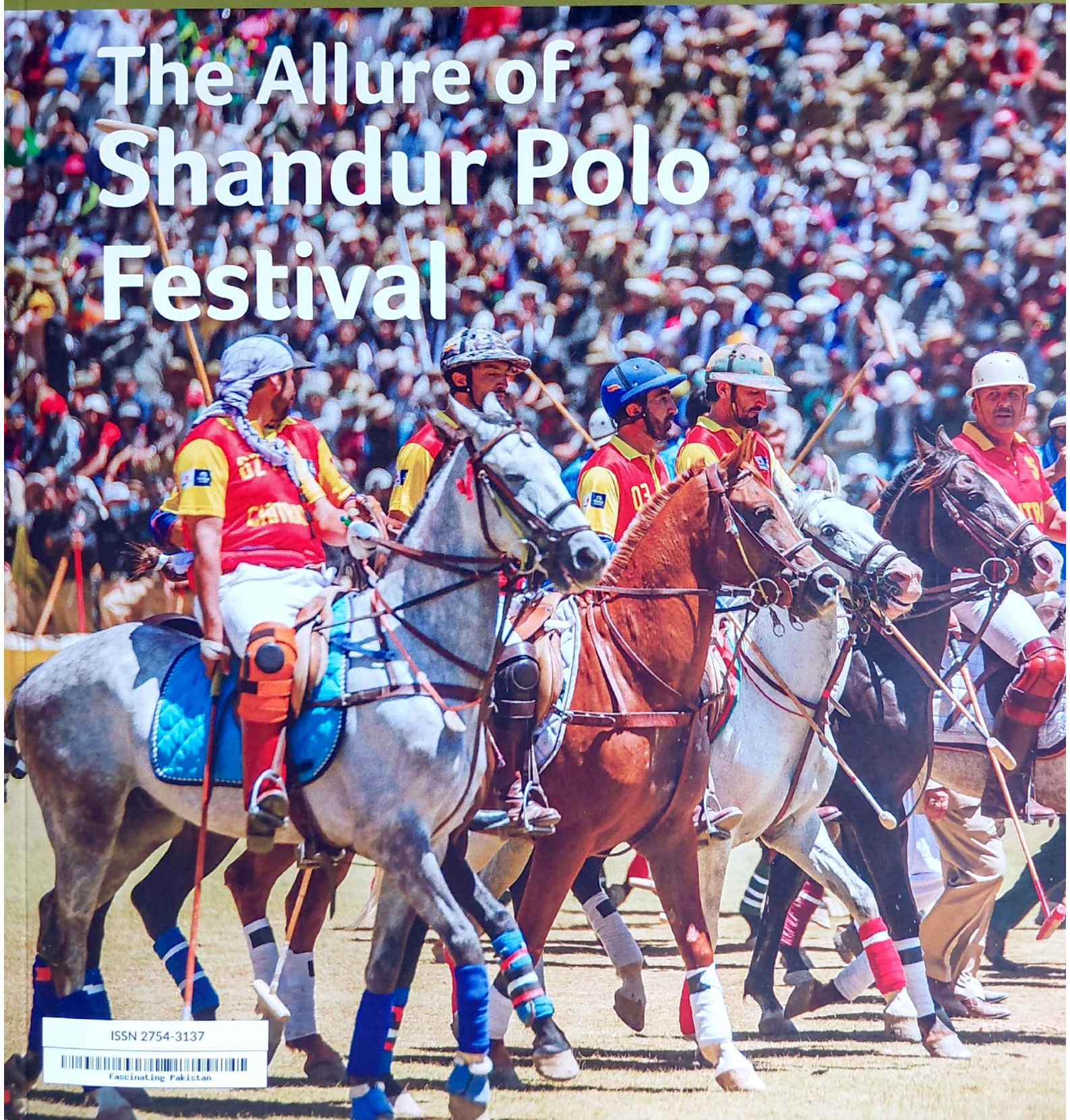


# FASCINATING PAKISTAN

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## The Allure of Shandur Polo Festival



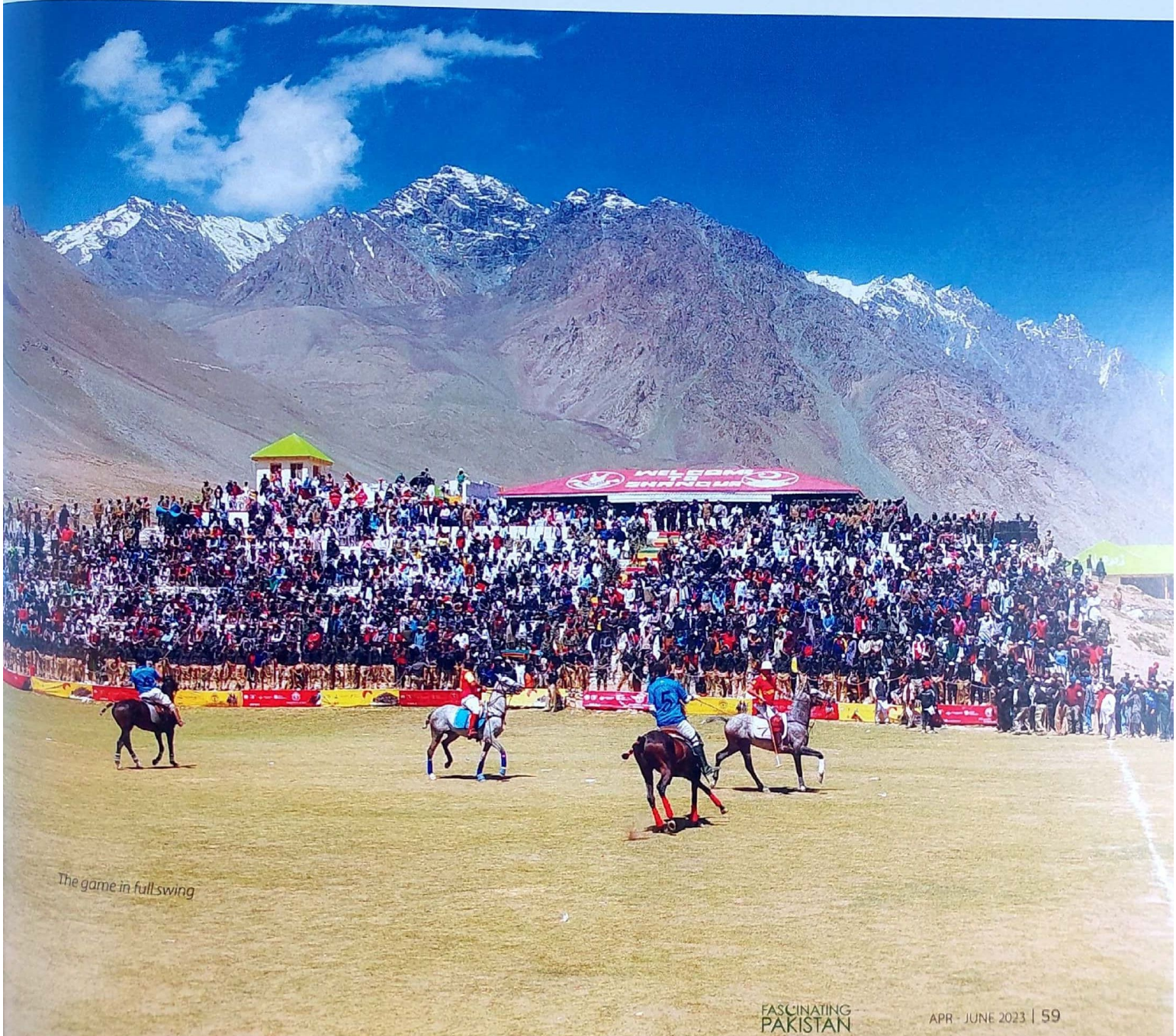
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Fascinating Pakistan

# Freestyle Polo

By Shams Uddin



The game in full swing



A band performance before the games

**S**handur (3,700 m) is where the three mountain ranges—Hindukush, Himalaya, and Karakoram—meet. The region has historic importance with beautiful landscape, flora, and fauna. It is the highest polo ground on earth, where the contest of the rugged free-style polo takes place between the team of Chitral and Gilgit from July 7 to 9 every year, and that attracts national and international tourists, high-profile officials, and diplomats.

## The Origin

The origin of this unique and historical sport is largely shrouded in mystery; however, some researchers believe the equestrian sport originated and evolved in Central Asia around the 6th century BC to train the cavalry and stimulate a real-life battle. The ruling elites and soldiers initiated the sport to maintain and promote their cavalry skills and use the exercise to prepare themselves physically and mentally for the battlefield.

Since technology has superseded the use of horses in battle, the free-style polo of northern Pakistan is the only surviving cultural sport to remind the battlefields of the medieval era. No rule governs the game played at Shandur and across Chitral and Gilgit Baltistan. It sheerly depends on the stamina of the horse, the skill of the player.

Evelyn Hey Cobb, the British Administrator in Chitral and Gilgit Baltistan, introduced free-style polo at Shandur for the first time in 1935. He played a nighttime match under



players in action

the light of the full moon—a *raison d'être* to name the polo ground 'Mas Junali', in Khowar language, which translates 'the Moonlit Polo Ground'. Since then, the Shandur event has become a source of cultural and sports connection between the communities living in the Hindukush, Himalaya, and Karakoram mountains, who share a common culture, history, cuisines, dresses, musical heritage, and cultural sports.

## The Teams

The arch-rival teams of Chitral and Gilgit play at the Shandur festival, the biggest free-style polo contest in the world, let alone Pakistan. Four teams from each region participate. Every team has six players plus two reserves. Chitral C versus Gilgit C, Chitral B versus Gilgit B, and Chitral A versus Gilgit A are the scheduled matches of the event. The contest between Laspur and Ghizer teams is another exciting event

that quickens the pulse of the public. Spectators from both the valleys, including local women, turn up to support their respective teams.

The horses are healthy and well-trained. They also gallop and dance to the rhythmic beats of traditional music, which is an integral part of the free-style polo matches. At the end of each contest, the winning team celebrates the victory with a group dance to thunderous clapping and shouts of their supporters.

The event, over the years, has attracted many tourists from North America, Central Europe, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Tour operators and travel companies abroad enthusiastically schedule the trip of their clients every year to witness the fiercest polo contest played in its raw form.

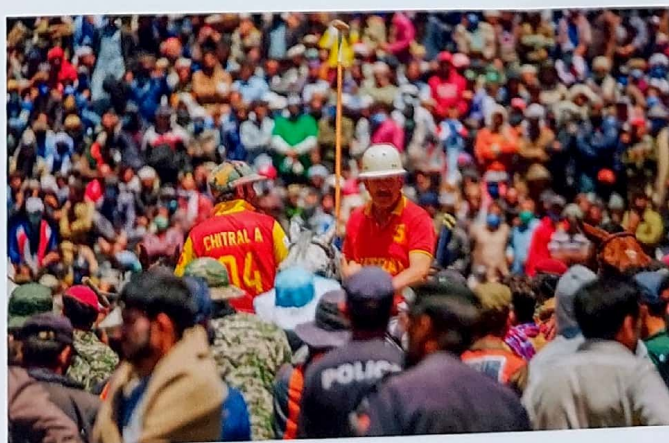
When the Shandur polo event draws to a close, the district administration in Chitral and Gilgit decide on the final teams for the Shandur polo through a series of preliminary matches in their respective regions to identify and select the outstanding players and best horses. Players and their supporters attend the district-level polo event from across different villages, tehsils, and districts. The teams then get divided into two pools and play under the strict scrutiny of the Jury to settle disputes, if any. The jury members comprise former polo players, coaches, and community representatives with experience and skills in dispute settlement. The teams reaching the final in their pool play in the final of the district tournament.

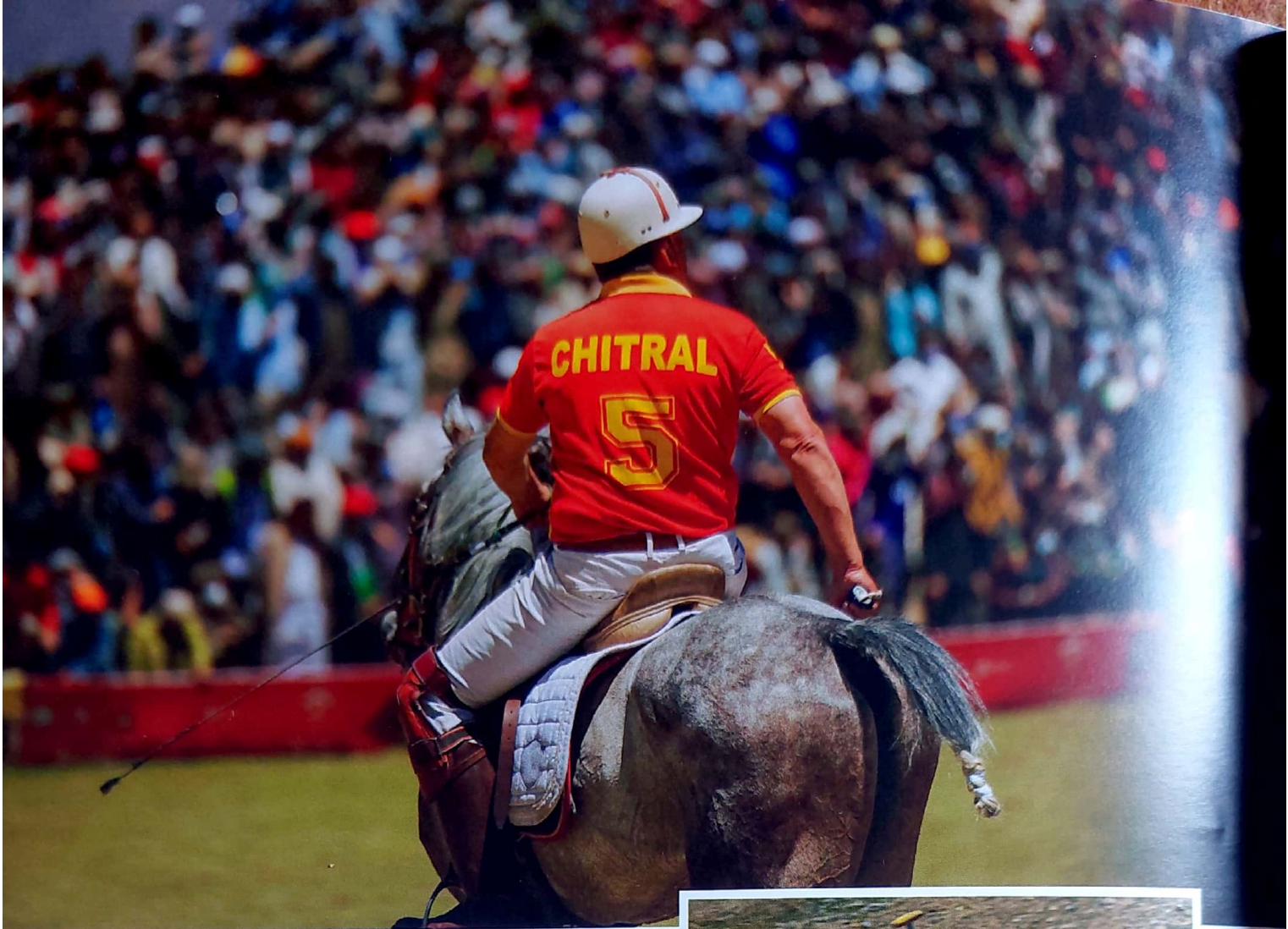
During these matches, the Jury members are responsible for keenly observing the tactics, skills, and strength of players and the speed and stamina of their horses—the factors determining the selection of the players for the

grand Shandur event.

Besides the thrilling matches of free-style polo at Shandur, the event also features a unique cultural experience for foreign tourists and sports enthusiasts. The cultural fusion of the Hindukush, Himalayan, and Karakoram regions with their traditional music, cuisines, dresses, and overall lifestyle in a single space has a tremendous fascination for tourists.

Adventure sports like paragliding, tandem flights, boating in the blue lake, and horse-riding, in addition to folk dances, folk music, and indigenous cuisines of Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan, are the highlights of the event.



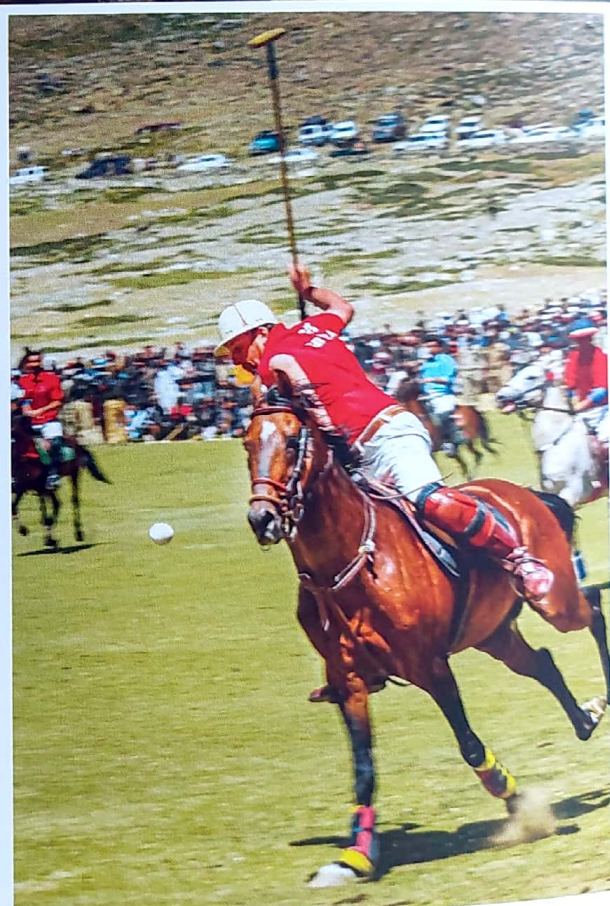


The cultural performances of Chitral and Kalash valleys along that of Gilgit-Baltistan are the high points of the three-day mega event. Enjoying the pleasant but relatively cool nights in camps at Shandur and listening to the traditional music of tabla, sitar and rabab provide the visitors refreshing entertainment day and night.

The picturesque meadows on either side of the Shandur plateau along the snow-topped mountains provide the best opportunity for trekking and picture-taking in the pristine natural environment from the close quarter.

### **The Camping Site**

The Langar camping site, 5-kilometer north of the Shandur polo ground, is one of the best campsites in northern Pakistan, flanked by a clean river stocked with trout fish. Trekking up to the Baha Lake (11,883 ft) from the Langar camping site is another irresistible attraction for trekkers, adventurers, and nature lovers. It is where you will experience the cool breeze and see different singing birds in the wild shrubs, willows, and Himalayan birch, with shepherds tending their yaks and livestock.



The rugged polo, a traditional sport of northern Pakistan, is to promote adventure tourism in the area. It has provided adventurers, nature lovers, sports enthusiasts, and cultural tourists plenty of opportunities to know and enjoy the indigenous cultures, traditional cuisines, folk music, flora and fauna, and the beautiful landscape of northern Pakistan.

### **Festival Information**

It is advisable to reach Shandur one day ahead of the game as the routes get crowded. The best way to reach the

Shandur Pass is via Chitral or via Gilgit as it is a midpoint between both.

### **Facilities**

A tent village is set up for tourists coming for the festival including wash room facilities.

Restaurants and food stalls are set up for the festival only.

Many people travel to sell their crafts and souvenir.

### **About the Author**

Mr. Shams Uddin operates tours of both national and foreign tourists across Pakistan, particularly in the north. He has rich experience and knowledge in the field coupled with extensive linkages in northern Pakistan. Mr Shams Uddin is also a valued member of the Advisory Board of Fascinating Pakistan.

