

The wheels of a royal sport were a turnin' at CC&fc



Wheel deal: The cycle polo Legend's Tournament in progress at CC&FC earlier this summer. Picture by Rashbehari Das

The chase, the adrenaline, the ball, the mallet, the rules — everything remains the same. Only the ride changes. If December had horse hooves kicking up a storm on the Maidan, the summer saw a bunch of enthusiasts chasing the ball with mallets across the lush greens of CC&FC, but atop bicycles.

Traditionally, polo — often called the “the sport of kings” — is played on horseback on a rectangular field with two four-member teams trying to score goals by hitting a white wooden ball through the goal posts with long mallets. The maharajas loved this sport and out of this love was born a different avatar of the game — cycle polo. During off-season, the horse would be swapped for the bicycle and the kings would get back to their beloved game of stick and ball.

According to records available, cycle polo was first played by an Irishman by the name of Richard J. Mcreedy in Ireland in 1891. The game made it to the Olympics once — in 1908, London, where Ireland beat Germany.

In Calcutta, while it is the equestrian variant that rules, given that the city is home to Calcutta Polo Club, the oldest active polo club in the world, and the Pat Williamson Polo Ground on the Maidan, the oldest active polo ground in the world, there is still one city club keen on cruising on the cycle. The Calcutta Cricket & Football Club (CC&FC) has been playing cycle polo for decades. In fact, the very first Merchant's Cup tournament played at CC&FC in 1973 was for cycle polo.

With almost the same rules as horse polo, cycle polo is a game for the early risers, kicking off no later than 6.30am. The cycles used have just one brake, on the left, because the player's right arm carries the mallet and needs to be kept free.

“Balancing oneself on the cycle while playing is the most tricky part,” said Bikram Das, a legend within the closed coterie of cycle polo aficionados in the city. “I started playing in 1982, mainly because it was a tradition at Blacker & Company, where I worked. As I was a professional cyclist, I ended up being one of the fastest on the field,” laughed Das.

Today cycle polo is a dying sport in Calcutta. But the wheels do turn occasionally, for the tricks of the game to be passed on from veterans to a small bunch of enthusiastic youngsters.

Three cycle polo tournaments were played at CC&FC in April — Legend's Tournament, Marsh Mug and the CC&FC Cup. One of the highlights was seeing the youngsters from Ranaghat Cycle Polo Academy and NGO Future Hope India in action. “I have a farmhouse in Ranaghat (Nadia district). Around 10 years back, I invited some local kids to play cycle polo with me. Since then, their love and passion for the game has made me continue teaching them. Today some of them play at the state level,” said Suvendro Mullick, also a horse polo veteran.

At present there are some 10,000 people who play cycle polo in India, though not necessarily in the cities. And it's definitely no longer a game restricted to the royalty or the army. The Cycle Polo Federation of India (CPFI), with its office in Dundlod, Rajasthan, has made sure that the common man can reach out to the game. CPFI controls around 32 state and defence associations across the country, who in turn give out club and district memberships.

Sreyoshi Dey

Have you ever played cycle polo? Tell *t2@abp.in*

THE BASICS OF CYCLE POLO

- Any ordinary bicycle can be used. No extra attachments such as mud guard, bell, stand, carrier or gears are allowed.
- Originally the bamboo ball of horse polo was used for cycle polo. In India, however, the tennis ball was used for quite some time till tennis companies came up with a special orange ball specifically designed for cycle polo that met international standards.
- Bamboo plays a major role in cycle polo. The mallets used to strike the ball have to be made of bamboo cane with a wooden head measuring 36, 34 or 32 inches. Cycle polo mallets are shorter in length than those used in horse polo.
- Each team has six players, of which only four take the field at a time. As the game continues, the players join in, in rolling substitution.
- Just like horse polo, each round is called a chukker and lasts for seven-and-a-half minutes. Following the round robin tournament rules, a full game comprising two teams entails four chukkers. The finals have five chukkers.
- A grass field is mandatory for cycle polo. Technically the area should measure 150 metres by 100 metres.



Hardcourt Rules: A variation of bicycle polo, hardcourt bike polo is played in an enclosed rectangular area on any surface that is available. Also called urban bike polo, the game has three players on each team without any substitutions. A street hockey ball is used, and matches are played until one of the teams scores five points. There is no time limit (like in chukkers), but for the finals, a time limit may be set. The game came up in Seattle, US, among a group of messenger boys who would kill time in between deliveries by indulging in this sport. Today, hardcourt bike polo has spread to almost every country across the world, powered by its easy rules and accessibility. So, even if you don't have a horse or a green field, there's always hardcourt bike polo. Just remember to wear that helmet!