

**MESSI-RONALDO**  
IS THERE ANYONE GOOD  
ENOUGH TO REPLACE THEM?

**KAYAKING**  
3,300 KM, ONE DARING MAN  
AND THE HIGH SEAS

**AMIR KHAN**  
THE BOXER WHO DOESN'T  
KNOW HOW TO TRASH-TALK

FREE  
POSTER  
INSIDE

# Sports Illustrated

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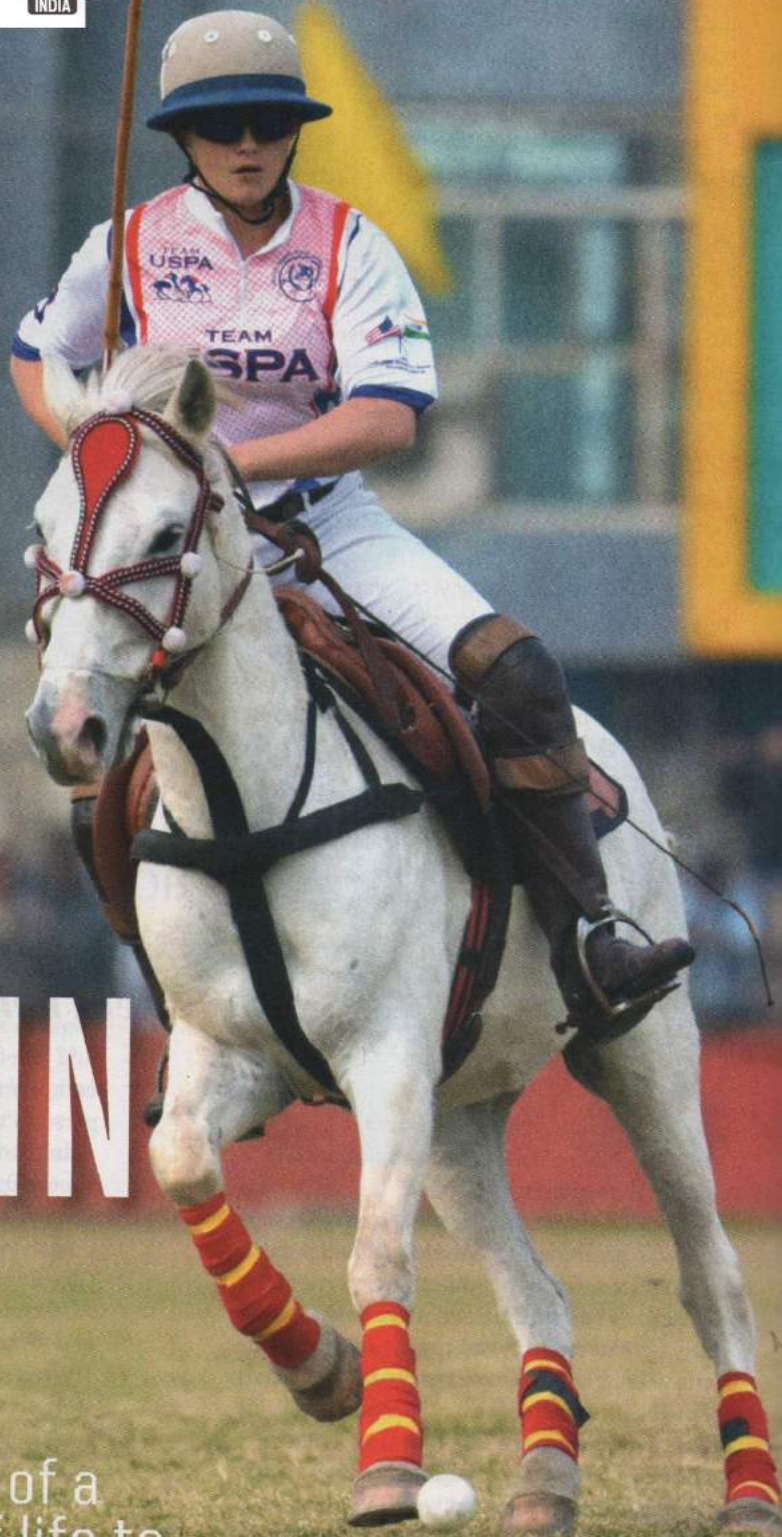
INDIA

POLO

## RIDING OUT THE UNCERTAIN PAST

The patience and dedication of a few has given a new lease of life to Manipur's dwindling pony population, but there is a long way to go

By **Vaibhav Raghunandan** Photographs courtesy of Laifungham Somi Roy



WITH HIS CHAIR turned away from the warm, evening sun, Laifungbam Somi Roy says something that's hard to believe, given the cause he is fighting for: "I don't even know how to play polo." His ancestral home, named the M.K. Binodini Residence, is in Yaikul, a part of Imphal West—the old quarter of the most densely populated city in Manipur.

Roy's mother was M.K. Binodini, the writer, poet and Padma Shri awardee, the last immediate descendant of Manipur's former monarch, Maharaja Churachandra. Roy grew up in this house, surrounded by the simplicity of old-world grandeur. The house is an old structure that no one has tampered with, renovated or even dusted (in parts) for years. A large lawn occupies a part of the estate and Roy sits on the top floor, out in the *aangan*, which has a roof, but is otherwise open, allowing a gentle breeze to sweep through.

Roy went to the US in the 1980s for education and employment, returning post Y2K into a culture reborn—one that had thrown away the shackles of socialism and opened itself out for those looking for a profit. A film critic and curator based in New York, he used to come back to Manipur for a few months every year to organise and supervise the polo tournaments that dot the state's winter itinerary.

He doesn't know anything about polo, he reiterates, although he does know a lot of the people involved in the playing and organising of the sport. He admits he's a bad rider, but surrounds himself with friends and colleagues who ride better than they walk. He isn't interested in the margins and the handicaps that define the modern game.

And yet, his efforts to revive and sustain the game in Manipur are unparalleled. Roy is a curator. A custodian of culture, if you may. And in this project, the one demanding his custodianship is the Manipuri Pony.

"When were you born?" he asks a local guide, who says "1984."

"Around the time they started massive construction in Lamphelphat. It was that construction which drove the ponies into the city. Their grazing areas were lost and, left without choice, they picked on plastic."

"The area around the hospital?"

Roy nods. "I left Manipur around that time and went abroad. When I got back 20 years later, to take care of my mother, that's when I was confronted with this reality. There were ponies on the streets."

Roy is a tall man, dressed very simply in a *kurta* and pyjamas to keep himself cool. He wears spectacles and his voice is so gentle that it can hardly be captured on a dictaphone. On his return, Roy felt for the ponies roaming the streets, and used the resources available to establish contact with those in power. When that failed, he got in touch with others who worked in conservation to try and understand what could be done for the animals.

"It is then that I realised," Roy says, "No one would care for the pony for the pony's sake. It was an environmental issue and a conservation matter, much like any other. Good to drum up in crises,

but otherwise shoved under."

The trick was to brand it a cultural outrage. Manipur loved its polo. But its pony—the most important cog in the game—was under threat of survival. He also realised that political manoeuvring required public attention. To get the pony its due, it would need the spotlight. With that, and a handful of contacts in the United States Polo Association (USPA), Roy hit the American

## SANMAHI CREATED THE PONY AS A WEAPON OF DESTRUCTION, PREPARED TO ENGAGE AND ERASE EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH



and Indian polo scene, inviting teams and players for tournaments and matches to the state.

**P**OLO WAS MANIPUR'S contribution to the world. Despite arguments that the modern game was founded in Persia, China, Mongolia or Iran, there is enough evidence to suggest that polo's origins may have come from this small state bordering the Myanmar kingdom.

Mapal Kangjeibung in the heart of Imphal and home to local football teams, is one of the oldest polo grounds in the world. Records mention a game called *Sagol Kangjei*, the Manipuri game that gave birth to polo. It was the British who took an interest in the sport and exported it to the wider world. In the Kangla Museum is a photo of six Meitei polo players, all of them barefoot, two astride horses at the Calcutta Polo Club in 1864.

Additionally, the Manipuri pony has historical and mythological prestige in society. The patron god of every Meitei house is Sanamahi, the rejected elder brother of Pakhangba, the founder of the kingdom of Kangleipak (Manipur today). Sanamahi is the creator of



the Manipuri pony, the Samadon Ayangba.

Cheated out of his inheritance by a favoured brother and a scorning mother, Sanamahi created the pony as a weapon of destruction, prepared to engage and erase everything in its path. The original Samadon Ayangba had four wings, and spikes on its hind legs. The pony and Sanamahi's rampage are only calmed when the gods go to Atiya Guru Sadiba, the father of all, and ask him to end the mayhem. He offers him an agreement—Pakhangba (the younger brother) is the ruler of the land, but Sanamahi is the ruler of the home. A statue of Sanamahi adorns almost every courtyard in Manipur today. Samadon Ayangba, the fastest among the beasts, meanwhile, roams the land, Pakhangba's land, feeding on the rubbish people throw away.

### RESURRECTION

Roy's efforts to conserve Manipuri polo ponies has led to the revival of the game in the state. More women too have started playing polo.

**T**WO YEARS AFTER his return, Roy organised an artist retreat, a 'field trip' for American artists to experience Manipuri culture and learn about its history. One of the key moments of the trip was a Sagol Kangjei match, an introduction to Manipuri polo.

Slowly, breeding contacts and an expanding group

of cultural visitors to Manipur brought him in touch with polo associations and horse enthusiasts from around the world. They were more concerned with the plight of the Manipuri pony than Indians themselves. Very soon, Roy's annual residencies became full-blown polo festivals, ones that now sustain themselves without any need for his helping hand.

One of the first successes towards pony conservation in Manipur involved the Manipur Polo Association and the USPA almost three years ago. The tournament pitted the Manipur polo team against a team from the US in an invitational match held during the polo festival that year.

It was at the tournament that Steven Armour, Governor, National Board of Team USPA, met Roy, by then an established voice in the 'Save the Pony' campaign across the state. Roy was the brains behind organising the tournament, using it as a spring board to talk about the plight of the pony. The duo decided to collaborate on the project and came together to form Huntré! Equine, a company that organises polo tours across India.

This was in 2014, the year that the numbers of the pony had dwindled to alarming levels (dipping at one point to below 1,000 in the state). The tournament was organised around the idea that in a twist, the US players would also try their hand with the Manipuri ponies, and play a game against the locals.

"It was one of the most fun experiences they had ever had," Armour says. "Although quite a bit different from the horses that they were used

to, they had nothing but high praise for the ponies.”

The Manipuri pony is not an ideal animal for modern polo. It averages around 12 to 14 hands, small by any margin and not suited for international competition. Armour and Roy both acknowledge this fact. They were also quick to realise that instead of it being seen as a drawback, they could use it to their advantage and play it up as special, a quirk that visiting players could take to.

The success of the tournament, and subsequent mushrooming of many more groups demanding pony conservation, forced the government into action. Plans for a pony reserve were quickly put in place. One would be established on the outskirts of Imphal East. A massive grassland area, bordered by small village settlements around the Heingang lake. Another would be on the nearby hillock of Khundrakpam. Very soon the streets of Imphal were emptied of plastic-chewing ponies. It had taken Roy close to a decade of manoeuvring, cajoling and imploring various entities across the board. Now, it seemed his work was near its end. But Roy doesn't think so.

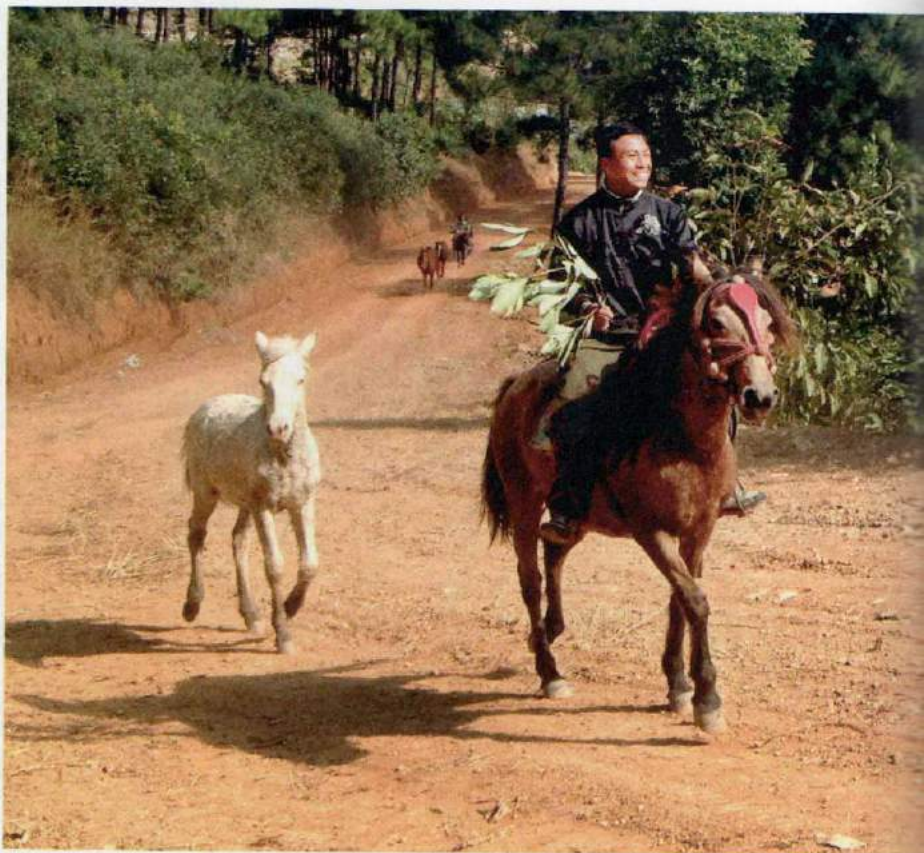
**T**OPNAORIA, A SMALL township on the edges of Imphal East, is an abandoned area that falls between the urban and the rural. Freshly minted tarmac roads, flashy cars and new construction mingle freely with thatched roofs, and mud paths.

This is where teenager Thoudam Tanna Devi spends most of her time. Maisnam Khelendro, a retired polo player, who now works towards organising the tournament alongside Roy, had recommended that the place was worth a visit.

At the heart of the evolution of the ‘Save the Pony’ campaign had been an expansion into different social agendas. The tournament had expanded to include women's polo and therefore opened up an avenue less explored—to cater to women polo players across Manipur. Women who had given up the sport because of a lack of opportunity, and others who hadn't pursued it out of a lack of direction. Khelendro says that the initiative involving women's polo has thrown a new spotlight on the cultural aspect of polo in the region. “Now everyone who comes out of curiosity to watch the women polo players also very slyly gets a quick hit about the conservation issue.”

Manipur has 22 polo clubs. Four of them cater to women. There are approximately 24 women polo players in Imphal alone. Two of these polo clubs are owned by women. The owner of one, Thoinu Thoudam, Tanna's aunt, lived in Topnaoria too.

Thoinu at one time was a *gram panchayat* leader in the area. Separated from a husband who relied on her for income, she is widely respected in the Topnaoria area. With support for polo dwindling, and resources scarce, Tanna's uncle, Tomba, visited Thoinu seven years back with a proposition that she invest and manage a polo club in the area. He, Tokba, would get the players and source the horses. Thoinu owns about 20 horses at the club now, and is a one-woman crusade in Manipur polo. When she became manager, she insisted that girls be let in. The first among them was Tanna.



#### EVERYONE'S GAME

Unlike in other places, in Manipur polo is not a privileged class game. The owners, riders and caretakers come from the same family and background.

In early January 2017, Tanna was one of the brightest prospects that emerged out of the invitational tournament between the Women USPA team and the Manipuri women's team. Thoinu proudly shows me pictures of Tanna jostling for the ball in a handbook from the tournament. She is dwarfed by two bigger, stockier American girls around her. However, it isn't just Tanna that is small.

“They do look like wind-up toys,” Stephanie Massey laughs. Massey was one of the players who toured Manipur in January. A player with a two handicap, she is also a fourth-year veterinary student with a keen sense of conservation, placing her perfectly to understand the issue of the Manipuri pony in India.

“Getting these ponies off the streets was a huge step towards a positive outcome,” Massey says. “A large part of raising awareness of the breed and emphasising its importance in Manipur largely stems from the ponies' ability to play polo. In addition, educating people who own the ponies about basic husbandry also gives these animals a happy life.”

The government's bigger function was to give cause for people to own the animal itself, regardless of its importance to polo. Without that function, the animal could never be taken off the streets. Among the proposals were mounted police units and involving the pony

in state functions. None of them ever worked as well as polo, though.

"You have to remember," Roy says, "that, unlike the rest of India, polo in Manipur isn't a privileged class game. Here it is a commoners' sport. The owners, the players, the riders and the caretakers often come from the same family and same background."

Manipuri polo players soon became a famed accessory to polo tournaments across the country. Regardless of the pony's prowess, or its ability to compete against the

"Go watch a game," Khelendro says, "that's where the preserve is."

A visit to Mapal Kangjeibung for a game of polo between two local women's teams shows promise for the sport to flourish. The game is slow, but competitive. The ponies may not have the speed or the size of the thoroughbred, but their manoeuvrability is unbelievable. If the thoroughbred is a rally car designed for power, speed and precision, the Manipuri pony is a city-going hatchback designed for theft and sleight. Their low centre of gravity affords the riders more space for the turn, and easier and quicker contact with the ball. Instead of outrunning and flanking their opponents, here players use contact as a point of

negotiation. The closer they get, the more important the ponies' manoeuvrability.

A banner tied to the fences on the opposite side of the main stand is fading, but still legible enough to read: NO PONY. NO POLO.

Roy speaks of a 'Polo Yatra', an initiative designed to take the Manipuri polo message across different cities of India. He is working on a draft proposal for pony conservation, one that will expand

the scope of the project itself. This is happening as Manipur goes in for assembly elections. "I'm an apolitical man. It doesn't matter who comes or who goes. This issue will remain unchanged. It is one of the minor ones affecting the state, but one that will completely erase a part of its culture."

In 2015, the government auditor found the pony reserve to be misappropriating funds for office expenses rather than preservation of the animal itself. The report found that the Manipur Horse Riding and Polo Association (MHRPA), the body entrusted with the conservation of the pony, procured 39 ponies "without rate justification on account of which avoidable excess expenditure of ₹16.74 lakh was incurred from public fund." Furthermore, "It was observed that out of the said budget provisions of ₹16 lakh, ₹15.11 lakh was diverted by the department to meet expenditure for office expenses, diesel oil, repairing of vehicles and stationery items etc of the directorate," the report said.

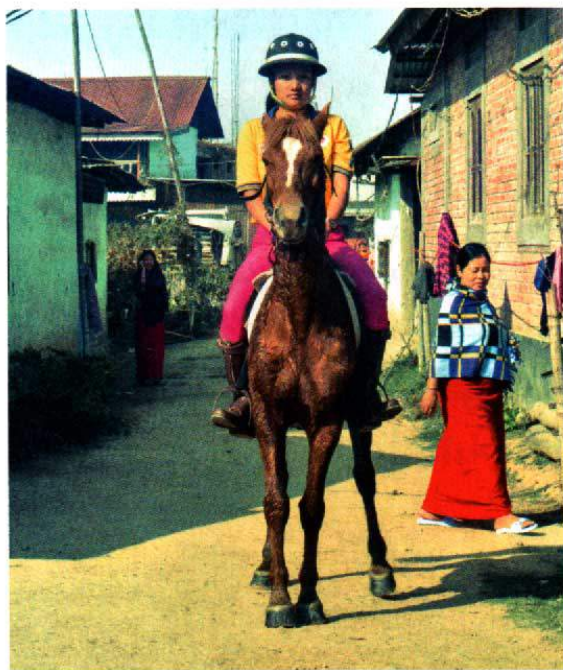
It becomes clear why the preserve is a 'wild grassland.' It is precisely this inadequate functioning of the preserve that Roy hopes to tackle next. "That's the problem, you see. Rampant corruption. In the draft I'm preparing, I'm asking that they include a range of people in the committee that oversees the conservation reserve," he explains. "Geneticists, scholars, polo players, administrators and even cultural icons. If one group slags, others can pick them up."

Roy, however, knows this is easier said than done. By now he is familiar with the mechanisms of the Indian nation state. Maybe a new government will look at this afresh and accept new perspectives.

"It's all the same. All talk and little action," Roy sighs. "Why do you think I want more coverage of this issue? The more the din, the more the chances of something actually happening." It is also the reason that he prefers to focus on the polo yatra and the tournaments than spend all his energy on pushing through the reserve.

Pakhomba is lord of the land and the pony is safe only at home. At the homes of the players, the owners and the clubs themselves. That is the worrying bit. Massey had, perhaps inadvertently, summed it up perfectly. The sport protects the animal for its own pleasure, remove that and the pony may have a bleak future. □

## IF A THOROUGHBRED IS A RALLY CAR DESIGNED FOR SPEED AND POWER, THE MANIPURI PONY IS A HATCHBACK MADE FOR THEFT AND SLEIGHT



thoroughbred, all local tournaments now encourage the use of the pony in the game.

However, for all the progress do-gooders like Roy have overseen, the government's contribution is still barebones. The pony reserve, it seems, isn't doing much. "It hardly exists as a real reserve. It will break your heart," Roy says. "It is just a wild grassland. Lots of ponies roaming around. That's it." Khelendro says. "What the government has done is basically clean up the streets superficially and push the ponies to the outskirts, so that no one asks more questions," Roy says. "They think we haven't noticed."