

# The World's Oldest Team Sport Enjoys a Surge in Popularity

BY ROBIN STANBACK

**T**he ability to combine the skill of a Tiger Woods, the agility of a Pelé, the speed of a Michael Johnson, and the stamina of a Lance Armstrong is what it takes to be a superior polo player - and that's just the horse! The human half of the team needs to possess similar exorbitant traits to take to the field in polo. It is not a game for the faint of heart. In this age of extreme sports, polo is fascinating sportsmen and spectators alike.

The game is said to have originated in Asia some 2000 years ago as a competition between nomadic warriors to help them hone their battle skills. It evolved into a valuable training tool for cavalry officers and was played from Constantinople to Japan throughout the Middle Ages. It was known as the

"Game of Kings" and competitions were fiercely joined by princes and their military officers. British planters who observed the sport being played in India adopted it for their own and in the early 1850s members of the English cavalry drew up the earliest rules. Polo crossed the Atlantic to the Americas in 1876 when publisher and adventurer James Gordon Bennett set up the first games in New York. Americans fell in love with the sport and polo clubs sprung up all over the East Coast.

The United States Polo Association (USPA) was established in 1890 to create a uniform method of handicapping players and to standardize the rules of the game. Founders hoped that by doing so they would raise the game to the status of a recognized American sport. By the 1930s they had exceeded their expectations. American players dominated the game in this decade producing legends like Texan Cecil Smith, a ten-goal player who held his rating for a record 25 years, and war hero Tommy Hitchcock, considered the best of best in international competition for 20 years. It became an Olympic sport that drew crowds exceeding 30,000 spectators at the international matches held at the Meadow Brook Polo Club on Long Island.

The depression and World War II stilled the momentum of enthusiasm for the sport but it rebounded at the end of the century. Today, in the United States alone, there are over 225 clubs sanctioned by the USPA with over 3,000 players as members. But the United States can no longer claim to be the dominating force in the sport. Polo has achieved worldwide popularity. There are 13 polo clubs in Africa, 16 in Asia, 42 in Europe and seven in Australia and New Zealand.

For over 30 years, Argentineans have claimed the top rankings in the world. Members of the Gracida family of Buenos Aires are renowned for their horses and their athletic ability. Another family, the Heguyas of Mexico, also dominates the sport. Players with the top rankings in the world travel from Hurlingham, England, to Palm Beach, Florida, to Palermo, Argentina, to La Quinta, California, and to other venues around the world to compete, taking with them entire stables of polo ponies.

What provides the fascination for this game in today's competitive, risk-all sporting environment is the speed and agility required of both horse and rider as well as the danger involved when eight horses and riders take to the field. The game requires two teams of four horse-and-rider combinations. The object is for one team to outscore the other by tipping the ball through the goalposts at either end of a 160- by 300-yard field. Team members assume an offensive or defensive position but, because of the huge size of the playing field and the speed with which the direction of the ball can change, the positions can alternate moment by moment. Unlike football or soccer where sides are changed at the quarter or the half, polo players change field sides after every goal to compensate for field and wind conditions.

A typical match lasts one and a half hours, divided into six, seven and a half-minute periods or chukkers. During these chukkers the play is fast and furious, so much so that one horse would be unable to be competitive in successive rounds. While it is possible to use the same horse more than once in a match, avid players often will bring six horses to a competition to enable them to have fresh horses and spares for every chukker.

There are very specific rules that govern how a competitor can move the ball down the field. Two mounted referees and one official off the playing field monitor the play. Short of interfering with the right-of-way established by the path of the traveling ball, riders may hook an opponent's mallet, steal the ball, bump the opponent's horse, or push a rival's horse off the line. Infractions are penalized by awarding the other team a free hit. The proximity to the goal of that hit depends upon the severity of the infraction.

Most polo matches are played on a handicap basis. The handicap is based upon a player's ability as judged by a select committee. In the United States, the National Handicap Committee meets yearly in October to review the handicap of every registered player. Each player is awarded a skill rating that will range from -2 for the lowest rating to 10 for the highest. In the history of the sport there have been very few players rated above six and an extremely low number rated 10. Today, there are only 11 registered 10-goal players in the USPA. This rating system helps determine a level of play. The handicap of all four team members is added together and compared to that of the opposing team. The lower of the two is subtracted from the higher and the difference is awarded to the lower rated side in goals. The handicaps also assure a certain level of play. A top player with a higher handicap may look for three others similarly rated to play on his team but other teams wishing to match their skills against them will know in advance what it will take to be competitive. Most matches see teams that are mixed between higher handicapped players and those with lower ratings. Games are rated according to the

players that comprise the teams. A 10-goal game would refer to one played by team members whose combined handicaps equal 10. This team could be comprised of a zero rated player and one each rating a one, a three and a six.

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Adam Snow of Aiken, Georgia is a nine-goal player. He explained, "It is to the advantage of the player to be slightly underrated so that the handicap helps the team, but you must remember that the handicap committee is extremely objective and largely made up of retired players who know and love the sport. Their goal is to fairly judge each player. They look for preparedness, number of wins, great horses and where the games have been played."

Mr. Snow is a good example of the dedication it takes to become a highly rated player. He is the third generation of his family to enjoy the game. He remembered, "I began riding when I was very young - eight or nine years old. I was a little bit afraid of the horses until our local club, the Myopia Hunt Club, had a tournament for the younger kids. About 11 of us all started out at the same time. Playing with my friends and riding all the time gave me the confidence I needed. I have been playing ever since. It is a thrilling sport."

Striving to achieve a 10-goal standard has demanded all of Mr. Snow's time. He has a string of 38 horses in various stages of training. "To make it to a rating of 10, I must have horses that are able to sustain a very high level of play. The quality of horses you ride helps to determine your rating. Thoroughbreds are wonderful horses for the sport because they can produce the speed that is needed, but you also need an animal that can maneuver through quick turns and changes in direction. Many people favor Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse crosses to combine speed and agility. My personal favorite is a little black eight-year-old Thoroughbred mare, Hale-Bopp. She is only about 15 hands high and just about as wide as she is tall. She has funny little ears that point in and a tremendous heart."

To keep his horses fit and healthy, Mr. Snow relies upon his wife, veterinarian Shelley Onderdonk, a successful horsewoman in the sport of three-day eventing. Together, they review every facet of their horses' daily regimes. Dr. Onderdonk cited their nutritional program as an example. "Because many of these horses have to travel long distances to compete, we have to formulate a feeding program that takes into account the changing nature of their forages. At home they may spend 14 hours on pasture. On the road



Photo by Mark Lewellyn

they may not get any pasture time at all. A type of hay that might be available in Georgia might not be available in Mexico or California. We can provide the same feed for them but we cannot always provide the same forage. I want their feed to contain as much of what they need as possible.”

Mr. Snow and his wife turned to Charlie Herrick of Banks Mills, their local feed supplier and a Kentucky Equine Research Team Member, to help them formulate the best mix for their horses. Mr. Herrick is an avid polo player and fan. Together they designed a feed mixture that provides 10% protein, 10% fat and 10% fiber. It also contains essential vitamins like the antioxidant vitamins C and E that Dr. Onderdonk values for cellular repair, as well as a supply of essential minerals.

While Mr. Snow represents the top level of polo enthusiasts, there are a vast number who maintain a smaller string of horses. Mike Lennox of Versailles, Kentucky is one of these. As a formulation and quality assurance specialist for Kentucky Equine Research, Mr. Lennox is a knowledgeable horseman who enjoyed polo as a youngster and has returned to the sport recently. He explained, “Polo is a sport that can easily be enjoyed in many parts of the world by people who have only a few horses. My string includes four and they aren’t the youngest horses. Actually, for someone just getting started or coming back to the sport after years off, an older experienced horse is precisely what you need. A green horse and a green rider are going to get themselves



Photo by Mark Llewellyn

in trouble. Experienced horses know what the game is all about. They aren’t going to “cheat you” (a polo term for a horse that shies out from under his rider). They know where they need to be and they will help you learn.”

Mr. Lennox also pointed out that good polo horses must be as adaptable off the playing field as they are on it. “Because the chukkers are so intense, horses cannot be expected to run in two chukkers back-to-back. They have to be able to relax and stand quietly while their rider is on another horse. You can see four or more horses tied to a trailer waiting for their turn and they have to be able to get along well with the others. For some of the larger stables, where exercising the horses requires ponying them, you can see one rider leading an entire string of horses.

Their attitudes towards the other horses have to be almost as if they were a family. A horse that doesn’t get along with others cannot be a part of a polo string.”

Whether a top player or a beginner, playing the game requires not only the right horse but also the right equipment. Proper saddles and bridles are an understandable must, but other requirements include a helmet, blankets, polo wraps, mallets, and kneeboots for the riders and bell or quarter boots for the horses. There are often grounds fees that need to be paid to participate in a match and membership fees to individual clubs as well as to the USPA. Like any equine sport, it is not the initial purchase price of the horse that matters as much as do all the extras. Still, polo enthusiasts from the top players to the beginners will adamantly state, “Polo is one of the most exciting sports to play.”



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