



Opposite: Prince Charles (left) next to Robert Graham, Julian Hipwood and Guy Wildenstein's team 'Les Diables Bleus' in 1982. This page: Robert Graham

HAP SHARP INVITED ROBERT TO RUN HIS POLO OPERATION IN THE UK, AND HIS FARM IN ARGENTINA

The polo community was saddened to hear of the untimely death, from natural causes, of Robert Graham on 7 August. Robert, a former six-goal player, was born on 7 March 1952 in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and was brought up with his brother and sister firstly in Scotland and later in Gloucestershire. His early equestrian career centred round the local branch of the Pony Club, where he had his first taste of polo. Thoroughly hooked, he asked his father if he could put off entering a career in the army for a year in order to play. Graham senior agreed and Robert enjoyed a great season, winning several trophies along the way.

USA patron Michael Butler spotted the keen young player and offered him a place on his team. Robert approached his father again with a request for a second year in polo. He agreed that Robert could take up the offer of a place with another American patron, Hap Sharp – his future father-in-law – and the army lost him forever.

Hap Sharp invited Robert to run not just his polo operation in the UK, but also his farm in Argentina where his ponies were bred and trained. By this time Robert had fallen in love with Hap's daughter Betsy and asked if she would go with him to Argentina – as his wife. Hap wasn't keen on the idea, Betsy being

only 18 years old, but Robert's family were supportive. The two families met in London and Robert's mother worked out how a wedding could be arranged in the short time before Robert was due in Argentina. She organised with the vicar that the lengthy reading of the banns could be waived and on Christmas Day 1973 Betsy and Robert married in Gloucester Cathedral.

Winters were spent at the farm in Argentina and then it was back to the UK for the European polo season. Hap Sharp's polo team, Greenhill Farm, was based at Cowdray, but they entered tournaments at other clubs – winning the Warwickshire Cup at Cirencester amongst others. 1975 was a memorable year for many reasons. The couple had to leave Argentina due to the serious problem of kidnap gangs targeting anyone who looked as though a ransom could be paid for them.

Robert and Betsy headed for Florida where Hap was taking a team into the Sunshine League. They won several cups before heading to Spain, the only polo destination in Europe where 25-goal polo was played. They took home the King's Cup and several others. Back in the UK, Greenhill Farm won the Cowdray Park Gold Cup and the team finished a brilliant year by winning the Copa

de Oro in Sotogrande. They played many seasons in the early days of Sotogrande, winning the Copa de Oro twice more.

Robert continued to play in several notable teams, in 1982 reaching the final of the Cowdray Park Gold Cup with Guy Wildenstein's Les Diables Bleus alongside Prince Charles and Julian Hipwood, losing to Southfields 7-6 in extra time. He later became a Grade-A umpire, the UK having become the first country to employ professional umpires for high-goal matches. He succeeded Brigadier Arthur Douglas-Nugent as chief umpire of the UK in 2003, a position he held until his death.

Betsy and Robert bought the farm in Argentina from Hap Sharp and continued to breed and produce polo ponies assisted by English player Will Healy, manager of Ham Polo Club. The ranch has become a favoured destination for many young English players over the years as a place to improve their polo during the UK off-season.

Robert is survived by his wife Betsy and their daughter Vanessa, born in 1984, who is now finance controller for Cowdray Park Polo Club. Robert also served on the committee that runs the Club, and will be greatly missed at Cowdray Park as well as in the wider polo world.