbuljan, Wilayat, Ghairy Khan, Ali Khan, Arastu, Sherbas, Raji Rahmat and Hussain Ali, they comprise the elite horsemen of the Shandur Pass.

Polo started out as a 'wargame' for the royal cavalries of Persian emperors. There was no maximum number of players to a team, and sometimes these were over one hundred players to each side. In time polo became a Persian

national sport played extensively by the nobility. Men as well as women played the game as witnessed by references to the queen and her ladies engaging King Khusro and his courtiers (6th century A.D.). From Persia the game spread to Arabia, then to Tibet, to China, and to Japan. In China, in the year 910, the death of a favoured relative in a game prompted Emperor A-Pao-Chi to order the beheading of all surviving players. Polo was introduced into India by muslim conquerors during the 13th century. The founder of the mughal empire, Babur, was an avid polo player and established it as the most popular of royal sports. Akbar, the Great played polo at night by torchlight. For more than twenty centuries polo remained the favourite sport of the rulers of Asia. As the great eastern



**Blood, sweat and tears pay off in victory**  
**Photos by: the Active News and photo Service (ANPS).**



**Tent city at 12,000 feet**

Tuesday Review, April 26 — May 2, 1994



**Pomp and splendour at the Shandur Pass**



empires collapsed so also did the glittering court life and the royal patronage of polo. For a long while the game was preserved only in remote villages.

Mastuj and Phandar are two such remote villages where the teams from Chitral and Gilgit set up their training camps six weeks prior to the annual showdown in Shandur. This is necessary to get the men and horses acclimatised to the high altitude. The polo ground at the Shandur Pass is long and narrow, and hedged in by snow-capped peaks on all sides. The stone walls which constitute the boundaries of the field pose as great a hazard to man and horse as the no holds barred rules which govern play. The first recorded polo tournament here was played in 1936. A romantically inclined British political agent, Major Cobb, was given to playing polo under a full moon, and he no doubt contributed in considerable measure towards the rejuvenation of the game in these parts.

With hard, cold dollar generating capabilities of sports-aided tourism being given a high priority in Pakistan, Shandur promises to become a bigger and bigger attraction with the passage of

time. The Pakistan Army's Frontier Works Organisation is presently constructing a

**A game of polo generally lasts one hour and in house sixty breathtaking minutes, eight men on horses (four to each team) chase a small white ball, with a sometimes demonic ferocity, to the goalpost. Getting it through, with your horse, at 50 mph, the opposing team at your heels and abuses and instructions ringing in your ears, is what polo is all about. No other game combines the same level of speed, strength and courage. This coupled with the incredible coordination required between a man and his horse, makes polo the most exciting spectator sport in the world. The player is rated by way of a handicap which ranges from a-2 for beginners and from 0 to 10 for players qualified to compete. Polo is a high risk sport and it is this that inspires that universal camaraderie between all polo players and sets them apart as a special breed. Probably the only thing more thrilling than watching a good game is playing it.**

network of new all-weather roads throughout the northern areas, opening up hitherto inaccessible regions and cutting down considerably on travelling time. A tremendous investment needs to be made in the infrastructure and the skilled manpower which the tourism industry has for a prerequisite. The attitudes at the bureaucratic enclaves like the PIDC need to be drastically altered to conform to a 'tourist friendly' atmosphere as opposed to the free loaders and rip-off con artists who plague Pakistan's tourism.

"There is no denying the fact that opening up the northern areas to tourism will constitute an invasion of our privacy.

With the industrialised west and east looking for new, unexplored destinations for their vacations, we can prepare ourselves for a huge influx. It is a choice between maintaining our privacy or shedding our poverty struck primitiveness", comments a tour operator. "Sure the tourist will leave behind all manner of garbage on our beautiful landscapes. That is an inescapable side-effect yet tourism is the key to the prosperity of the northern areas and the rest of Pakistan as well". ■

## COVER STORY

By Misbah Saadat

# Lady Shehsawars

In our typical male oriented and chauvinistic society, women and sports — any kind of sports — rarely go together. Playing polo is a passion shared by only a handful of people when compared to those playing in other fields such as cricket, hockey, tennis etc. It is therefore gratifying and encouraging to know that amongst that limited number are also a bunch of Lady Shehsawars.

At the moment, there are about five or six women registered with the polo clubs. I had the chance to go to the old race course in Karachi and meet two of the ladies, Dr Isma Aitizaz Uddin and Ms Ayesha Malik, who are members of the Karachi Polo Club. Their cooperation with the writing of this article is appreciated.

When I asked Ayesha Malik how she got involved in polo, she smiled and said, "well, I started riding with Jaja Mian, and one thing led to another. Basically, if you like and enjoy riding, you sort of get into it. I like it because it is a very challenging sport. I am competitive by nature so I feel it is right for me. I don't know why people have the preconceived notions that it is a

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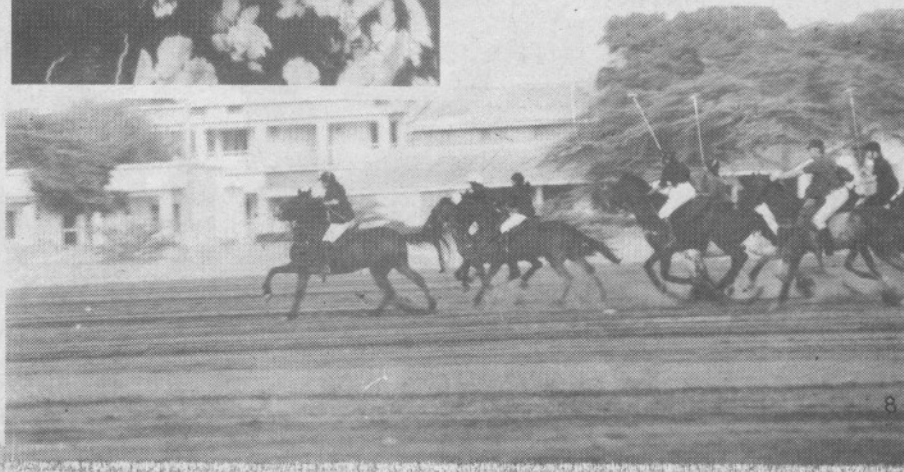


man's sport. There is no such thing as a man's sport anymore..." Isma cut in at that moment to say, "people usually feel that because men have been playing it for a long time..." Ayesha continued, "Also because men are stronger than us physically, but that does not really matter. On horseback we are on par with men with an equal level of strength. This is not to say that the horse is doing all the work. It depends on the rider and his or her skill."

Talking about their family's reaction to their playing polo, Isma laughed and said, "being Jaja Mian's daughter, I was almost born on a horse! So ..." Ayesha said, "my mother was a rider. My father was in the air force so we had air force horses over here and a riding school.

**Dr Isma Aitizazuddin is a veterinary surgeon by profession. She studied in the College of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry, Lahore, and now has her own clinic at home in Defence.**

Polo ladies at sea-level



That was even before I was born. I used to ride with the weekend riders in New York, like take the horses in the park or trail rides, but when I got here and found out about Jaja Mian's school, I came over and joined. It has been about four to five years now. Then I bought my own horse about three years ago." Isma proudly looked at Ayesha and said, "she's is doing very well now, Mashallah."

Continuing about the expenses of playing polo or even riding as a hobby or for pleasure, Isma said, "If you join a riding school, it would cost you something like Rs 1500/- to 2000/- per month. That is if you do about two cross-countries in a month and ride about twice a week. But if you own your own horse, then the upkeep of the horse is expensive. Plus buying the animals. You have to have good animals. That does not mean that only the very rich or elite can afford it. There are a lot of people earning salaries who come as well. It is upto you basically, because you don't have to own your own horse. That is one major reason why riding schools exist. There are so many children and people who come here and none of them own horses. It is only when you get into polo that you want to get your own horse. For polo it is very important to have your own horse because riding schools mainly have horses for the riding school. We have a few good animals as well, whom we use only for show jumping and polo, but we can't afford to give them to everybody, because then the horses get spoilt."

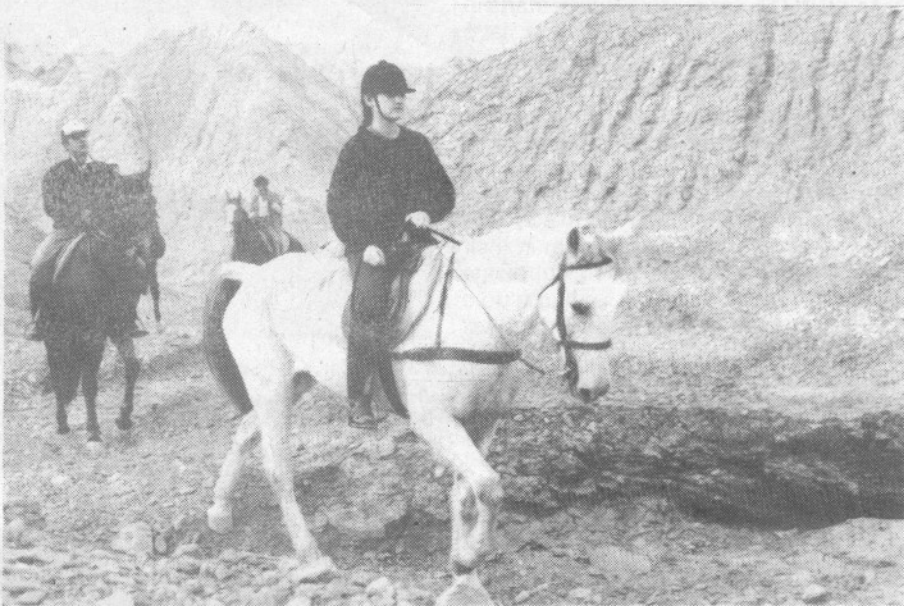
Coming towards other sports, Ayesha said, "We both play tennis, go for swimming and I have also learnt karate." Next we talked about the most important aspect of women playing polo. And that is the existence of women's polo team. Speaking in that context, Isma said, "last year they had the first Women's International Championship in America. And they had lots and lots of women playing there. From Pakistan only Seher Ahmad had gone and she took three English girls with her as a team. This year, I am hoping to Inshallah take along with me, Ayesha, Seher Ahmad, has now come back from England where she had been playing tournaments. She has also played in Argentina for about six months. She is back in Pakistan and intends to play polo here. Basically, there are the three of us here and one girl in Lahore. When we include her, we have our polo team. It will be the first time that an entire Pakistani women's team will be able to go."

Ayesha continued to say, "We have had women polo teams when we had more girls playing here. There was one Britisher and one German. A lot of foreigners also come here to play. We have a few other Pakistani women who also play but are not here right now. One is Musarrat Apa, she doesn't get much time

because of her work, there is Ayesha Karim, who has not yet started playing polo, but she will in a short time. We have had teams which comprised men and women. That usually happens when we play in a chakkar or in a tournament here. We have also played in tournaments with all women's team against all men's team. In that, we have won once and lost once.

As I had said before, we are equals!" Talking about the small number of women joining polo, Isma said, "It is not easy to play polo.

First, you have to be a very good rider, second, you have to have reasonably good horses, third, you have to learn how to play polo, which is slightly difficult and demands a lot of energy..." Ayesha cut in



**Ayesha Malik is an interior decorator by profession. She had her formal education and training in New York for four years. Though she has her own furniture and household things shop in Clifton, she mainly operates from her home**

to say, "this is a dangerous game. You have to have that killer instinct. You have got to be aggressive out there. Because if you are not, you get killed. The only reason we don't get scared while playing, apart from not having the time to get scared is, we aim to kill!" Talking about facing any sexual discriminations, both girls laughed and Isma said, "not anymore. In the beginning, yes. Even when we were in Lahore to play last season, it usually happens that whoever we play against feels that we are only girls, and

*"We really wish that we had a polo field over here which belonged to us. Which belonged to the polo club..." "With grass!" said Ayesha. Isma continued, "because right now one gets scared to buy or even keep horses because if tomorrow the field is taken from us, what are we going to do with our horses? Where are we going to keep them? It is very discouraging. We are doing so much, it is such a lovely game to watch, in Lahore it is great during the season. So many people come to watch. Here, on the other hand, we are playing in this field which is full of loose mud or sand"*



will therefore be easily intimidated. So they try to hit our horses with theirs and do other similar tricks."

Ayesha continued to say, "As Isma was saying, that is only the initial reaction. Once they see us play, and find out what we are all about, then it really doesn't happen again." Mentioning their future plans, Isma said, "Our immediate future plan or rather, goal is to play in Lahore Inshallah. The season over there starts in September or October. After that, let's see!"

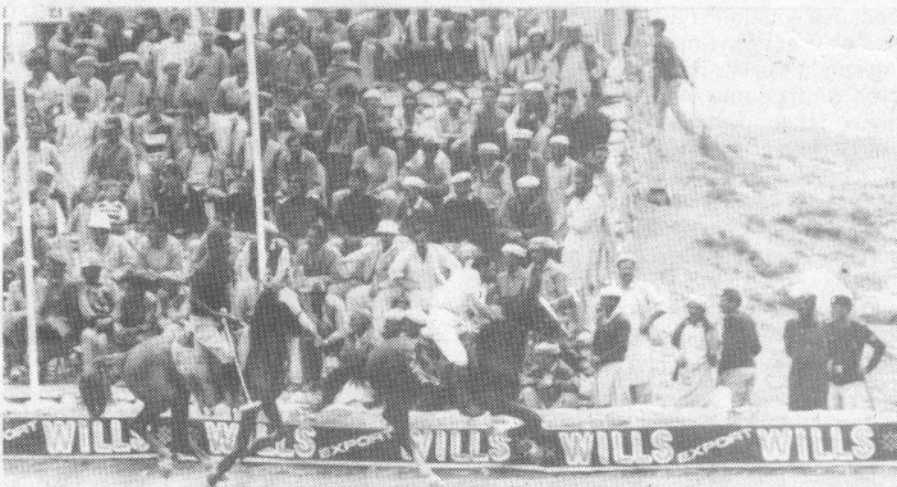
The National Open, which so far has always been held in Lahore, should be rotated among the different polo clubs in the country to generate greater interest in the game.

I asked them if they wanted to add anything and both girls got a gleam in their eyes. Taking a deep heartfelt sigh, Isma said, "We really wish that we had a polo field over here which belonged to us. Which belonged to the polo club..." "With grass!" said Ayesha. Isma continued, "because right now one gets scared to buy or even keep horses because if tomorrow the field is taken from us, what are we going to do with our horses? Where are we going to keep them? It is very discouraging. We are doing so much, it is such a lovely game to watch, in Lahore it is great during the season. So many people come to watch. Here on the other hand we are playing in this field which is full of loose mud or sand."

Sweeping her hand towards the field, she said, "No one in their right mind would want to come here to even watch polo, let alone play it." Wiping the sand away from my eyes and face for the umpteenth time in fifteen minutes, I could not help but agree and be impressed with these girls who come here everyday! Isma continued to say, "the sand gets in our eyes, our hair, by the time we go back



*Vanquished by the sheerness of the pace*



*Deadly duelling on horseback*



**Quite self-sufficient — Afghan tribesmen at the Shandur festival**

home, we look like no other creature on Earth! Being girls or even men actually, you think about these things. If only they would allot us even a small piece of land and say that you only play polo here, we would get the field oiled. Once it is oiled, not even a speck of dust would fly. It is the best playing field in the world. It is totally smooth. They have done the same thing in Dubai. This is how it is played on sandy land. We would be able to invite players from other places and have matches.

It would only improve our and their game." Ayesha added, "besides, who would sit here to watch a game?" Isma said, "When the government had taken Bagh-e-Jinnah next to Pearl Continental from us, they had claimed that in return, we will get another field. But they have not given it up till now. Even the race course has shifted. It is so far away in Malir. People can only go there now once a week for races. We are playing on borrowed land which belongs to the Army. People just cannot walk in here. If the

polo club had its own land anybody could walk in and see what's going on. There is a polo club but no polo ground! It is not only pathetic and disgusting, it is also very disheartening. I mean, just think, Asif Zardari learnt and played polo over here. Despite the fact that their government is in power, nothing has been done about it. That is the saddest part."

We concluded our talk on polo and riding and looking at both of the intriguing women, I finally asked Isma why she had become a vet. She laughed and said, "I was actually becoming a doctor. I was doing my F.Sc from Kinnaird in Lahore, when I accompanied my cousin to Mayo hospital. She had had an accident. I did not like the attitude of the doctors towards the patients. It was like they were treating animals. I thought what if I become like that. Let me become a doctor to animals and retain my humanity!" As a horse impatiently nudged her, I hurriedly left the ground after spending a very fascinating and pleasant evening ■