



BRITISH TENTPEGGING ASSOCIATION

The History of Tentpegging

Introduction

The term 'Tentpegging' refers not to the ability to pin down the guy lines on an 18 x 24 tent as fast as possible, but to the cavalry sport of removing wooden 'tent pegs' from the back of a galloping horse from the ground using a sword or lance. In a wider sense it also now involves all mounted skill at arms as finally developed for use in war by the British Army.

In this article, the early origins of the sport, its development in the Victorian era, the way the sport changed to reflect a new cavalry sword in Edwardian times, and it's almost final evolution around the First World War, into the form still seen today, will be covered.

In addition along with the mechanisation of almost all of the Army during the Second World War the decline in numbers participating in the sport and the establishment of the British Tentpegging Association to enable civilians to compete alongside the Army will also be examined.





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Origins

The origins of the sport itself go back into the depths of history, perhaps some 2500 years to the time when Asian armies relied on their skill with the lance. There are many apocryphal

stories where the origin is stated as the practice of disabling enemy war elephants by spearing their toe nails, or the removal of tent pegs in an enemy encampment as the first wave of an attack.

Both are highly improbable, a lancer would be lucky to get in range of a war elephant, let alone spear its toe nail and survive the attempt for he would be a prime target for the arrows and spears raining down from the elephant's occupants; galloping through an encampment, criss-crossed in tent guy lines is equally improbable, as anyone who has put up a tent knows you knock the pegs in firmly, even flush to the ground to keep the tent up, such a peg is very hard to take with the lance, even if the lancer's horse had not fallen over the guy lines before hand!

What is far more probable is that cavalry men, when training in camp would have had an abundance of wooden tent pegs to use as makeshift targets on which to demonstrate their skills with the lance at a full gallop. Human nature would soon develop this display of skill into a very competitive game. Indeed the origin was often stated as 'so named from the use of an ordinary tent-peg as a marked for a lancer's practice.' [1]

Such competitions can still be seen today in countries such as India and Pakistan where the vibrant culture of this competitive tribal sport recalls the glory days of native cavalries.





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Early Development in the Victorian Army

No doubt before the introduction of the lance, British cavalry men would have competed against each other with the sword, either with the edge against 'heads' on posts or with the point against rings representing the throat of their enemy as described in sword regulations such as those written down by Le Marchant in 1796, the inventor of the famous 1796 Light Cavalry Sabre[2].

After Waterloo the British Army adopted the lance as a weapon having been on the receiving end of Napoleon's Polish Lancers, and converted several Regiments to Lancers.

It was these regiments that, when stationed in India, met with the native sport of tent pegging and adapted it to their own needs. In 1875 the 5th Royal Irish Lancers gave a demonstration of the sport at the Gun Club in Hurlingham which was reported on by the Illustrated London News:

'The company of fashionable spectators, who on Saturday assembled in the grounds of the Gun Club at Hurlingham, saw the first public exhibition in England of a manly exercise and game, which has been imported from Asia by the 5th Royal Irish Regiment of Lancers. The Prince and Princess of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh were present, with other Princes and Princesses, in the Royal Pavilion.

Tentpegging has been thus described by a contemporary:- A wooden tent-peg, similar to those ordinarily used in Indian camps, is driven firmly into the ground, and the object of the horseman is to draw this with the point of his lance as he passes at full speed. In description the thing sounds simple enough; you have only to lower the lance at the right moment, and the trick is done.

Nor is the difficulty more apparent as one watches the graceful motion and easy precision of a skilful practitioner; but if those who doubt that there is any art in it will only mount a horse and try for themselves, they will soon confess that there are more qualities needed than a good seat and a quick eye for the distance to transform them into accomplished tent-peggers. The hand must be light as a feather, the grip close as steel, the eye true, and the aim unerring.

As a training for cavalry whose arm is the lance, and whose chance of success in battle depends on a sure use of that weapon, tent-pegging has long been assiduously cultivated among the horsemen of nearly every province of India, and in the native cavalry regiments of our Eastern army forms as much a part of the drill as the bayonet exercise lately did in our infantry regiments.

When and where tent-pegging originated are questions upon which everybody has a theory, and all the theories differ. The North-West Provinces, however, seem to be the home of art, and, though it is practised alike by horsemen of Mysore and Scinde, by the accomplished, and in all probability neze-baze, as the natives name it, is but one of the many warlike feats in which the Mohammedan tribes from over the Indus and the wild fearless riders of Afghanistan excelled centuries ago. The 10th, 12th, and 15th Native Regiments are perhaps the most brilliant tent-peggers of the irregular cavalry, and they are nearly all Mussulmans. It was while stationed at Sealkote, away up on the Cashmere frontier, in, that the 5th first practiced the art.

Some English regiments, among others the 4th Hussars, had previously attempted it, at the suggestion of Lord Napier, who, appreciating the value of such training, had



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offered prizes to be competed for by European cavalry only. Then the result was not a great success; and up to the present the 5th Royal Irish Lancers have held a proud supremacy, though both the 4th and 11th Hussars have a few tent-peggers whose workmanship is not by any means to be despised.

The 5th Lancers have, of privates and non-commissioned officers, some forty or fifty who can handle their pegging-lances as such horsemen only can, and ten or a dozen officers who are at least equally skilled.'[3]

What is clear from this article is that this display was not a 'one off' imitation of sport seen once before in India at a Regimental sports day; it was a demonstration of the skill with the lance at a sport at which several other British Regiments such as the 4th and 11th Hussars had already practiced.

It is also clear that the native cavalry were very well practiced and accomplished in the art. To reach the level of expertise to which the five Royal Irish Lancers reached would have taken several years of training and development, in all probability it was likely that British Cavalry, armed with the lance would have tried their skill since the 1840's and incorporated such competitions into their gymkhanas[4].

It is likely that the tent demolition story as to the origins of the sport is far more likely to have come from cavalrymen galloping through their own encampment trying to collapse the tents onto their mates, or rivals from another regiment! Officers no doubt used this opportunity to keep the desire to show off the skills, but channel the spirit, into a sport which had much training benefit for a cavalryman armed with the lance. A ready supply of tent pegs for targets would have made this a cheap way of both entertaining, and of training the troops.



During the Victorian Era, all manner of 'Feats of Arms' or 'Assaults at Arms' became a popular form of public entertainment. In particular the Naval and Military Tournament, which became the famous Royal Tournament, began in the 1880's earning the 'Royal' prefix from Queen Victoria in 1884. Tent pegging has featured since 1880, indeed it still continues, as the mounted events are still conducted to this day by the Army at the Defence Animal Centre, still under the title of the 'Royal Tournament'.

Who knows, with the recent reintroduction of the British Military Tournament which included a tent pegging display, we may once again see the finals for this illustrious competition ran at Earl's Court again. Other competitions, now sadly defunct or at least dormant until resurrected, were; the heads and posts competition



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in which a swordsman severed dummy head from a post whilst jumping a fence, and lemon cutting[5]. In addition there was a range of man on man combats using dummy weapons such as Sword versus Lance Mounted which continued to 1920.

The earliest rules for Tentpegging appeared in this era and are remarkably similar to today, 'the seat from the hips downwards should be immovable, the body from the hips upwards bent well down to the right, rather than forward, it's sway being well supported by the left leg, the handling of the lance easy and free from stiffness, the right arm slightly bent, the hand just in front of the instep, the lance to be kept close to the ground. Any jabbing at the peg, striking it with the lance sloping from above downwards, or lengthening of the lance beyond the balance must be avoided. A firm seat is indispensable for good tent-pegging. Riding at the peg in an upright posture is not tent-pegging.'[6]

The Edwardian Era: A Time of Change

The Edwardian era was a time of change for the whole Army. Khaki had become the standard field uniform, and the importance of musketry was learnt the hard way in the Boer War. This did not however mean the end of mounted cavalry, who although recognising the importance of dismounted rifle and supporting machine gun fire, also still valued the importance of sword and lance in shock action if the tactical situation was right.

An important change made to the cavalry which affected sporting use of the weapons was the adoption of a purely thrusting sword in 1908, often cited as the best cavalry sword ever produced. It is still the weapon of choice for tentpeppers today. Interestingly it was referred to in the Cavalry Journal as 'so shaped as to be a first class pointing weapon'.[7] One important effect of this change was that the old 'heads and posts' style of competitions was superseded by the use of the point, even before the new sword was introduced.[8] Indeed cutting with this sword was discouraged, as is reflected in the fact that Lemon Cutting was only allowed 'for advanced swordsmen who have been passed as proficient in all the pointing exercises laid down, and can be trusted to use the cut only when it is really necessary.'[9]

A further competition, now also no longer competed, was introduced in 1911 to practice the use of the point, this was 'Dummy Thrusting' in which a series of dummies were attacked at different heights to left and right with the point whilst negotiating a course of jumps. This competition continued at the Tournament until the outbreak of war in 1939.





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The reader must remember that although held for competition between regiments, the purpose of all of these mounted competitions was to encourage prowess in the use of the weapons in war, hence the strong influence of the changing of weapons and drills upon the sport.

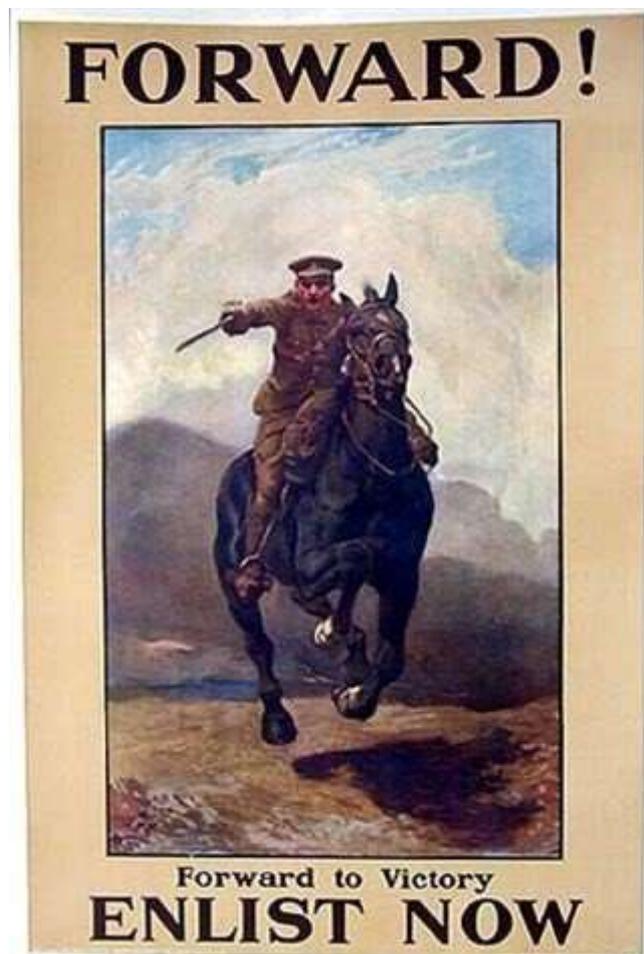
The Two World Wars

By the First World War the elements of the sport that are still competing in today were well established as competition disciplines, it is a credit to the skills required to compete in them that much of it has remained unchanged to this day. The introduction of the thrusting pattern sword in 1908 shaped the future of Tentpegging and introduced the taking of pegs with the sword as well as the lance, for the new sword was in effect a very handy short steel lance. Indeed the idea of cutting with this sword was positively discouraged[10]. It was still sharpened on mobilisation, but the idea of this was to help withdrawal of the blade from an enemy, not for use in cutting.

A key competition developed in this era was that of Sword Lance and Revolver, one which apart from minor changes in distances and calibre of revolver available has changed little over the years. The sword drill is still marked according to the drills for mounted combat taught just before the Second World War[11] and in essence little different from that of 1912.[12]

The importance of this drill is that it not only taught the soldier to hit a target accurately with the point, but that combined with the momentum of the horse, position of hand and body, and the timing of the thrust, it made the attack very hard to anticipate and parry on the part of the enemy. In addition it also requires a high level of training of both horse and rider, the horse was, and is, required to accelerate before, and decelerate just after hitting the enemy in order to lend the horse's momentum to the impact, a true example of man and horse operating in harmony as a weapon of war!

The inclusion of the revolver reflects the realities of modern war, horse and man had to be proof to gunfire, and accurate in the use it. In this era the balloon now used alone as the pistol target was actually the head of a dummy leant against the fence. Indeed apart from these minor differences much is the same today, even to the method of marking, a reflection of how worthwhile a test of the military horseman's skills that this was and is.[13]





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A key competition of this era, now sadly no longer competed for, was that of dummy thrusting. In this sport a rider engages a series of dummies, both left and right and at different heights with the sword, whilst completing a series of

jumps, simulating the engagement of multiple enemies across country as a result of the charge.[14] The earliest reference to this sport was in 1912 showing that it was well established by then, 'Dummy Thrusting. The introduction of a new pattern of cavalry sword, which has no cutting edge, but is designed for

thrusting only, has necessarily caused some modification in cavalry sword practice.'[15]

Any reader wishing to see these sports in action can do so by looking up the key words of 'tent pegging', 'sword', 'lance' and 'cavalry' on the British Pathé News website.[16] Here can be seen soldiers in khaki from 1914 through to the late 1930's completing courses almost identical to those used in competition to this day by their successors. It is a tribute to their skills, and to the soldiers of today, that such competitions have stood the test of time and are still a hard and difficult art worthy of mastering.

Surviving Rules for the sport reflect its military origins, regulation swords, lances, revolvers and even saddlery were standard requirements. These rules also provided a level playing field in which advantage could not be gained by resorting to gadgetry and fashion, in fact even the use of the lightweight 1912 officers pattern of sword was deemed as cheating by many!

Post War Developments

The days after the end of the Second World War saw several experienced mounted cavalymen discharged from the service, the war over and no return for operational cavalry. Several of these men ended up in various Mounted Police units, such as Jack Britt[17] at the Metropolitan Police's training depot at Imber Court.

It was no surprise that such men used the skills which they had perfected in their pre-war cavalry service to hone the ridden skills of their mounted policemen. The value of tent pegging to the development and testing of a riders skills remains as great as ever, as any experienced horseman who tries tent pegging for the first time can testify. Hence the Mounted Police became regular competitors on the Tentpegging circuit

Imber Court even incorporated displays of combat lance drill into their open days.[18] The skills of the mounted





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cavalrymen were used to develop good horsemanship while riding one handed in the policeman, not in anticipation of engaging crowds of rioters with sword and lance!

The Modern Sport. Britain and International

Towards the end of the last century the sport had declined in the numbers of participants due to the disbandment over the years of several mounted units such as H Sqn RCT and the RMP Mounted Troop. In addition the remaining mounted units reduced in size and increased

in workload, the Mounted Police units also stopped competing on their service horses, a mixture of political correctness and penny pinching.

Civilians seem to have dabbled in the sport both before and after the Second World War however no great developments seem to have come from this. At the time the rules of the major competitions ran by the Army, which required service weapons, tack and even horses precluded any such development. However several civilians did learn to peg, either in riding schools ran by ex-cavalrymen, or as part of mounted re-enactment activities.

To remedy this and to keep this skilled sport going, the British Tentpegging Association was formed in the 1990s. Its formation has allowed civilian riders to compete alongside their Army counterparts. The organisation represents both military and civilian in one combined national governing body.

In recent years teams representing Great Britain have consisted of both soldiers and civilians.

Today even military riders may compete using civilian saddles with such novelties as padding and knee rolls! Our forbearers in 1914 would grimace with embarrassment at such 'softness' but be glad to see their sport carry on. Other changes have been that hired horses may now be used, something essential for modern units committed to operational tours which can prevent horse ownership for all but the most determined, gone sadly are the days in which all units had horses on strength, or at least that chargers had free stabling!

Another change reflecting the softness of modern life is that wooden pegs have been replaced by soft plastic coreboard, or even cardboard ones, a change which no longer requires the rider to use the momentum of the horse and a locked arm to hit the peg, simulating an enemy, hard enough to do him mortal harm.

Some Things Have Never Changed

The peg has since at least 1906 remained at being 12" x 3" by 1" thick, until a couple of years ago this was made of softwood, bound with wire top and bottom, and soaked to prevent splitting.

Another constant has been the requirement for pace, since the beginning of Tentpegging the rider has been required to be at a full gallop[19]. Indeed in 1906 judges were able to, at their discretion cancel the scores of any competitor 'if pace is insufficient'[20], whilst other sources stated that 'Pace is considered of great importance, points being deducted if insufficient'.[21] The manuals from the era of horsed cavalry reflect that this was a need based upon good skills learnt in war, 'In the charge against both cavalry and infantry each



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man will ride at his opponent at full speed with the fixed determination of running him through and killing him.'[22]

The FEI drill for Lemon and Pegs is almost identical to that of the old lemon cutting competition, apart from the introduction of taking a peg:

The Gallows to be 15 yards apart. For the first lemon, a forward cut to the right must be used; for the second, a backward cut to the right; the sword must be carried at the 'right engage' (arm straight and sword pointing in the direction of the lemon) up to a point 15 yards short of the first lemon.[23]

Apart from very minor changes such as the rings reducing from rope to leather, little has changed in SLR in the 100 years since it first appeared. It is still the acid test of a good mounted man (or woman) at arms on a good horse.

The challenge of competing on the sport's many disciplines has not changed since its inception. A rider still needs a good seat, steady nerves, and rapid reactions delivered accurately in a fraction of a second. Indeed many competent horsemen who have tried the sport find it much harder than it looks, but this difficulty is what makes it a challenge worth working hard to achieve.

The Future

The sport has taken many measures to widen participation. There are now recognised instructors for the British Tentpegging Association so that those who want to learn the sport can now do so. Most riders learning the sport would need to be on their own horses, but there are some places from which horses who know the game can be hired to train or compete on.

A new development has been the introduction of the sport to Juniors. This is a process in its infancy at present but GB sent a national junior team to compete in South Africa in 2011. It is hoped that Junior elements will soon appear in the main competitions held by the BTA.

Internationally it is hoped that the sport will become an FEI full discipline. There are surely enough countries now competing. International rules do exist and allow for nations to keep their own versions of the sport but to compete on an even keel internationally, in essence the only rules internationally relate to sizes of pegs, length of runs, weapon lengths and the time in which each run is to be completed to ensure that pace is kept up. Style marks are not awarded as there is no common style. It is interesting to see that many Asian and Arab nations have keenly embraced the sport. India, Pakistan, Oman and even Iraq have all been seen competing, and doing well. One day the sport will hopefully appear at the World Equestrian Games and the Olympics.

The changes made, are they for good or bad? Many changes have reflected the changing times, we no longer have the absolutely level playing field on which riders once competed, with regulation saddlery and weapons, even the same types of horses who have received the same levels of training; however we do now have a wider range of competitors and horses, many of whom would have no access to regulation kit from the Quartermaster's Stores!



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We are however the only country in which tentpeggers who are serving soldiers and officers still compete in uniform, for example at Royal Windsor Horse Show No1 Dress, otherwise known as Blues and very similar to the uniforms worn in the 1870's is still worn. Hard hats have now become universal, not a bad idea given the effects of a fall at full gallop!

Whilst we welcome the advantages that some modern equipment can bring we must not lose sight of the origins of the sport and the fact that it has always required training, nerve and correct drills, we must avoid going too far down the soft peg and gentle drills route that could turn the sport into a club games pastiche of it's real cavalry grounded origins.

Conclusion

It would be good for the sport, its heritage and that of units with a mounted tradition, if current regiments were to rise to the challenge that this exciting and challenging sport, for it was so much once part of the lives of their predecessors. Whether Lancer, Hussar or Dragoon, officer or soldier, if you can already ride, there is much challenge as well as history in taking up the sport. The opportunity to participate is a good challenge for any young officer to get this going in their regiment: The challenge is there, take it up, train, raise a team and compete!

Anyone wishing to take up the sport should contact the British Tentpegging Association. They can then direct you to one of their instructors who may be able to assist you in learning the sport in your area.

This account is as complete as it can be with the information available to date. Should any reader have further information to add or documentary sources to suggest they would be gratefully received. Researching this sport is like doing it: A constant learning process!





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- [2] Rules and Regulations for the Sword Exercise of the Cavalry, War Office 1796.
- [3] Illustrated London News, Sat 12 June 1875.
- [4] The term 'Gymkhana' is now used to refer to any competition involving mounted games, until recently it was still the term used in South Africa to refer to Tentpegging, their national organisation was called the South African Gymkhana Union.
- [5] Now incorporated into 2 Lemons and a Peg in which two lemons must be cut with a sword which is then used to take a peg from the ground. This has just been re-introduced to British competition and uses a drill remarkably similar to that of the 1880's for the first two targets.
- [6] The Cavalry Journal Vol 1 Jan to Oct 1906 page 222.
- [7] The Cavalry Journal Vol III Jan to Oct 1908.
- [8] Cavalry journal 1908, Vol III page 403 refers to these changes having been in effect for the heads and posts competitions for several years, replacing the cut with the point in anticipation of the new design of swords. It was probably at this point that tent pegging was introduced for sword as well as lance.
- [9] The Cavalry Journal Vol III 1908 page 403.
- [10] Cavalry Training 1912, War Office.
- [11] Cavalry Training 1937 (Horsed), War Office.
- [12] In 1912 the final part of the point resulted in the edge of the blade being around 45 degrees to the right the back of the hand upwards. By 1937 it had changed to the edge being uppermost with the back of the hand to the left, in this position the joints of the wrist, elbow and shoulder become locked which aids penetration of the target; was this as the result of lessons learnt against German cavalry in the Great War?
- [13] The ASCB Handbook, India 1933, Skill at Arms (Mounted).
- [14] The ASCB Handbook, India 1933, Skill at Arms (Mounted).
- [15] The Encyclopaedia of Sports and Games, the Sportsman, London 1912.
- [16] British Pathé News Website: www.britishpathe.com/, see also: <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=4514>
- [17] Conversation with Norman Edwards, ex Mounted Police.
- [18] See British Pathe News..
- [19] The Cavalry Journal Vol 1 Jan to Oct 1906 page 221.
- [20] The Cavalry Journal Vol 1 Jan to Oct 1906 page 221.
- [21] The Encyclopaedia of Sports and Games, the Sportsman, London 1912.
- [22] Cavalry Training (Horsed)1937, page 30, HMSO, London.
- [23] The Cavalry Journal Vol 1 Jan to Oct 1906 page 222

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