

## 21. Tent-Pegging



*The positions of the near-hind and off-hind indicate the rider has checked his horse while coming down for the peg – a cardinal sin !*

Fig.58

Today tent-pegging is perhaps a peculiarly Indian equestrian sport. Its origins go back to days gone by when Central Asian horsemen raiding an encampment at the gallop tried to carry off on their lancepoints tent pegs so that the collapsing tents would engulf their occupants

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and add to the general confusion. Such raids were more often than not at night.

In its present-day form tent-pegging is a competitive sport. A 14 inches long and 3½ inches wide softwood peg is driven half its length into the ground and a horseman gallops at and past it trying to pick it up on his lancepoint. Marks are allotted not only for scoring but also for style and pace. Up to four horsemen may make simultaneously their individual runs at pegs set to the sides of parallel tent-pegging tracks. As the horsemen gallop all out, and style includes the execution of certain flourishes of the lance, the whole affair certainly makes a gallant spectacle.

A cavalry lance is used. Having mounted, one rests the point on the ground, shaft perpendicular, and grasps the weapon, thumb pointing downwards, with the point of the thumb level with one's hip bone. This gives the correct length for the horse being used. One then raises the point until it is pointing upwards with the shaft vertical while moving towards the starting point. As you approach the starting point the lancehead is allowed to fall backwards and is passed below the hand and then again raised to the front in a sort of twirling action. This movement requires that the wrist joint be flexible and that the last two fingers of the hand relax their hold. The back of the hand will now be undermost, the thumb will point to the left front, and the fingers will point to the right; the lance will be over the wrist with the point well up and pointing to the left front. This movement, in itself

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a flourish, is a preliminary to the final flourish of the lance which is made as your mount jumps into a gallop. As your mount bounds forward you reverse the aforesaid motions and your weapon comes back to the perpendicular with its point up. You hold this at arms length, looking “through” it at the peg until, going at an extended gallop, you get to the 15-yard limit from the peg. You now smoothly bring the point down while leaning forward and out to the right as far as possible, using your right leg against the horse’s side to prevent your weight bringing your mount over the peg. Care must be taken to ensure that your right spur, if sharp spurs are worn, does not come in contact with the horse. This would probably sicken it of tent-pegging for good. Some horses shy off the right leg pressure which then requires to be used moderately to the extent indicated by the horse. The lance, which should be in a straight line between you and the peg, is grasped in the full of the hand with your arm hanging down from the shoulder. As you approach the peg, going all out, the lancepoint is subconsciously directed upon it by the eye which is concentrating *not on the point but on the peg*. No thrusting at the peg will be of avail. Such action must mean a miss. As your eyes are focused on the peg the lancepoint comes into your field of vision at the moment of contact with it. It is essential that one concentrates on the peg and refrains from looking for the lancehead which will presently arrive in one’s view. As it comes into one’s field of vision it should be kept there while still concentrating on the peg. As the lancepoint with, hopefully, the peg on it passes behind one, the eyes

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continue following it and the left shoulder is brought round to the front to permit this. The butt of the lance, after taking the peg, should now come in contact with your back and the arm should point to the right rear with straight wrist and the back of the hand upwards. If particular care is not taken the lance may come up straight to the rear, the butt passing over the wrist and bringing wrist and elbow into a very constrained position with the point of the weapon dangerously close to the horse's hindleg. As soon as the lance is straight in line with the arm to the right rear it should by a widish sweep be brought smartly to the front, the two flourishes as at the beginning of the run being then repeated, and thereafter the lance brought to the "order" position resting on the right shoulder. The horse should at the time be pulled up in a straight line on the track.

It is somewhat curious that the above described traditional and spectacular flourishes of the lance are no longer *de rigueur* these days and only too often neglected in tent-pegging events as was the case at the 1982 Asiad.

Horses should never be kept waiting at the starting point as this excites them needlessly. They should be taken to the start after the pegs have been set up and the course is clear and then jumped into their stride at once, going all out immediately. This last is important for style. Tent-pegging excites a horse and the best insurance against it playing up is to make it go fully extended holding it in a straight line by leg pressure. If a horse "plays up" at the start press it into full gallop at once and

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do not try checking it when it plunges as you may then reach the peg before your mount has settled down.

When training horses for such work take care to ensure that the animal does not get into the habit of running wide off the peg. It must go straight when extended. Some horses new to the game, as the horseman bends down and out to the right, tend to be drawn over the peg by the rider's weight in spite of the right leg pressure against the side. Training is required to correct these faults. Very strong left leg pressure, aided possibly by use of the spur, on the left side is indicated in the case of a horse which tends to run out.

Three runs in a day for a horse ought not to be exceeded. Too much of such work will put a good horse off the game altogether. Horses younger than 6 years of age are not advocated for the sport. Tent-pegging is still very much an Indian Army sport. The Army Regulations provide, or at least used to provide, that no horse younger than 6 years of age would be used for it.

Horses for tent-pegging require to be well trained and when first introduced to the game require as much riding school work as possible. It is a good plan to take such new horses straight from the school to the tent-pegging track while the sense of discipline is still in them.

The course requires to be prepared with the surface broken up evenly to save the horses' legs and, if

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available, tan, straw, stable refuse, etc. may be spread on the track. The prepared track should be long enough to make pulling up the horse gradually possible. Pulling up the horse sharply on its haunches may make it take a dislike to the game. As in hog-hunting, a naturally keen horse is the ideal mount.

The inner wood of a very young date palm is the best material for pegs. The pegs should be cut with the run of the grain to prevent them from splitting and wired round the top and again at mid-distance. The pegs require to be soaked in water before use. The side facing the rider is rubbed with dry lime which adheres to the wet wood and makes it a conspicuous target. The pegs require to be soft so that they are carried on the point of the lance after a fair hit has been made.

In this sport just taking the peg is not the only aim. Style is important and want of pace is punished by the withholding of marks. The rules provide that the rider shall not “come down”, that is bend over and lower his lancepoint, until within 15 yards of the peg. On a fast horse one must be careful not to come down too late for even if the peg is taken the appearance will be bad and points will be lost for want of style.

Considering the use of the legs called for, short stirrups are a mistake. Though one is galloping fully extended standing in the stirrups is not indicated and your weight is more on the insides of your thighs than anywhere else till the moment comes to lean forward and

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out to the right, when naturally full weight is put in the off-side stirrup iron. Some horsemen prefer to take up the near-side leather a hole or two shorter than the stirrup leather on the off-side. The Western horseman's seat is eminently suitable for this game but his saddle is not even remotely acceptable due to the high "fork" and horn in front which makes leaning down forward and out nigh impossible. The reader may find the following anecdote somewhat amusing in this context.

In 1971 I happened to be stalking markhor in the Pir Panjal Range of Kashmir with a base camp at Zazinag (a camping ground, not a village — the area is uninhabited). This base camp was at about 13,000 ft. above sea level. To while away the tedium of a day when we were not out after markhor, my eldest son Bulu and I tried our hands at tent-pegging, riding mountain ponies and using alpenstocks as lances! The saddles were monstrosities with very high pommels and cantles with all too much ironmongery adorning them. I am afraid I managed to crack a rib while leaning down and out with my alpenstock aimed at the peg in question!

Query. Is this the highest altitude ever that tent-pegging has taken place?

In the 1930s Calcutta was still a gracious city with large open spaces both in and close around it. Living there, the horseman could ride most Sundays in paperchases, go pig-sticking, hunt (surprisingly) with the Jafferpore Hunt — English fox-hounds hunted the jackal,

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not to speak of polo, horse shows, and gymkhana race-riding. In those far-off days the Calcutta Maidan, still an extensive area of green grass but currently much too used by others to be of appeal to the horseman, was flanked by the Ellenborough Polo Ground and, as is still the case today, by the green of the Royal Calcutta Turf Club racecourse, with a polo ground inside, and the open grassy maidans surrounding the Fort. All in all, an unexpectedly large area existed right inside the city for equestrian activity.

So it should not be too surprising that when the (British) Indian Army decided to hold a Midnight Tatroo in those pre-World War II years, the Calcutta Maidan was the venue. With such street lighting as there might have been at the time suitably extinguished the Maidan became a blackness which was a precursor of the blackouts of World War II which was to come, a fitting stage for the roll of drums, the crackle of musketry, the rat-a-tat of machine-guns, the bangs! of field artillery, the rhythmic footbeats of marching troops, the clarion calls of bugle and of trumpet, the thundering hooves of cavalry and horse-artillery, and in flashes of light or in the flooding of light as dramatics called for the colour of all that stirring pageant which was the Midnight Tatroo.

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The scene is the Calcutta Midnight Tatroo of the 1930s. That Bengal Lancers regiment, the 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, once a *sillidar* or yeomanry regiment of horse but now a

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regular cavalry one, is giving a torchlight display of tent-pegging. The participants are in native dress.

A line of twelve kerosene-soaked pegs throw twelve fitful discs of light, the shadows dancing to the irregular flames. All around is intense darkness.

A tattoo of hooves comes nearer and nearer and there bursts into that first orange-red wavering circle of light a horseman on a flying steed leaning down and far to the right, his lancepoint dropped; the peg comes up in a whirl of fire as mount and man fly down that line of flaring torches to the drum of hooves and the passionate cry of "Ali, Ali, Ali — *Yi hai!*" (Ali—here it is!) And then they are gone into the blackness beyond marked by that whirl of fire on the lancepoint as the weapon is twirled by the flying horseman in flourishes of victory. And that wild centaur is followed by another and yet again a peg comes aloft in a whirl of fire to the drumming of hooves and that fierce shout which is a prayer and an exultation in one. And yet another horseman thunders past, and another, and another, until where there were twelve flaming torches strung out in a long line there is but one.

Then the last of these Saladins gallops forth invoking the Name of the Lord of the Worlds, King on the Day of Judgement, roaring a fierce prayer

*"Bismillah hir-rahman nir-rahim—  
Al-hamdul-illah rabi lalamin—*

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*Ar-rahman nir-rahim*  
*Malik-i-yumi din, Yi-Hai! YI-HAI!"*

as he flames past the spectators, eyeballs and teeth gleaming in the red light of the whirling blaze on his lancepoint, his excitement infecting his flying steed so that he cannot pull up and he gallops a full circuit of the field, still roaring and twirling his lance, the whirling flaming point of which marks his progress as meteorlike he shoots through the blackness of the night.

Then four rows of twelve pegs each flare. Forty-eight blazing torches make a rectangle of light in the all-pervading blackness of that tourney ground.

Sections of four—Afridis and Khuttacks and Tiwanas and Khallils—thunder out of the dark, their white turbans and voluminous clothes flowing in the wind of the charge, four at a time, for four pegs each time to come up, four whirls of fire as the lances twirl in flourishes even as the excited horsemen pull up their flying steeds on to their haunches, all to fierce shouts of “Ali, Ali, Ali—*Yi hai! YI HAI!*” until all the forty-eight flaming torches are gone and there is but darkness save for forty-eight flares in the distance dimly outlining the horsemen holding them aloft.