



Save the Manipuri Pony!

In 1865, Major-General Sherer, the “Father of Modern Polo“, gave an account of his trip to “the fountain-head of the game” at the Manipuri capital:-

“I and my band, who had been so proud of our victories in Calcutta, were simply *nowhere* in Munnipore. We never won a single game. The Maharaja's men were his picked team, the best players in the State – clean, clever and scientific in their strokes and as sharp as needles.”*

Now, I think this quote could have been given by any of the visiting players attending the 6th Manipur Polo International 24-29 November 2012. Each one of the international teams was outclassed by the Manipur team and we were as impressed as Sherer was by the Manipuri horsemanship. Sherer went on to describe the players “who flash hither and thither, making such abrupt and sharp turns and sudden pauses that it is difficult at times to realize that man and pony have not one will, as they seem to have one body.”*

We could imagine the excitement that the young British colonial officers felt in those days as they came across the game being played in the independent state of Manipur “snugly ensconced amid the hills that rise to an elevation of 6000 feet to 7000 feet..”*We felt it too and were thrilled to be a part of it! The story of our trip, the games, the hospitality, the culture etc. has been recorded on other websites and in other articles, but the chief organizer, Lt-Col Ranjit Singh implored us “....not to forget the Manipuri ponies”. And that, I think, is our appointed mission and our task. Again and again those colonial officers noted that the Manipuri players “greatly valued their ponies”* and that this seemed to go beyond what we as horse lovers would deem as usual. We, too, felt how enthralled and involved the spectators were in every game, not just supporting their local sides but ready to be thrilled by other teams as well. So delving into the literature provided to us and asking as many questions of our hosts as we could, we started to piece together the importance of the manipuri pony to the people of this proud State.



This ancient civilisation, with evidence of a sedentary culture being found in Kangla dating around 15,000BC, sees the pony as “symbolizing the primal life source” and explains why the game of polo “has to be played with the utmost sanctity.”* We experienced this when one of the foreign players was gently but firmly reprimanded for clowning around on the field during a game. So the game should be played both passionately and seriously.

The ponies we encountered were small (approx 13 hands) and again as Sherer describes, were “hardy, wiry and active, with blood-like heads.” The owners had brought them in from the surrounding country areas where the ponies run free grazing on open grass lands. “This open feeding, living and grazing...have given the pony its sure-footedness, sturdy and hardy physique, manoeuvrability and great stamina.”*

However, it is this open living that is now contributing to the threatened extinction of the Manipuri pony. As the amount of open grazing diminishes due to the growth in the land's economic and agricultural value, the ponies are often left to fend for themselves and are threatened by private landowners, speeding vehicles, pollution, etc. We were told that the ponies would only eat fresh or freshly-cut grass. (and we saw the deliveries of this at the polo field at Imphal) The option of feeding hay has been tried and has failed.

The pony always had a sacred value in Manipur and never an economic one. It was used in war and polo was a means by which both man and pony could keep fit for battle, should the ruler require him. Nowadays, such motivation has, of course, disappeared. Later, too the rural population played the game as a leisure activity which didn't cost them a lot of money. This was not just restricted to the young men. We met women who had played the game as young girls growing up in the rural areas. But time marches on, even in Manipur, and today the young, educated Manipuri is looking for new thrills and new sports.

Fortunately for the Manipuri pony, the Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association has been formed and they have established the MHRPA Pony Breeding Farm about 30 minutes from the capital. This provides a home for the ponies and they have also started a breeding programme. The farm is becoming a place to visit, relax and bring tourists.

Nicholas Colquhoun-Denvers, former Chairman of the Hurlingham Polo Association has written in his message for the tournament programme, that he feels the modern polo world owes a great debt of gratitude to Manipur and to the Manipuri ponies. He praises the efforts made which give “hope for the future of this ancient breed of ponies.”

Is there a way we could look at preserving these ponies not purely for historical reasons but to give them a status in this modern world? Could this preservation be part of an educational programme, not just for children of the area but nationally and internationally? Educationalists are in agreement that the work and play with horses can increase self-esteem and confidence. These ponies with their forgiving temperament would be ideal for such a programme. Could the pony achieve a commercial status in some way? This is always a sure-fired method to preserve a breed! There are, for sure, ideas out there. They would just have to be coordinated and implemented. This is beyond the scope of this article but as Lt Col Ranjit has said

“don't forget the Manipuri ponies!”

written by Jan-Marie Kiesel January 2013

Sources

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Chanam Hemchandra “Polo and Pony in Manipur”

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Ch. Priyoranjan Singh “Polo Clubs and Players of Manipur”

Lt Col. (Retd) M. Ranjit Singh “Sagolkangjei (Polo) in the eyes of the British in 19th Century”



Rechts: Lt. Col. Ranjit Singh gibt Gastspielern Erklärungen zum Zuchtprogramm



Weitere Quellen: Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manipuri_Pony
<http://horseindian.com> (und dort aufrufen: Horse Breed Standards / Manipuri Pony Breed Standard)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35M9d0xKuLQ>