

# POLO: The Sport of Kings

The Toy Soldier Museum's James H. Hillestad shares a diorama detailing polo match festivities in British India

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

Let other people play at other things — the King of Games is still the Game of Kings.”

The preceding verse is inscribed on a stone tablet near a polo ground in Pakistan, north of Kashmir, along the fabled Silk Road from China to the West.



British soldiers and British tea planters in India, in need of recreation and excitement, enthusiastically adopted the game. The sport's first club, the Calcutta Polo Club, was formed by Sherer and Capt. Robert Stewart in 1862.

## POPULARITY GROWS

The 10th (The Prince of Wales's Own) Royal Hussars have been credited with introducing “hockey on horseback,” as it was referred to at first, to England. The cavalry unit had been stationed in India from 1846 to 1855, then served in the Crimean War before returning home to Britain.

A detachment is said to have played a practice game near Limerick, Ireland, in 1868. The following year Capt. Edward “Chicken” Hartopp of the 10th Hussars organized England's first polo match against the 9th (The Queen's Royal) Lancers at Hounslow Heath, Greater London. Each side had eight players and rules were almost non-existent.

The sport's popularity grew rapidly in England. In 1875, matches at Hurlingham and Richmond Park drew more than 10,000 spectators.

## ANCIENT ROOTS

Played on horseback, the game of polo has its origin in remote times, centuries before the Christian era. It was known as “changan,” taken from the word for the stick or mallet used in the game. From Persia, the game spread westward to Constantinople and eastward as far as China.

After vanishing during the 18th century, it was rediscovered in the 1850s in the mountains of the Hindu Kush, North-West Frontier. It then became known as polo, derived from the Tibetan “pulu,” the word for the willowroot from which the ball was made.

India is considered the cradle of polo. British Army Lt. (later Maj. Gen.) Joseph Sherer, who saw a polo match while stationed along India's North East Frontier in 1859, is credited with being the “father” of modern polo.



Jim Hillestad's diorama depicting a 1912 polo match at Simla measures 60 inches by 30 inches.

An important contributor to the growth of polo was the U.S. Army. It encouraged cavalry units to participate in polo to improve their riding skills. However, the increasing mechanization of the Army, and the realities of World War II, ended its reliance on horses.

Today, polo is played in more than 60 countries.

## FIELD OF PLAY

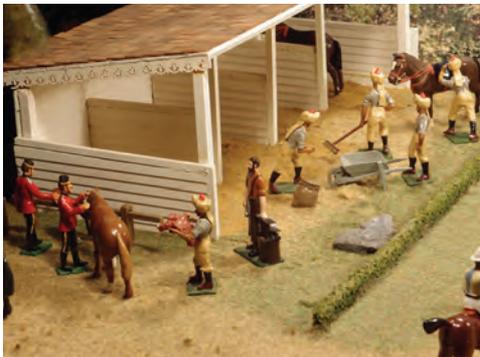
Traditionally, polo is played on a grass field of 300 by 160 yards. Each team consists of four riders. The modern game lasts roughly two hours and is divided into periods called chukkas (occasionally rendered as “chukkers”).

The outdoor polo ball is made today of high-impact plastic. But it was formerly made of either bamboo or willowroot.

The polo mallet's shaft is made of manau-cane, not weaker hollow bamboo. The ball is struck with the broad sides of the mallet head, rather than its flat ends.

## SIMLA SCENE

A 54-mm diorama that I created for display in The Toy Soldier Museum depicts a spirited polo match on a pitch in Simla in 1912.



Grooms go about their chores behind the scenes at the stables.



Spectators line up along a fence to follow the action.



The game is on as teams of Indian and British players race across the pitch after the ball.



A band from the Royal Marine Light Infantry provides a musical soundtrack for festivities surrounding the match.



Carloads of late arrivals make an entrance.



Refreshments and socializing are a big part of the fun at the polo match.

The hill town's mild, Britain-like climate made it a refuge from the hot summer and monsoon season in India. In 1864, Simla was declared the summer capital of British India. The government of the British Raj moved from Calcutta to Simla during the "hot weather."

Though the "Game of Kings" was

pursued aggressively, polo matches were attended by light-hearted entertainment and social good times, as portrayed in this diorama.

The figures are from a number of makers, including William Hocker, Peter Cowan, and Bill and Kay Speer. Models of period motorcars pictured came from the Franklin Mint. ■



#### ABOUT THE WRITER

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.