



DON'T GIVE UP YOUR DAY JOB... ELEPHANT POLO PLAYER

HE'S AN UNASSUMING INSURANCE BROKER BY DAY. BUT AS TEAM CAPTAIN OF THE PUKKA CHUKKAS, JASON WHEELER (LEFT) TELLS **SHANE CONROY** HOW HE STAMPEDED TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD'S WEIRDEST SPORT – ELEPHANT POLO.

:: How did you get interested in elephant polo?

My wife and I were staying in a lodge in the mountains of Nepal. We met a guy in the bar who was involved in elephant polo, and he explained that it's possible

for amateurs to enter a team in the annual World Elephant Polo Association (WEPA) Championships in Nepal. The more we drank, the better the idea seemed. When we got back to the UK, I sent a couple of emails around to work colleagues and clients to see if we could get a team together. It worked and we played in the tournament last year and are going back in November to play in this year's tournament.

:: How seriously is the competition taken?

We thought it was a social event and turned up at the tournament last year hoping to have some fun and raise money for charity. But the minute you start playing, you realise how deadly serious it is. None of us had previous experience with elephant polo – or horse polo for that matter. Only two of us had ever ridden an elephant, and even that was on a holiday.

:: So did you manage a win?

We hadn't expected to hit the ball, let alone score a goal. But we won our first game, then made it to the semi-finals. It's the only world championship that I'll ever have a chance of winning – even if it takes me the next 20 years.

:: How do you train for this event? Most people don't have an elephant in the garage...

That's the problem. We did most of our training at the bar. Some of us tried hitting a tennis ball around with a broom while standing on a step ladder. I know the US team drove a bunch of four-wheel-drives around a car park while the players hung out of the sunroofs. It seemed like a very good idea, although the way they played, it didn't show. I think that beer and tequila seem to be just as effective.

:: It's certainly the breakfast of champions. So... how do I get recruited?

You simply need to be keen to have some fun doing something slightly bizarre, while raising a bit of money for charity – we support the MS Society. Although you do get knocked around a bit. Elephants tend to naturally cluster together, so you get lots of bruises because you constantly bump into each other.

:: That's not enough to scare off a supreme male specimen such as myself...

Oh, it gets worse. You climb up behind the mahout [the driver who steers the elephant for you while you play], and there's no saddle – there's only a rope that goes around the elephant and then over the top of your thighs. Last year, one of the players got clouted in the head with a mallet. Another guy's rope slipped and he slid face down underneath the elephant. He was OK, but it was probably an experience that he'd like to forget.

:: You'd definitely need a drink after that – or you should at least buy the elephant one.

How are the elephants treated?

The younger elephants enjoy it a huge amount and run around trumpeting and trying to stamp on the ball like little kids. The older ones have been doing it for 20-plus years and tend to realise that the ball will eventually come to them, so they are less energetic. The mahouts are with them from when they're born until they die, so there is quite a bond between them. The elephants get rotated throughout the game and only ever play for 20 minutes a day.

For more information or to donate to the MS Society, visit www.pukkachukkas.com.

NUMBERS GAME :: NRL

Rugby League is back in town, and these are the numbers that matter the most...

45 :: The most points scored by a single player in a single game – Dave Brown, playing for Easts in 1935.

85 :: Highest-winning margin – St George defeated Canterbury 91 to 6 in 1935.

328 :: Most games played for a single club – Andrew Ettingshausen, playing for Cronulla from 1983 to 2000.

839 :: Most points scored in a regular season by a club – Parramatta in 2001.

2,176 :: Most career points scored by a single player – Andrew Johns, playing for Newcastle from 1993 to 2007.

107,558 :: Highest grand final attendance – Storm v Dragons at Olympic Stadium, Sydney, 1999.