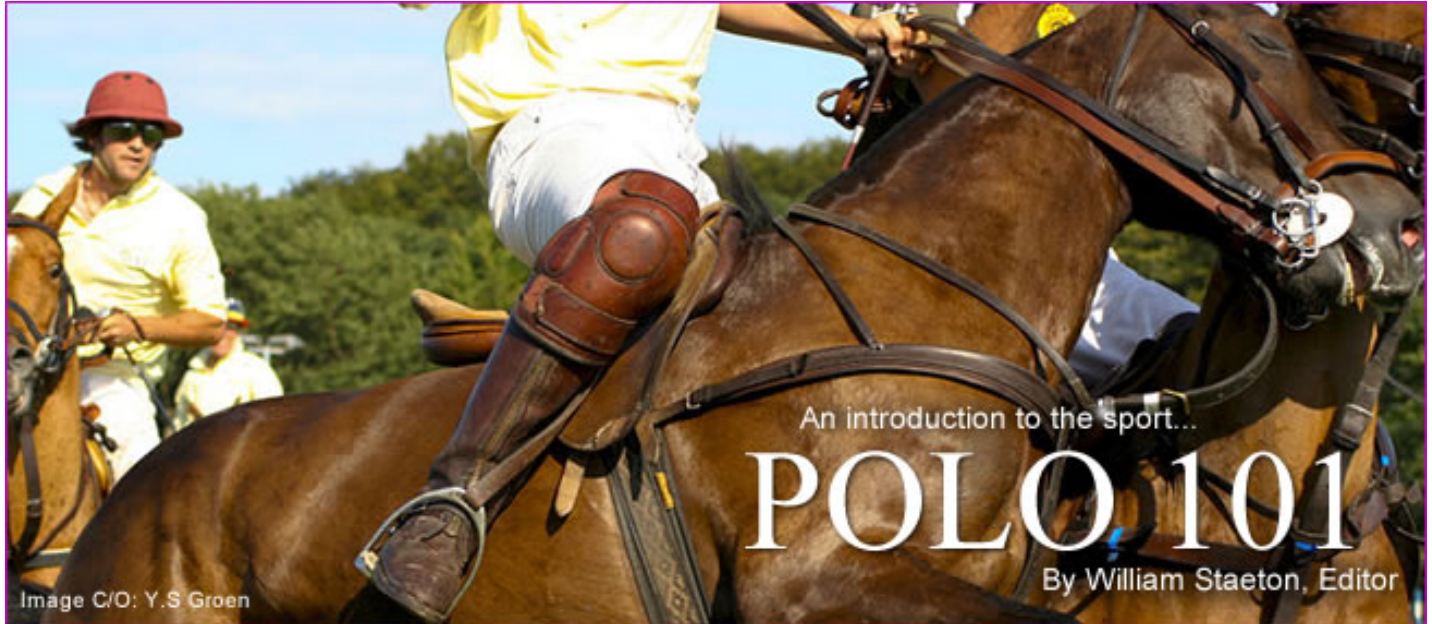


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L I F E T H A T R E A L L Y M A T T E R S



From the Experts: Polo 101 | By Will Staeton, Editor

The equestrian team sport of polo attracts a huge amount of spectators and players every year. Dating back to 600 BC, the game is steeped in history, rigour and excitement as it has evolved into how it is played today. So whether your contribution to the polo field is divot stomping at Cowdray Park or playing like a natural in Argentina, we hope you'll enjoy in our interview with polo expert, Patrea More-Nisbett.

About the game:

Polo is the fastest equestrian team sport in the world. The object of the game is to score the most amount of goals by hitting the ball through the competing team's ten feet high goal posts. There are four to six chukkas in a game depending on the level (i.e.: low goal, medium goal and high goal). Each chukka lasts seven minutes. It starts with the umpire throwing the ball in the middle of the ground among the players. Like some other field sports, ends are changed after each goal for even and fair play, allowing both teams to not be disadvantaged by strong sun, uneven ground or the direction of the wind. When the ball goes out of the sidelines, it is thrown back to the players. However, if it is knocked over the backline, it will be given to a player of the opposing team to hit back into the ground. The ground is 300 yards long and 160 yards wide.

A new chukka is started by a throw-in at the last position of the ball during the previous period.

Getting into Polo...

If you want to break into the polo world, you want to start in a little club. There are 55 HPA (Hurlingham Polo Association) outdoor clubs and 28 area clubs throughout the UK and Ireland. If you are a complete novice to all things horses, learn to ride first, and then learn how to ride a polo pony, because if you can't ride it well, you won't be able to turn it during a game and end up looking rather silly. Trotting you must learn to rise, cantering sitting down. You can't play it left handed as all players play with their right hand, and you could end up killing someone! In order to learn polo, you will have to grab a weighted stick to get your shoulder, elbow and wrist strong enough to play. Your polo pony is only going to neck reign. Take the weighted stick with you whenever riding as it is good practice. Then progress to low goal polo.

In the polo World of low grade polo clubs, people are happy playing chukkas just a few times a week. It's down to earth and a healthy environment to learn in. They also through plenty of parties and get-togethers. The usual situation is a get-together arriving with three to four polo ponies from a field, groomed up and put into a sheep lorry for a game. And on the other side of the coin, you'll get people with lots of money who are really trying to break into the polo world; they will buy a rather sharp horse box, groom, an unscuffed Land Rover and immaculately clean boots. If you are rich, then you are most likely to start at the top, there are lots of people that teach polo well, **Johnny Halls** for instance is very good at his game. They tend to get bored of low grade polo rather quickly and move onto high

grade rather soon. At low grade level, it doesn't matter much as you're just learning the ropes.

For novices, several Clubs that teach polo spring immediately to mind. HAM Polo Club has been family run and known for its friendly environment since formed in 1926. Only eight miles away from Hyde Park Corner, it is one of the UK's oldest polo clubs, and a good choice to learn the sport near London. Marcus Hancock runs a good one too in Surrey - 01784 434 212. Big tutors ride 30 minutes, then polo lessons on ground for 30 minutes, manoeuvres then go on horse. Someone once said to become a good player, go never go on horse without a stick – very true! The Blue Book by the HPA is good also worth looking at.

Depending on your dedication you could be playing in 3 weeks. You will be spending hours and hours on a wooden horse, in a cage with slanting boards long enough for you to have a reach in directions as you bash ball after ball. The good polo pony will know more about polo than you do. The game will go to the left, and the pony will go to the left, if you don't follow you'll probably fall off! Your average player is almost glued to their saddle from the top of knee to groin.

What to wear

Don't wear jeans, as the seam is rough. It will add to the soreness of your legs the following day. Also wear shoes with the heel and good socks. During your learning stage (before you get kitted out), an inexpensive alternative to big named polo trousers are baker's trousers, available online or through a catering catalogue. They are made of tough white material, and have a flat seam. It doesn't matter what you are wearing above the waist too much, apart from insuring the use of a helmet with chin strap, preferably with a face guard. Helmets come in various guises: peak caps, round jobs, etc. If you have a bad back, be sure to wear an elasticised back support.

If you like the game, you want good trousers, chaps, knee pads, elbow pads and boots for your ankles. You do not need spurs. You will eventually buy sticks but initially borrow.

Polo Team

In a polo team comprised of four (or three in arena polo, depending on the space), the weakest player is Number One, who is at the front being Forward with Number 2. Number Three is the Pivot Man and Number 4, if the goal defender / long hitter.

There are also two mounted umpires on the ground and a referee, usually in the stands; a time keeper; and two goal judges – one based behind each goal, signalling scores with a flag.

Making Your Own Team

If you are setting up your own team for High Goal Polo, you should aim to get a good name and patron behind you, and he'll usually wind up being the Number One, with the other players being a number of professionals depending on what league you are playing in. The best professionals to source are from abroad the Argentineans (the Argies), the Colombians, the Peruvians, the Americans, the Australians, and the New Zealanders. When they come over, they will expect their patrons to buy their horses and pay them anything between £500 and upwards of £1000 a week. Horses can cost anything from £2,000 to £50,000 depending on the time of the year, the horse involved, and what competitions they are in for.

Chukka

Periods of play are called chukkas. A chukka is seven minutes plus 30 seconds overtime if the ball is still in play. There are three minutes between chukkas for changing ponies, and five minutes rest at half time. And you have one pony per chukka. But I have known 4 people with 7 ponies. On a 6 chukka match, you will change every chukka. If there are no goals scored during the game, extra chukkas are played.

Handicaps

Introduced to England and India in 1910, a good handicap is widely considered a passport to the world. Players start at a handicap of minus two and can reach ten goals depending on their skill and dedication. The Hurlingham Polo Association designates handicaps from the 2,000+ UK polo players. With the advantage of great horses and Polo Manager, R Winnie Ferguson, Prince Charles played for an enormous amount of time at a handicap of 4, which takes a huge amount of concentration. In a low goal team, the number of handicaps are added up, divided by six and multiplied by four.

Your Polo Stick

Your polo stick is 49.5 to 62 inches, depending on how long your arms are and the height of the pony. In elephant polo it is anything from 97 to 105 inches. Both types of the sport use a normal polo ball. In arena polo, red bamboo sticks are preferred as they are easier to see.

In your first match, start walking, never connecting to the ball. Because even though the odds are your horse will get you to the ball, the chances of you hitting the ball are steep.

Stick Chicks & Grooms

Ponies can be changed before, during or after a chukka, will gallop off the side rings and this is where polo groupies come into their own where they stand waiting. Attractive girls with sticks are all good, but you would rather have a groom as they are more efficient. So you will ride over crying "stick stick stick!" and they'll hand you a new stick. After the game you need to find the mallet head to the shattered shaft in the field to get it glued back together again as they're terribly expensive. They must be back ten feet from the line that delineates the edge of the polo ground, or if you're lucky the grounds will have a wooden edging on it.

Your Pony

Your pony is an animal between thirteen and sixteen hands high depending on your height. The English have documented polo pony breeding since 1893. Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses cross breeds have been incredibly popular. Thoroughbreds and Criollo horses from Argentina are the best breeds for the sport. It should be fast, fearless, and not afraid of mallets flying around.

Your Pony's Health

Your main problem with them is that they can go lame. When ponies jar their legs, they get splints. There are vets who can keep them going come hell or high water. You really don't want play them too often on Phenylbutazone, known more widely as bute which numbs their pain. Occasional use of the chemical is only advised if you have a competition you really want to win, as over a prolonged period of time, it does the pony's health no good. You cannot play a blind polo pony because it can't see in one of other eye.

Training your Pony

There are a lot of ponies are that thoroughbred but they are not fast enough for flat racing or big enough for national hunt, that with training, can be perfect for polo. It is a great idea to buy a pony straight off a raise course, as they are used to being with lots of other animals.

After acquiring a racehorse, you will want to break them into a bit as they are used to going, but not stopping. You can accomplish this with sugaring the bit or dipping it in honey - the horse will soon get used to it. A normal horse has one bit in its mouth, a polo pony has two. If its jaw is too tight, you will use a bridal without a bit. Neck reigning is a matter of laying the reigns across the neck to get the animal to turn, in appose to pulling the reigns left or right. When training, do not focus on trotting because it's a difficult speed to hit a ball. Instead, go from walk to canter which is not too difficult. Then get its back used to a heavier saddle and player as it is accustomed to lighter saddles and jockeys. After that, the horse must get used to having long legs riding it - they will find it surprising at first! And you can play polo with pony with a snaffle if it's a very light mouthed animal. But because they get very excited, you want to have control. So a pelhem, which is a bit with a longer leg on the outside with an extra reign will force the bit forward. Or you could do it with a double bridal which has two reigns and you may also loop the slightly longer reins underneath the girth to give playback so you can stop anything.

They get used to neck reigning through schooling. Then you teach them how to ride off which they love. Teaching the pony to ride against somebody is difficult. At this point of tough training you are well advised to wear not only chaps and knee protectors, but a helmet with face-guard too.

Tips on buying a Pony

As you get hooked on polo, you will find yourself encouraged to buy a pony. Never buy one without having it vetted! Polo pony dealers are not dissimilar to other horse dealers. The only thing that can stop an able bodied polo pony from playing is if it has only one working eye. So the first thing you do is flap your hand in front of their eyes. If they don't blink, do not even bother! Then run hand underneath the leg - if there is any heat in the leg, just walk away. In the hoof, if there is any heat or smell, leave it. You want an animal that has been at rest. Then feel the shin bones, and search for a bump - the splint. It means it has been hit, and hard enough to crack the bone. This can be dealt with through pinning, but forget it - it will be off duty and not playing polo that season as it takes time to heal. If the hoofs are clean, they should smell fine. If it does not smell right, it could be bursitis. Many problems in a pony can be overcome, but in all, you do not want to spend thousands of pounds on the mend whilst it is out of season.

More Ponies

So you have a pony, you'll soon need another. On Low grade polo, you can survive with two. Just swap each chukka. Then it goes wrong and you need three to four ponies. You'll then need your own groom, paying him and giving accommodation from £500 per week plus a car, box and accommodation. The current cost at livery is approximately £100 a week and that is with you doing the exercising.

Watch out for..

They are various people who are very good at lifting their knee when riding off. As a novice, you will want to look out for this. As you could be riding along, he will level with your knee on the saddle, he will lift his right knee and you will discover yourself on the ground. And this is legitimate

Rules

There are various rules, like crossing. You can't cross somebody when they are taking a goal, The rules are very basic. The Federation of International Polo produces the International Rules of Polo through a cooperative agreement with the Hurlingham Polo Association, the Asociación Argentina de Polo and the United States Polo Association. The HPA drew up the first set of formal British rules in 1874, many of which are still used today.

The Polo Year:

March: Cowdray Park and the Guards' club start the new season with practice games and matches.

April: Cirencester's starting date depends on the date of the Badminton Horse Trials – no chukkas before Badminton is a rule.

May: The Queen's Cup at Guards', end May to early June. The first major high-goal tournaments of the British season.

June: Ascot Week Tournament at the Guards' during the Royal Ascot week.

Warwickshire Cup, at Cirencester, late June. Preliminary rounds are played at Cowdray and Windsor.

July: Peak polo month. British Open championship for the Gold Cup at Cowdray, in the first two weeks of July. International Day at Windsor on the last Sunday. This is the biggest event of the season.

September: Cowdray Park Tournament.