

# The show must go on

As the Indian horse trade takes an unwelcome hit and terror reigns in Mumbai, **Gaurav Chand** reports on polo's persistence amid the chaos

Last September brought every expectation of an exciting and busy schedule for the Indian polo season 2008-09. However, just as horses and players were set to move to New Delhi for the mid-October start, India was hit by equine influenza, which spread rapidly throughout the northern part of the country. In 2007 Australia was affected by equine influenza and it brought its horse racing and polo to a standstill for several months. This time, in India, the government imposed a swift ban on the inter-state movement of horses.

The Reid & Taylor Indian Open Polo Championship in December was the first tournament to be played in Delhi after a six-week delay to the start of the season. Due to the small number of ponies available, only four teams participated in the tournament, where in previous years it has attracted six.

And, where normally the Open features teams between 18 and 20 goals, this time the team handicaps were between 10 and 12 goals. However, at least there was finally some action at New Delhi's Jaipur Polo Ground, which had not hosted any polo since March.

The tournament was played with the four sides in two leagues, with the winners in each playing the runners up in two semi-finals. On the first side of the draw, Sahgal Stud and Himalayan Horse/Equisport met in the tournament's opening game. The latter ran out comfortable winners, 11-4, thanks largely to the performance of Himalayan Horse/Equisport's talisman, Simran Shergill. However, the whole side succeeded in neutralising Manupal Godara and Lokendra Singh, two great players on the Sahgal Stud side.

Some of India's top players were on show in the second half of the draw, where Sona Polo and the Army met, showcasing the likes of Samir Suhag, Ravi Rathore, and Angad and Uday Kalaan. Sona Polo went on to sneak a 7-6 victory, leaving the Army to rue a last-minute missed scoring opportunity, which would have tied the game. Their bigger mistake more generally was leaving Sona Polo's Ransher Singh unmarked on several occasions, allowing him to cause damage.

Thus, in the semi-finals, winners Sona Polo and Himalayan Horse/Equisport met Sahgal Stud and the Army respectively. Both were close but, in the



Winners, Himalayan Horse/Equisport (l-r: Simran Shergill, Abhimanu Pathak, Adhiraj Singh and Lt Cdr Akhil Sirohi), with Yashoraje Scindia and Tarun Joshi, chief executive of principal sponsor, Brandhouse Retails Ltd (Reid & Taylor)

first (between Sona Polo and Sahgal Stud), Sona Polo took charge from mid-way through the fourth chukka and ran out to a 11-7 victory. Once again, it was Ransher Singh who stood out, scoring eight of his team's 11 goals.

The second semi-final, between Army and Himalayan Horse, was an absolute thriller, going right down to the wire and culminating with a controversial goal-mouth winner right at the death as Himalayan Horse prevailed, 5-4.

Ahead of Sunday's final, a minute's silence was solemnly observed by spectators and the finalists, Sona Polo and Himalayan Horse/Equisport, to show solidarity with those killed, injured or taken hostage in the terrorist attacks a week earlier in Mumbai.

Himalayan Horse/Equisport then pinned back Sona Polo expertly right from the off in what many rightly predicted would be a closely fought contest. Sona Polo fought back valiantly but were unable to take the lead at any point, leaving Himalayan Horse/Equisport to take the 2008 Indian Open title, 6-4.

Their star performer Simran Shergill scored five goals and also won the most valuable player award. Cappincha, owned by Sona Polo's Sunjay Kapur, the husband of Bollywood actress

Karishma Kapoor, was awarded the best playing pony prize. ✕

## Indian Open Polo Championship, 3-7 December 2008

**Host:** Army Polo & Riding Club, New Delhi

**Principal sponsor:** Reid & Taylor

**Handicap level:** Open

**Result:** Himalayan Horse/Equisport beat Sona

**Number of team entries:** four

**Chukka scores (Himalayan Horse/Equisport):**

1-0; 3-3; 5-3; 6-4

**Most valuable player:** Simran Shergill

**Best playing pony:** Cappincha, owned and played by Sunjay Kapur

**Final teams:**

**Himalayan Horse/Equisport (10):** Abhimanu Pathak 2; Lt Cdr Akhil Sirohi 2; Simran Shergill 3; Adhiraj Singh 3

**Sona Polo (11):** Sunjay Kapur 0; Ransher Singh 2; Angad Kalaan 5; Uday Kalaan 4

**Subsidiary final teams:**

**Army (12):** Capt Vishal Chauhan 2; Lt Col GS Pandher 2; Maj Ravi Rathore 3; Samir Suhag 5

**Sahgal Stud (11):** Rajesh Sahgal 1; Gaurav Sahgal 2; Manupal Godara 4; Lokendra Singh 4