



Rao Raja Hanut Singh with his eldest son, Kr. Bijai Singh (right), himself a seven goaler at his peak, England 1957

THEY CALLED HIM GOD

Even though he's been gone for more than thirty years, people still remember Rao Raja Hanut Singh, in the words of HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, "The Golden Boy of the Golden Era of Polo". On the fields of play, he was the most influential person in polo, as Camilla Alfthan discovered at Cowdray this summer

Every summer for more than twenty years, Rao Raja Hanut Singh would come to England to play polo at Cowdray Park in Midhurst – the home of polo, which was revived after the Second World War by the late Lord Cowdray.

Hanut was a great instructor of polo at Cowdray. Everyone revered him, and considered him the guru of polo. He was a clever player and a great tactician, who at 65, won the Gold Cup – the sport's most prestigious trophy.

He was also a very theatrical man. He had a red handkerchief, which he used to wipe his forehead with, while his horses' red silk martingales, and his longbearded Indian groom, Bakhshi, was also what impressed everyone.

Among players, his nickname was God, and his team was called 'Only the Best'.

Michael O'Brien, proprietor of the Park House Hotel in Bepton.

“When Hanut came to England after the war, Lord Cowdray told him to go to Park House. He stayed for more than twenty years, and became a part of the family. Today the place is filled with photographs from the gold cups and the endless string of trophies that he'd won.

Hanut was a man whose life totally revolved around polo. Nothing else interested him. He was also a very thorough man. He would always surround himself with young players, and discuss tactics at the dinner table; him being the salt, they being the pepper, which they'd move back and forth over the table.

He was passionate about ice cream. He would always get his manservant to fetch him some, after a match was played. He didn't drink, and he told great stories. He loved to entertain and receive friends at the hotel, but only as long as it had to do with polo.

Beryl Hill, who was always with him was his right arm and organised his life for him. When he went back to India, she went with him.

Hanut was a great talent, who was a 9, when he was 19 years. He was a real horseman. Today you don't see too much of this. When his father put him in a team, he could only ride and not stick, because the first thing you had to learn, he'd say, was to be a horseman. Today, it's rather the other way around.

One year he took up golf with Prem Singh. They did not know that you walk in this game, so they would hit the ball and then run. After playing like this for a while, and becoming very exhausted, they realised that they were doing something wrong.

On the field, Hanut most certainly was the greatest influence on polo. Anything, you wanted to know about polo, you'd ask Hanut. ”

Paul Withers, professional umpire in England and Miami, and on the fields of play, one of Hanut's frequent opponents.

“Hanut was a brilliant horseman, who had brilliant horses. Only the best was good enough. He was also a very private man, who went to bed at nine, and got up at 4:30. He won the Gold Cup in 1964 and 1965 at 64 and 65 years of age. His sons, Harry and Bijai were good players too.

He'd guard jealously over his team, and every chukka was always carefully planned.

He was an icon, and we all revered him. I used to go and sit in his room and talk to him, when he was getting dressed by his manservant, Sawai. Whenever we could talk to him, or to get him to tell us his tricks, we felt very lucky. He didn't impose himself. You'd have to go to him and ask him for advice. In the poloworld, he was the most respected man world wide. He only reached a 9, but he used to say that a 9 in his younger days, was worth an 11 today. ”

Julian Hipwood, professional. The only English player who along with his younger brother, Howard, has reached a 9-handicap. Today he plays three times a week and does a lot of coaching wherever he finds himself in the world. Of his relation with Hanut, he quite simply calls him his mentor.

“In 1964, when I was about 16, I played in Cirencester with some low goal players. We were short of a player. Hanut, who was then 64, joined the team. I was then a 0, Hanut was 5.

My first impression of him was that I did not like him. He came in shouting and wearing his camel coat and shining riding boots. He was so full of himself, that it was almost over the top.

Later I realised that this was just being well organised. But at the time, I was just a low goal player, and didn't know anything about high goal players.

The year after, Hanut won the Gold Cup. He played in Eric Moller's team, Jersey Lilies, and one of his players was an officer from the 61st cavalry. The India-Pakistani war broke out, and he had to leave. Hanut remembered me, and called my father, who'm I was working with, and asked if I could join the team.

So I went to Park House, where a lot of players stayed, and I got a bed and board. I was woken up every morning at 5 o'clock by one of Hanut's two servants. I had a cup of tea, and at 5:25 we were off to the stable yard by the Cowdray ruins, where he kept his horses. I was never allowed to canter, only to trot for hours. It was good for my riding, and best for the horse. That was how I started to learn.

At 6 o'clock I was back at Park House, to clean myself and have breakfast. And then he made me go and practice on the wooden horse. Everyday, I had to read a part of the rule book. I lunched with him and I dined with him.

I was his boy. I used to drive him all over the place in his Jaguar, and I loved it.

He'd tell stories, as a way of giving examples, of what not to do. I got to know all about the polo players of the whole world, and learned the polo history. He had a great sense of humour. He was also a very proud man, and very meticulous. You could see your face in his boots.

He was an excellent tactician, who taught me a lot of things.

For instance, if you hit the ball, it does not matter where you are; you have to be able to hit it from all sides and every angle.

At my first match at Cowdray, I played against Paul Withers, who was a 6, and Jose Diaz Alberdi, who was a 7. I had 7 chuckers and 7 horses. Before, I'd only played against 2s or 3s. I'm sure he did it on purpose, to teach me a lesson.

It was not until I was a 6, that he patted me on the back and said, "Julian, you've finally become a great polo player". It meant a lot to me. Before that, I'd sometimes get upset, because he never said anything.

I used to play with Colonel Harper's son, Sandy, and he called us 'the Heavenly Twins'. We were both blonde, and very good friends. Today, we'll often get together and tell stories about Hanut.

Once Sinclair Hill, the Australian 10 goaler, said to me, "Julian you're going to be a very good polo player". Hanut got furious; if someone had to tell me something, it had to be him.

A lot of people were afraid of him. He wouldn't mince his words; he was a very opinionated person, and you always knew, what he was thinking. He was rude sometimes, but also diplomatic.

He taught me that you have to be positive. You have to believe in what you do. The more you believe in it, the better it will work out.

When he went back to Jodhpur one winter, I went to visit him. I played polo and visited the palace where he was born. He told me that as a child, he was very good at hitting the ball, and that he'd take it away and score goals, so that no one else could get near it. So his father, the great Sir Pratap, took his stick away, so that he could be more of a team player.

I played with him for two years, and it was very concentrated. I learnt all the basics, and all the pit falls... You only realise this later, when you're older. Today I often smile to myself, because a lot of what I say, Hanut used to say...”

Polo historian J.N.P. Watson has written a book called 'Hanut: Prince Among Polo Players' on Rao Raja Hanut Singh, published by Michael Russel Ltd.