

FT Polo



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Saturday June 14 2014

Hopes soar for the high- goal season

Tight contests expected, writes *Bob Sherwood*

The English high-goal polo season promises to be among the most electric for years. New teams, including two all-British professional sides, a new showpiece fixture and an international test match against the might of Argentina will be highlights in the weeks ahead.

High-goal – polo played at the highest level – is more competitive than ever, with the world's top-rated 10-goal (the highest handicapped) players in action. The first high-goal tournament, the Cartier Queen's Cup at Guards, will culminate this weekend with aficionados keen to see if any team can upset patron Lyndon Lea's Zacara team, which triumphed in top

English tournaments last season.

Attention will move to Cowdray Park for the Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup on July 16 to decide the British Open title, billed as the premier high-goal polo tournament in the world. Zacara, featuring 10-goaler Facundo Pieres, will again be a prime contender after beating Dubai, the team that boasts Adolfo Cambiaso, the world number one, in one of the most exciting finals of recent times.

Liz Higgins, spokeswoman for Cowdray Park, believes matches could be tighter than ever. "Everyone's pony power is much greater these days which makes it harder to predict a winner in the Gold Cup. Lots of matches were really close last year –

Winning side:
the England polo
team played
South America in
the St Regis
International Cup
at Cowdray Park
in May. The
visitors were
defeated 11.5
goals to 8

Tony Ramirez

often within a single goal. And it will be just as tight this year."

Cowdray Park will host a new fixture in the polo calendar, albeit one held in an atmosphere of sadness. The first match of the Gold Cup will be the Carlos Gracida Memorial Trophy, in memory of the Mexican 10-goaler who was a star of English polo lawns for decades. The 53-year-old died this year in Florida after he sustained head injuries in a polo accident.

On July 26 the England team will face Argentina in a much-anticipated Coronation Cup on Audi International Day at Guards polo club. The rise of the England team has been a feature of the highest level of the game in recent seasons, with England having

won the showcase International Day match for five straight years.

England, captained by Luke Tomlinson, one of the UK's two 7-goalers, beat the South America team in the St Regis International Cup that kicked off the English season this year and defeated a young Argentina side 10-9 on their home ground in Palermo, Buenos Aires, in the Copa de las Naciones in April.

The Coronation Cup will be a tougher challenge, because the England side, yet unnamed, will be up against both Cambiaso and Pieres in the 26-goal Argentina team.

After the English season, the polo world moves to Sotogrande, the luxury residential area in Andalucia,

where the Santa Maria polo club hosts the Land Rover International Tournament throughout August. It is the biggest tournament in Europe and the event of choice for some top patrons, including James Packer.

Some senior figures in the English game acknowledge privately that the success of Sotogrande has in effect killed off higher-level English polo in August. However, it is not the tournament that will surprise, but plans for development of the sport in Spain.

The Santa Maria club is planning expanding its appeal as a luxury leisure destination, creating a complex of music venues, bars and shops

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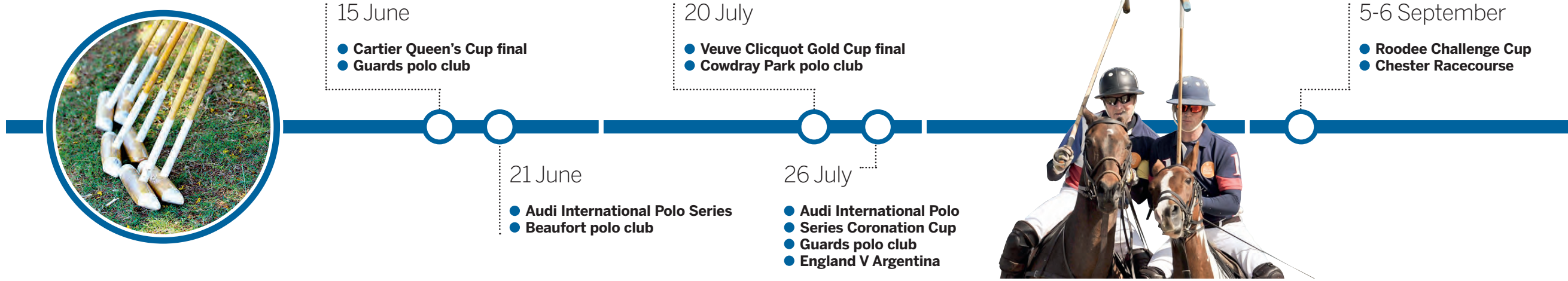
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Major UK polo fixtures 2014



Players look twice at clones as breeders seek to recreate star ponies

Benedict Mander reports on a controversial reproduction enterprise in Argentina

Ask any high-goal polo player what lies behind their success, and they will usually admit that the quality of their horses has as much to do with it as their skill. But with the search for the perfect mount becoming increasingly advanced, cloning is attracting growing interest among breeders.

Finding a horse that combines the speed and acceleration of a thoroughbred race horse is difficult, leading many to investigate whether cloning is a viable way of preserving the genetics of the best horses into future generations.

On the expanses of Argentina's pampas grasslands, cloning techniques are being developed by Adolfo Cambiaso, regarded by many as the world's best player.

"Cloning is growing by leaps and bounds here," says Adrian Mutto, the molecular biologist in charge of cloning for Mr Cambiaso's Crestview Genetics, one of two companies pioneering the technique in the South American country.

Crestview was founded in the US in 2008 but relocated to Argentina after catching the eye of Mr Cambiaso, who is backed by investor Ernesto Gutiérrez.

Although the first horse was cloned by Italian scientists in 2003, cloning



Quality genes: but cloned foals are expensive

polo ponies has taken off only recently, with Crestview having cloned about 35 horses. Those 35 have produced almost 70 foals, while another 30 cloned foals are expected to be born over the coming year.

The plan is for Crestview to be a kind of horse factory, creating a bank of clones of some of the finest horses in the world and then selling their embryos. The first official auction of these embryos is expected this year. Last year buyers paid about \$70,000 for the embryo of a clone of one of Mr Cambiaso's star horses.

Cloning is legal in Argentina, and at an institutional level it has gained widespread acceptance worldwide. Major international breeding associations accept the registration of cloned horses and clones have been permitted to participate in equestrian sports in the Olympic Games since 2012.

Mr Cambiaso played polo with a clone for the first time last year in the Palermo Open in Buenos Aires, polo's most prestigious tournament. Mr Mutto says this year Mr Cambiaso will play only with clones.

"No one can assure that a cloned animal is going to be as good a player as the original," says Mr Mutto, who explains that in general players clone horses so that they can carry on breeding from the clones with the same quality of genetics as their star horses, rather than with the intention of playing on them.

Perhaps the main barrier to cloning is the high cost, as the process requires a complex laboratory with a team of biologists. With much still to be learnt, techniques remain inefficient and a very low percentage of embryos that are developed go on to be born.

Cloning is cheaper in Argentina than elsewhere, costing around \$100,000 – 120,000 to clone a horse,

according to Mr Mutto. The average high-goal polo pony costs about half as much for a player to buy.

There is resistance to cloning among most players and breeders. Guillermo Buchanan, who runs Argentina's breeding association and says he has a neutral attitude, estimates that of more than 600 members, no more than 30 of them may be adopting the technique.

Most prefer traditional breeding methods, he says, questioning whether cloning will have the revolutionary impact on breeding polo ponies as the "embryo transfer system", which became popular in Argentina about 15 years ago.

A mare's pregnancy can last 11 months, so the system enables the best playing mares to yield foals via surrogates many times, while continuing to be ridden in competitive play.

"Embryo transfers have been a huge success in Argentina," says Mr Buchanan, who says that in the Palermo Open, most horses used by the top teams were born through embryo transfers. But although the technique has become more widespread, the numbers of foals born has stabilised as supply matches demand. Up to 7,000 horses are born by embryo transfer each year.

The success of cloning in Argentina, where the breeding of polo ponies is more advanced than elsewhere, will determine whether it spreads further afield such as to the UK.

"In many people's minds it is playing with God, and just going too far," says Nick Wood, managing director of PoloStudbook, a directory of UK polo ponies, who thinks cloning is "a fashion, but an expensive one".

"People [in the UK] want to try it to see if they really can get that double, but I think they'll find out pretty quickly that it's unlikely," says Mr Wood, pointing out that there is more to the quality of a horse than its breeding.

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‘Polo is tough and demanding – like playing chess on horseback’

Opinion
Clare Milford Haven

The British polo season is in full swing. Polo fields up and down the country – if not waterlogged by recent downpours – are echoing with the thundering of hooves, as eight polo ponies, with players atop, career across the ground at high speed trying to slot a small white ball through the goalposts with the swing of a bamboo stick.

Although the sport is increasing in popularity, it remains much maligned in some quarters.

Polo is widely regarded as a sport for the elite and the spoilt. It is portrayed in glossy magazines and by reputation (aided and abetted by *Polo*, Jilly Cooper's jodhpur-ripping novel) as a sport played for show and for effect, with the sole purpose of allowing male players to seduce the female spectators after the final chukka.

Apparently, it is played only by royalty, dissolute aristocrats, playboys and handsome South Americans – and it is not really that difficult. Pop on a pair of white jeans, hop on a horse, swing a stick and bingo! You're a polo player.

Let us set the record straight.

First, polo should come with a health warning. Not because it is one of the most dangerous sports on the planet, with horses galloping at speeds of up to 35mph and with players and horses crashing into you, "hooking" your stick – a move to prevent you from hitting the ball by blocking your swing with their stick – and doing everything they can to prevent you scoring a goal. But because, on a par with the purest opium or the finest bottle of Dom Pérignon, polo is highly addictive.

So addictive, in fact, that many players have faced financial ruin.

There is always one more pony to buy, one more team to put together, one more trophy to win.

Polo is one of the most high octane sports available to man, and it is also difficult.

It is tough, it is demanding and it is physically challenging, requiring commitment, determination, courage and quick thinking. It is like playing chess on horseback.

There are plays and moves you

‘You won’t survive five minutes if you roll out of a nightclub at 6am on match day’

must make within a split second using anticipation and skill as your tools.

You must have your wits about you and 100 per cent focus for at least an hour. You have to be fit and healthy. You can't lead a playboy lifestyle. You won't survive five minutes if you roll out of a nightclub at 6am on a match day.

But that is not to say that the sport is sober and conventional. Far from it.

Polo attracts highly amusing and unusual characters from all walks of life who share a love of horses and competitive team sport.

Many team owners – known as patrons – are successful, self-made businesspeople who relish the adrenalin fix of a game as the perfect antidote to the confines of corporate life.

Clare Milford Haven: setting the record straight



Clare Milford Haven is a polo player and ambassador for Jaeger-LeCoultre

It is the ultimate pro-am sport for those happy to step outside their comfort zone. It is also refreshingly non-sexist, because men and women can play together and are handicapped equally.

Of course, you need money, because you must buy and look after more than one horse. But there are different entry levels to the sport depending on the depth of your pockets, from low goal to the ultimate – Champions League-equivalent – high goal, where a patron can play with the leading professionals.

And yes, many of the pros are dashing, dynamic young men of all nationalities with film-star looks who have the same effect on women when they take their sweaty shirts off as the buff guy in the old Diet Coke adverts. But they are also sublime sportsmen.

Most have worked their way up from the bottom: from mucking out stables and being habitually bucked off young horses to playing on England's Elysian fields – at Cowdray Park polo club or Guards polo club in Windsor Great Park.

An avid polo player himself, Winston Churchill said: "A polo handicap is the best passport to the world".

He was right. Polo can take you to places you have only dreamt of visiting.

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It's hard work, but living a dream

Interview

Pablo Pieres
Team: *Alegría*

The Argentine player tells *Benedict Mander* about his family, his ambitions and why his countrymen are so successful on the pitch

My father [Paul Pieres] first put me on a horse when I was three or four years old. He played polo in many different countries, and we always went with him. I've been playing since I was really young... if you don't do that it's impossible to reach this level.

I've been playing professionally since I was 18. I'm 27 now and have been playing in the Argentine Open for the past three years... the best tournament in the world.

The money I earn I spend on horses. More than 60 per cent [of success] is about what kind of horse you have. Last year we did well in the Argentine Open and I played a nice tournament, mostly because they were the best horses I've had.

How much of your time is devoted to polo?

It takes up a lot of time, so I try to have fun and relax because it's a hard sport. I have three grooms who have come with me from Argentina [for the English season]. They work the horses every morning at 5.30am and in the afternoons at 4pm. I try to be in the barn with them all day drinking *mate* [a Latin American tea] and watching the horses. But it's important to play [other sports such as] golf or tennis. If I don't have injuries I try to do that, unless my body is telling me to take a break.

This year from January to April I was in Palm Beach, then I spent a month in Argentina. I'm in England now for the Queen's Cup and the British Open, and will go to France. Then in September, back to Argentina for the Triple Crown. I may get 15 days off all year, but I'm living a dream.

Why are Argentines so good at polo?



Rising star: Pablo Pieres plays with *Alegría* at the Argentine Open in Buenos Aires

Getty

Top handicap dynasty continues to rule

Pablo Pieres may be one of the best players in Argentina but he is not the best in his family, writes **Benedict Mander**.

He has a handicap of nine – and so do 12 other Argentine players, one of whom is his cousin, Nicolás Pieres. Nicolás's brothers, Gonzalo and Facundo, have reached the highest handicap of 10 – a distinction claimed by only five other active players in Argentina.

Many consider 28-year-old Facundo to be the world's best player, a position monopolised for years by Adolfo Cambiaso, who is approaching the end of his professional career.

The exceptional achievements of the Pieres family are largely thanks to the efforts of Gonzalo Pieres – father of Gonzalo Jnr, Facundo and Nicolás.

Gonzalo Snr, who had a 10-goal handicap, is credited with

professionalising the game and helping raise its profile globally. He was also a successful polo pony breeder.

With the help of Kerry Packer, the late Australian patron – who once ranked as one of the 100 richest people in the world – Gonzalo Snr founded Ellerstina, the team that has become a fixture in the final of the Palermo Open in Argentina, polo's most prestigious tournament.

Mostly it's the horses. It takes six years before polo ponies are ready to play. In Argentina you have everything in place – the farms, the people, everything you need to raise polo ponies. It's a big advantage over the guys in England or the US.

Does Argentina dominate the sport? It would be nice if... the sport were [more balanced] like football or golf. But it's hard... because it's so difficult to keep horses. It would be

'If you don't start young, it's impossible to reach this level'

amazing if it were like football where you just need a pair of shoes and a ball. That's the frustrating thing about polo.

There are 14 Pieres registered with handicaps by the Argentine polo association. Is there much competition within the family? Yes. My cousins Facundo and Gonzalo have [the highest] handicap of 10, while Nicolás and I are on 9. They are all amazing people – of

Hopes soar for the high-goal season

Continued from page 1

designed to appeal to consumers not necessarily interested in polo.

"In the past, we have only opened the fields when polo was being played," says Luis Estrada, chairman. "This year we are going to open every day for 35 days. People will come regardless of the polo."

But the club plans to go further with a second phase of development, to turn this corner of Andalucia into the equestrian capital of Europe. It will invest €1.5bn in hotels, villas, shopping malls and equestrian sports venues and is in negotiations with luxury resort developers from the Gulf, China and the US.

Mr Estrada expects approval for the first phase after the summer and forecasts that work will begin in 2016: "Our vision, adding showjumping and dressage, is to turn the Santa Maria site from one of the world's most significant polo clubs into the equestrian capital of Europe."

The plan is an example of how polo is growing as a lifestyle attraction for wealthy people globally. Clubs are expanding in China and Dubai, countries with aspirations to raise the level of polo in their tournaments.

David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association, the sport's governing body in the UK, is aware of the threat. "Emerging countries will try to attract the best professional [players and patrons]," he says. "[Emerging tournaments] are not there to play 10-goal for the next 30 years. And even if they think they are, the pros will advise them otherwise. The pros drive the development of polo. They are trying to grow the market for their product."

But the English season is rooted in the high-goal circuit and there are not many countries where conditions are right for polo in June and July. Mr Woodd adds that things are looking up in English polo.

He points to three new teams and new patrons, including the King Power team of Aiyawatt "Top" Srivadhanaprabha. And both the Queen's Cup and the Gold Cup unusually feature all-pro British teams in Fox & Hounds and Halcyon Gallery, which add a different dimension to the matches and prove popular with spectators. There will be plenty for the crowds to cheer this season.

Sport regroups after decade of decline under Chávez

Venezuela

Clubs enjoy revival as new generation resolves to keep the game alive, writes *Andres Schipani*

Staring into the lush hills overlooking Caracas, Jorge Ruiz del Vizo remembers what happened five years ago. The socialist government of the late President Hugo Chávez, scourge of the country's private sector, took over Mr del Vizo's estate, which had a polo field.

"The army arrived and took over my *finca* [ranch], my horses," he says. "They never gave an excuse for the expropriation, let alone paying a penny in compensation."

The Monte Sacro estate, located about 100m from Caracas, once belonged to US magnate Nelson A. Rockefeller. But it was Mr del Vizo who built one of what was then a handful of private polo fields. He did this in a country that is home to a meagre 50 players, who struggle to make headway in one of the most hostile scenarios for the world's most exclusive sport.

"In the early 2000s, soon after Chávez took office, people started to lower their profiles and slowly, many wealthy polo lovers moved from playing in the Club de Campo in Caracas to their *fincas*... to hide away," says Mr del Vizo, a one-goal handicap player who heads the recently revived Venezuelan polo commission.

The government's rhetoric against personal wealth saw the number of players dwindle at the Club de Campo, with its two fields on the outskirts of Caracas, not far from a slum.

Since Mr Chávez's death in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro, has presided over deteriorating economic conditions and violent street protests, which have taken a further toll on the sport.

Some matches have been cancelled at the Club de Campo amid rising political tension. And costs are rising



Victor Vargas: part of Venezuela's polo-playing elite

steeply: in the mid 2000s, players say, a Venezuelan could buy and ship an Argentine mare for low handicap tournaments to Caracas for between \$3,000 and \$6,000. Today, higher shipping costs tied to Venezuela's currency devaluations and complicated system of currency controls have increased that price to between \$10,000 and \$12,000, forcing many local players to breed Venezuelan ponies.

"Polo dropped in frequency and quality. Teams were less willing to buy horses and invite professional players as the local currency lost its value," says Carlos Zuloaga, a veteran player of the Club de Campo.

In recent years, he says, polo was played for only a couple of months a year in Caracas, while it had stopped altogether in places such as Maracaibo and Valencia. Some Venezuelans

with deep pockets decided to establish their own polo premises in an enclave of private ranches with polo facilities in the northern coastal town of Tucacas, on the Caribbean coast where the land is flat and the weather unbeatable.

"The description sounds like this is the Caribbean version of Spain's Sotogrande, but the truth is that the town looks more like somewhere in rural Zimbabwe," says a businessman and low-handicapped polo player who has played there. "But inside the gates, the estates could rival Palm Beach."

The most emblematic of those ranches is Agualinda, the Venezuelan home of the Lechuza Caracas team, owned by Victor Vargas, the multimillionaire and polo fanatic.

The team, which plays

around the world, lost 21 polo ponies in the 2009 US Open, reportedly to accidental selenium poisoning.

Even if the polo scene in Tucacas goes against everything Mr Chávez's "Bolívarian Revolution" stood for, Mr Zuloaga feels "it was too hidden away for Chávez to be bothered by it."

In Venezuela's remaining polo pockets, there is a determination to keep the sport alive. Last year, the Club de Campo noticed a turnaround.

Some attributed the change to a generational shift. Young people who had grown up accustomed to Mr Chávez's ideology and the fear that it inspired simply started to shrug off those fears after the president's death.

"In Caracas, polo was reborn thanks to the sons or relatives of former polo players who stopped playing a few years ago," says Mr del Vizo. "These are youngsters who do not have enough money to buy their own *fincas*, but they are working professionals from relatively wealthy families who can afford to get organised, chip in money to buy and keep horses, pay green fees and grooms, and now they have teams of between three and four handicap goals."

This year 44 players faced each other in more than 100 matches from January to April, and the club managed to bring in Argentine referees, trainers, and professional players. Some say that the game now even attracts some rookies from the *bolibourgeoisie* – a term coined to describe a breed of business magnates that thrived under Mr Chávez.

"Polo took off in such a way that I feel it is unstoppable now. We are not going to have enough fields to play next year," says Mr del Vizo.

For Alex Ardila, a 30-year-old and part of the new generation of Venezuelan polo players, one "has to keep the lowest profile possible" because of political polarisation, violence and lack of security.

For him, the issue is simple: polo helps players "disconnect" from Venezuela's "grim reality" and its problems. "It is like oxygen."



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Broadcasting widens options for greater audience appeal

Televised matches attract interest but internet may be a better outlet, writes *Shannon Bond*

On a recent Saturday in New Jersey, spectators ringed an expanse of hoof-torn turf, sipping champagne and taking in views of the Manhattan skyline at the Veuve Clicquot Polo Classic.

The elaborate hats and bottles of bubbly lived up to polo's image: a sport for the well-heeled and well-connected elite. "When you poll the average person, it's [about] royalty, and it's clothing and lifestyle," says Jim Rossi, chief marketing officer of the US Polo Association (USPA), the governing body for US polo.

But polo is changing. Enthusiasm among women and the newly wealthy in emerging markets such as China, India and eastern Europe is driving growth. The New Jersey event, featuring star Argentine player Nacho Figueras, was part of a mission by organisers to increase polo's visibility and broaden its appeal in parts of the world where entrepreneurs and celebrities are funding teams, from Silicon Valley in the US to Dubai.

One approach to raising polo's profile is to make matches available on television and online. In Argentina, where polo enjoys the largest mainstream audience, events are regularly broadcast on television. ESPN, the cable sports network, airs polo on its Spanish-language channels in Latin America, including live broadcasts of the Argentine Triple Crown.

But elsewhere it can be difficult to watch top-level matches. Sky Sports in the UK airs some competitions in agreement with the Hurlingham Polo

Association, which governs the sport in the UK, Ireland and other countries, but it does not have a regular slot.

Efforts to show polo in the US were piecemeal until last year, when the USPA, which has about 5,000 members, created a professional marketing wing with a \$2m budget.

Following broadcasts of 2013's US Open and Westchester Cup and the 2014 CV Whitney Cup on NBC's sports channel, the 2014 US Open final will air on NBC's main network on June 21 – the first major network broadcast of a polo match in more than a decade.

"We thought it was important to have some regularity to it," says Mr Rossi. "Television does make the sport appear more mainstream. There's a lot to like about it: equestrian interest, extreme sport interest, an exciting platform for engagement with sponsors."

Mr Rossi estimates that the combined viewership from broadcast and streaming video of USPA events in 2013 was about 300,000 – "probably larger than the live audience for all the events combined". Richard Caleel, president of the Federation of International Polo, which represents the polo associations of more than 80 countries, estimates there are about 25,000 registered players worldwide.

Polo has been boosted by the popularity of other equestrian sports, including the US Triple Crown of horseracing. "Polo is growing in popularity across the US and fits in with NBC's existing sports line-up of premier equestrian events," said Gary Quinn of NBC Sports when the USPA deal was announced. "We see a strong opportu-



The Polo Classic in New Jersey aimed to increase the game's visibility

nity to bring new fans to polo and expand viewership of a highly desirable audience to the NBC networks."

Televising polo is challenging: cameras must follow eight riders galloping in pursuit of a small ball across a field measuring 274m by 146m – the size of three football pitches. Cameras mounted on flying drones capture the action, speed and strategy of the game.

"What television has done is help to bring the action, the thrill of the game to an audience that has possibly never seen it before," says Mr Rossi. "Our goal is to make it a more regular part of the TV schedule."

However, not everyone is convinced that television is the best tool to reach a broader audience.

"Broadcasting is only worthwhile in Argentina," says Roderick Vere Nicoll, publisher of the UK's Hurlingham Media. "The Argentines are very well educated about polo. It's the only place in the world where somebody will pay for rights for games." The USPA would not comment on the terms of its broadcasting rights contract with NBC.

Mr Vere Nicoll also notes that while games in Argentina are aired live and replayed at night and the next day, the matches shown in the US are delayed. This year's US Open final took place in April but is being broadcast two months later.

He sees the internet as a better outlet and has devoted resources to making matches available to stream and replay on his website and a YouTube channel, The Polo Club.

"The great thing about the internet is that you can watch it live, but the important thing is to have it on replay so that if it's not convenient to watch it at 3pm British time, you can watch it at night," he says.

Mr Vere Nicoll, himself a polo player, acknowledges the sport "has a bad rap" that will be difficult to change – but this does not reflect the reality of today's game, he says.

"The majority [of polo players] are entrepreneurs. It's all new money and mostly business people. They love the aggression and the teamwork . . . it does have an allure and an attraction."

A jolly good networking event – by invitation only

British Polo Day promotes UK brands to the global super-rich. By *Feergus O'Sullivan*

There is much more to British Polo Day than meets the eye. Photos of some of the 36 events hosted by this five-year-old start-up give an impression of summery ease. Women with sharp cheekbones pose with champagne flutes. Important-looking men rub shoulders with royals. There are grand houses, chandeliers – and the occasional discreet brand placement in the background.

It might not look like a British brand empire in the making but that is what British Polo Day aspires to be, and it is expanding fast.

Founded by Edward Olver, a former Household Cavalry officer and Deutsche Bank trader, the company's events have been staged in 16 countries. Its first US event took place in Los Angeles this month and more are planned in Australia, South Africa, Brazil and South Korea.

Events are by invitation only with between 100 and 5,000 guests attending. They feature competitive polo, lunches, receptions and charity fundraising. But their primary purpose is to link the horse-loving international elite with the British luxury brands that sponsor the events – albeit in a sociable environment. What looks like a jolly day out is a networking event.

Mr Olver's ambitions go beyond this. He envisions British Polo Day events, and the networks they forge, as a platform through which British companies build close relations with prime movers in emerging markets.

As well as promoting an internationally marketable image of Britishness based on the traditions of the aristocratic past, the events help Britons improve their international sensitivities. As Mr Olver puts it: "I'm not running polo events, I'm building a platform for elite engagement in emerging markets. Many westerners fail at this because they

are preachy, arrogant and not tolerant or understanding of the challenges that exist in a diverse world."

The company's business model rests on sponsorship revenue from brands including Land Rover, Justerini & Brooks, the wine merchants, and Hackett, the apparel company.

While British Polo Day expects turnover of £2m this year, its ambitions depend on building trust and range rather than revenue. "We're not really in the mood for transacting," Mr Olver says. "We'll probably make a £6,000 profit this year. It's the platform we are aiming to build. There is no rush."

British Polo Day's belief in the status of British brands among global elites may seem optimistic but its attitude is supported by data.

In 2013, 28 per cent of Rolls-Royce sales were in China, while Burberry reported sales there jumped 20 per cent during 2012-13 from the previous financial year. Jaguar Land Rover's world sales increased by almost a fifth in 2013, with Chinese sales rising by almost a third.

Keith Pogson, Asia Pacific financial services leader at accountants Ernst & Young, says British luxury can play well in China. "The appeal is based on the concepts of heritage, ancestry and history. The big challenge is the austerity drive but in the mainland, British cars are still seen as very prestigious."

Britain's share of the luxury sector in emerging markets is held back by lack of connections and understanding of local business culture. A survey last year from Ledbury Research forecast sales for British luxury brands of £12.2bn in 2017 from £6.6bn in 2012. It noted that only 23 per cent of these brands had a presence in India and only 13 per cent in Brazil.

In this light, British Polo Day's emphasis on relationships makes sense.



A couple enjoy the fun at British Polo Day

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