



GREAT TEAMMATES

One of the keys to game strategist Alan L Corey Jr's successful career was his marriage to Patricia Grace, whose intuitive knowledge of horses made them a solid team both on and off the field, says his son Russell Corey

Rarely does a lifelong medical affliction lead to a distinguished sports career, yet it was precisely so with my father, Alan L Corey Jr. His chronic asthma introduced him to polo – a sport that left an indelible mark on his life, and created countless treasured memories for his family and the many friends with whom he shared the love of the sport.

My grandparents sent my father to the Aiken Preparatory School (APS) in 1930 – they thought the move from New York to the milder climate in South Carolina would benefit his breathing condition. Whether it achieved the intended health benefits is debatable, but it did introduce him to polo.

APS was founded by Louise Hitchcock, the wife of Thomas Hitchcock Sr, in 1916, for her son Francis. The Hitchcocks believed in a classical English education and the importance of a sporting life for young boys. In keeping with those founding beliefs, my father was introduced to polo – first on foot, then on bicycles and finally on horseback, acquiring the honour of bicycle-polo captain in 1931 and winning the APS bicycle-polo tournament that same year.

He really liked polo and showed promise as a player. During the summer, he would play at the Phipps and Hitchcock fields on Long Island three times a week with other keen young players. He played with Louise Hitchcock's Meadow Lark Polo Club, who often competed against Mrs David Iglehart's Sparrow Hawk Club. At the end of the summer, a junior tournament for the Thorn Memorial Cup was held at the Meadow Brook Club.

My grandfather, Alan L Corey Sr – a superb sportsman in his own right – had attended Yale and my father followed in his footsteps in 1936. It was the ideal place for him to continue his polo career, since it had facilities for both indoor and outdoor polo. In 1938, his Yale team won the Indoor Intercollegiate Tournament for the Townsend Cup, defeating West Point in the semi-final and Harvard in the final. They also won the Outdoor Eastern Intercollegiate Tournament for the Gerry Cup in 1939 and 1940, when my father was captain. My brother, Alan III, continued the family tradition, and captured the coveted Townsend Cup in 1964 and 1965 as team captain.

My father was fortunate to play polo during summer vacations at Meadow Brook, which was the centre of the sport in the United States from its inception in 1881 until 1954, when the Westbury facility closed and the Open Championship moved to Chicago. Not only did he have the opportunity to play with top-rated players from all over the world, but he could watch the matches that were played there and at the neighbouring clubs and private fields in the area. He attended as many games as possible, studying both the teamwork and individuals' moves. His diligent scholarship

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Opposite Sweethearts Alan L Corey Jr and Patricia Grace, in 1940

This page, from top Corey in 1947, before the East-West match; and (third from left) celebrating victory with the Bostwick Field team after the 1950 Open Championship – both at the Meadow Brook Club



and keen analysis of the game made him a wonderful strategist and teacher to many young players, including my brother and me. In 1939, my father, at that time rated a 4-goaler, had a breakthrough year, winning three Meadow Brook Club Tournaments: the Hempstead Cups (12-goal), the Autumn Plates (16-goal) and the Meadow Brook Club Cups (20-goal). In the last of these, he played back, behind his Yale classmate Bill Chisholm, Peter Grace and Tommy Hitchcock, who was considered the best player in the world. This was a pivotal moment in his career, as he learnt Hitchcock's simple strategies of moving the ball quickly to prevent your opponent from preparing a defence, and always hitting it towards the boards in your team's defensive end of the field and towards the goal in your team's offensive end.

Hitchcock also taught him how to be a good captain and team leader – he made his teammates a productive part of the team and his leadership led his young teammates to victory



This page, from top Corey (far left), with the Sands Point team, Tommy Hitchcock, Peter Grace and Bill Chisholm having won the 1939 Meadow Brook Club Cups; and (on left) with Henry Lewis, carrying the Monty Waterbury Cup, and Russell and Patricia Corey, at the Piping Rock Club, in 1956

against teams that were older and far more experienced. My father would carry Hitchcock's teamwork and leadership lessons with him. In 1940, after graduating from Yale and winning his first National Open Championship with the Gerry brothers on their Aknusti team, he married my mother, Patricia Grace. She, too, came from a polo family and became a very valuable teammate off the field and another important ingredient in my father's polo career. Raised among horse enthusiasts, she was an excellent rider in her own right, winning ribbons in shows and foxhunting

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in New York and Virginia. In the 1930s, she attended many National Open Championships and International matches at Meadow Brook with her father, William Russell Grace, after whom I am named. He was rated at 3-goals, and his family's club, the Great Neck Polo Club, became a member of the United States Polo Association in 1900. In addition to polo, my grandfather was also very involved in the breeding of polo ponies, owning 45 mares and interests in several stallions.

My mother had an excellent eye for a pony and never forgot those that had caught her attention. She knew a better-quality horse would help my father improve his skills and reach a higher handicap, so she encouraged him to improve his horsemanship so he could control a higher standard of pony. She was a true teammate in selecting, conditioning and improving the horses in his string.

By the 1950s, his ponies were considered by many to be the best in the USA. In 1957, Seymour Knox, who was in Chicago to watch his sons play in the Open Championship – commented that my father was the best-mounted player in the tournament. His ponies were small – 14 hands 3in to 15 hands 1in in height – which made them perfect to hit off. They handled with ease and had top speed

and acceleration. I had the opportunity to play Lady Pal, the last of my father's great ponies. She had a mouth of silk, with top speed and an overdrive. Joe Barry, a 9-goal competitor of mine, told everyone he didn't have a pony that could keep up with me when I rode Lady Pal.

Due to his asthma, it was necessary for my father to be mounted on easy ponies. In fact, in order to play, he usually received a shot of adrenaline prior to the match. The effects of the injection lasted only five periods, but if his ponies hadn't performed so easily, the shot would have lasted far fewer periods.

Being married to my mother must have been good for my father's polo because, in 1941, he won the National 20-Goal (now known as the Silver Cup), the National Open Championship and the Monty Waterbury Cup. He was raised to 7-goal at the end of the 1941 season and to 9-goal in 1952. He was rated a 7-goal or more until 1972, when he retired from competitive play. Between 1940 and 1958, he won no fewer than four National 20-Goal Championships, five National Open Championships and five Monty Waterbury Cups.

One of my first polo memories is from 1953. I was sitting in the Meadow Brook members' stand at the International Field, with teammates Henry Lewis, Pete Bostwick and Philip Iglehart, father of my friend David, watching my father captain the last all-amateur team to win the National Open Championship. He defeated the team led by Cecil Smith, considered the best American player at the time. The captains had a mutual admiration for each other – my father thought Smith was second only to Hitchcock as the best 10-goal player, but was a much better horseman than Hitchcock. According



This page, from top Corey (second from left) with the Bostwick Field team before the 1947 \$5,000 World Handicap Polo Championship; and (second from left) at the presentation of the 1955 Hazard Leonard Memorial Trophy at Piping Rock



to Dick Latham, who played with Smith's son Charles, Smith thought Philip Iglehart's brother Stewart and my father the best backs he had ever played with or against.

In 1960, my father took a Meadow Brook team, including my brother, to play in the high-goal events in England and France, and we accompanied him. I recall, as a wide-eyed young lad, going to Idlewild Airport (now JFK) to see the ponies boarding a KLM Super Constellation for their flight to Europe.

The team played at Cowdray Park and reached the final of the Midhurst Town Cup. They defeated the Windsor Park team in the Westbury Cup and were presented with a trophy by Queen Elizabeth II. After the game, we were all invited to the Royal Enclosure for afternoon tea with the Queen Mother, who was delightful. Before the Gold Cup final, we had lunch at Cowdray House – its great hall was the largest room I had ever entered. When we played at Windsor Great Park, we lunched at the nearby home of the Maharaja of Jaipur, in Ascot.

Our team then headed to France, where we stayed in the Normandy Hotel in Deauville and rode the ponies on the beach each morning before the bathers arrived. The fields were in the middle of a racetrack, so the games had to be played after the races.

That season, there were six high-goal teams with handicaps of 21- to 25-goals, and three of the future stars of Argentine polo – Frankie Dornigac, Juan Carlos Harriott and Daniel Gonzalez – were all playing in France. Dornigac was a tremendous hitter, knocking in often to the middle of the field. The Gracidas from Mexico and the Menditeguys from Argentina were also playing there.

The polo in Deauville was very exciting, with many close matches. For a boy of 13, the trip was a wonderful introduction to the world of the international game – a world that has remained an important part of my life, taking me to play in England, France, India, Thailand, Malaysia and most of Central and South America. However, more important than the travel and the tournaments are the enduring friendships I’ve made along the way.



Opposite, from top Alan L. Corey Jr at the 1947 Open Championship, Meadow Brook; (from left) Russell Corey, Major Ronald Ferguson, Queen Elizabeth II and Col W H Gerard Leigh at Guards Polo Club in 1977
This page, from top Alan III in 1977 on Whitney Field, Aiken Polo Club, between chukkas; Russell with his father in Aiken after Meadow Brook won the 1972 National 16-Goal tournament



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My brother and I grew up on Long Island, first riding ponies, then playing bicycle polo and eventually polo. We had the opportunity to watch many high-goal matches and observe the finest players, including 10-goalers Cecil Smith and Bob Skene, from the USA, and Roberto Cavanagh and Quito Alberdi, from Argentina. We were fortunate to have as our instructors in both horsemanship and the game of polo our mother and father, and, having played our father's ponies, we knew how a good polo pony should perform.

We also learnt our father's strategies on the field, and were lucky to experience them first-hand when we played with him. He moved the ball quickly, never turning on it or dribbling, and his back and forward shots were always placed on his teammates' ponies' offside. He said very little on the field – he believed if you had to holler, it was already too late. Rather, at the end of a period off our mounts he would quietly enquire as to why we had taken a particular course of action. This forced each of us to analyse and recognise our faults. He didn't overwhelm us with instructions or tactics – he knew that, as we matured, we would come to recognise the intrinsic value of his simple, concise off-the-field suggestions.

My father won the National 12-Goal in 1962 with my brother and reached the finals of the 1969 National 16-Goal with me. He was our coach when we won the National 16-Goal in 1972 and six North East Intra-circuit 12-goal tournaments, from 1968 to 1976. We were a wonderful combination: my brother was a forward who was always attacking, and I was a defender, always closing the door. We brought out the best in one other. I give my father, our mentor, most of the credit for that, because he instilled in us the leadership style he learnt from Tommy Hitchcock. The lessons he imparted to my brother and me are the cornerstone of what made his teammates and teams so successful from 1940 to 1970. His extraordinary polo career was officially recognised in 1992, when he was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the Museum of Polo – a well-deserved honour for a man of talent, insight and kindness, and a fitting tribute to his legacy.

From '9 Goals', available from yalepolo.wix.com/yalepoloteam for a tax-deductible donation of \$100 (about £70) to be divided between the Museum of Polo and Hall of Fame, and Yale University Polo