



Rule changes bring drama to playing field

Controversial tweaks to the regulations have helped produce a thrilling season, writes **Bob Sherwood**

As the English polo season reaches its climax, crowds have been enjoying some of the most exciting and unpredictable matches for years. Always a spectacle, the high-goal – or top professional – season, which culminated in the Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup and this weekend's Cartier International at Guards Polo Club, has been shaken up by rule changes that many aficionados believe have made the sport more dramatic. Concerned about the ability of some leading players to dominate matches, the Hurlingham Polo Association, the sport's governing body, altered the rule book to force more open play. The changes – which were already implemented in Argentina and the US – have been credited with playing a part in surprise results such as the win by the French-funded Talandracas team in the Queen's Cup where the favourites, Dubai and La Bamba de Areco, failed to make the semifinals. Previously, the best players could slow the game down and keep possession of the ball by continually changing course to stop opponents from tackling them. The tactic often won penalties when opponents were deemed to have infringed the line of the player in possession. But now players cannot turn if an opponent is following closely, forcing them to play more backhand shots, potentially conceding possession. With a lower number of penalties, many games have been lower scoring, but arguably more thrilling to watch. The HPA has also clamped down on players arguing with referees, which has also meant fewer penalties. "It is something that has been appreciated by most of the players and the spectators," says David

Woodd, chief executive of the HPA. "It has removed 80 per cent of the ability of top players to work the umpire." The changes have not been universally welcomed, however. Many in the game believe that if players are skilled enough to turn at a canter, they should be allowed to do so. Unsurprisingly, some top players are also opposed. Adolfo Cambiaso, the Argentine 10-goaler who plays for the Dubai team, called the new rules "stupid". "You want to see the good players show their abilities. Sometimes when they [the HPA] make new rules, they confuse the players, they confuse the umpires and they confuse the game. I think they should leave [the rules] and not touch them," he says. "It is like telling [Argentine footballer Lionel] Messi he can only tap the ball twice and then [he has to] pass." Despite the furore, the top level of polo remains in good health, with 18 teams competing in this year's Gold Cup at Cowdray Park Polo Club, which has continued to attract the best players in the world. Four new teams entered this year and, although

some dropped out, the fact that teams are being created at a time of economic uncertainty is seen as a sign of confidence in the game. But inevitably, the economic situation has affected a sport that, as Neil Hobday, chief executive of Guards, puts it, "is an expensive recreation ... there's no getting away from it". Cartier raised eyebrows when it announced that, after 27 years, it would no longer back the International Day at Guards. Instead, the luxury jewellery group will sponsor the Queen's Cup. Elsewhere, not all prime events, such as the international test match at Beaufort Polo Club in the Cotswolds, manage to attract a central corporate sponsor, while corporate hospitality has been a casualty of the recession – as it has across all sports. Liz Higgins, spokeswoman at Cowdray Park, which styles itself as the home of British polo, says there are signs that corporate hospitality is picking up. She also points out that, in spite of its elite reputation, attending polo is "very affordable", with stand-

ard tickets even for the Gold Cup costing just £20 (\$32). "It's much, much cheaper than football," she says. The HPA says the number of players in the UK is broadly stable and may even be up a little on last year's total of 3,007. Higgins says Cowdray Park's number of playing members remains consistent at 150, but points out that some members have played at a lower level, entering lower-handicapped tournaments. "Patrons [wealthy players who bankroll the top teams] used to bring in professionals for the 12-goal tournaments, and now they have probably dropped to eight-goal so they haven't had to pay such high fees to the professionals," she says. The club has also recently introduced four-goal tournaments that have proved popular with members. At Guards, the Windsor club most closely connected with the royal family, there are about 160 playing members, although the number has previously been as high as 200. However, the demand for matches is higher than ever. "We have increased our polo playing resources," says Mr Hobday. "The total number of chukkas [periods of play]

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Riding high: Facundo Sola, scorer of the extra-time winner in last month's Queen's Cup, celebrates victory for his Talandracas team
AliceGipps.com, Joan Wakeham, Getty

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Polo

Riding high in game’s spiritual home

Argentina

The sport is a lucrative business in the country most passionate about the game, writes **Jude Webber**

Forget the glamour of the Hamptons or the cachet of Cowdray Park. There is nothing in the polo world to equal the equine paradise that lies just outside Buenos Aires.

The sport may not have originated in Argentina, but with as many as 80 fields packed into a roughly six-mile radius on the lush plains less than an hour’s drive from the capital, as well as state-of-the-art stables and the world’s most prestigious players, this is polo’s spiritual home.

When the Argentine season is at its height, from October to December, as many as 6,000 ponies are training in paddocks and fields around the town of Pilar. Add to this a newer polo zone slightly further away that has sprung up in the past decade, and that number rises to about 20,000.

Because of Argentina’s equestrian and farming traditions – where top-notch polo is dominated by family dynasties and the sport is still played by enthusiastic amateurs on *estancias*, or ranches – the sport has a less elitist image than in other countries. The Argentine Open, the final leg of the coveted Triple Crown and the single most important match in the polo calendar, is played out in front of passionate crowds of 15,000 people and broadcast live on television.

Last year, the Triple Crown went to Ellerstina, the club founded by Gonzalo Pieres, the Argentine polo legend, and Kerry Packer, the Australian magnate.

Now led by Pieres’ sons, Ellerstina’s interests span horse breeding and rearing as well as tournament organising. The club has also taken a leap into another of the hot new business areas to have been spawned by the sport – property.

Investors may have many reasons not to put money into Argentina, a country with a long history of political uncertainty and economic strife that is grappling with high inflation and large outflows of capital. The business of polo, however, has proved resilient.

“Argentina still has enormous advantages – you can probably buy a hectare here for what a square centi-



Star attraction: Facundo Pieres, son of Argentine legend Gonzalo Pieres, competing for his Ellerstina team in last year’s Argentine Open

AliceGipps.com

metre would cost you in Europe,” says Mauricio Fernández Funes, executive director of the Argentine Polo Association.

In General Rodríguez, a leafy polo enclave outside Pilar where a string of top players have homes, building work is in full swing on Pueblo Polo, a property and retail development where Ellerstina hopes to open the first of its 96 apartments in time for next year’s season.

Apart from young polo professionals looking for a *pied-à-terre*, Ellerstina also expects the development to attract investors seeking to rent out properties that come with the prospect of living next door to some of the world’s best players.

The country’s multimillion-dollar horse-selling business has, however, been “a bit depressed” lately, according to Jimmy MacDonough, vice-president of Unicorn, a polo pony exporter.

The financial crisis prompted some horse buyers to reduce imports from Argentina. At the same time, the number of breeders has risen by a third to 650 in the past three years, according to Guillermo Buchanan, an official at the Argentine Association of Polo Pony Breeders.

Still, Buchanan reckons as many as 2,000 Argentine polo ponies are exported every year.

Mid- to low-handicap ponies can typically fetch \$5,000-\$10,000, but high-handicap mounts are in a different league: Fina Pepa, on which Gonzalo Pieres scored the winning goal in the 2008 Argentine Open, was sold for \$490,000 last year.

Yet despite its resilience, the sport must also look to garner further corporate sponsorship to help broaden its appeal, according to Nacho Figueras, the polo-playing face of clothing brand Ralph Lauren.

Figueras pioneered the polo celebrity endorsement business that others are now following – for example, Gonzalo Pieres for Rolex and his brother Facundo for Hublot, both luxury watchmakers.

“Sports in general are marketing platforms, and perhaps the sport that has lagged the most in this is polo,” says Figueras. “Polo is never going to be massive, like football, but it could be open to many more people ... and players could be used by more mainstream brands.”

But polo is a complex game, hard for beginners to decipher, so the key to winning ratings is to preserve the powerful spectacle of exquisite horsemanship at speeds of up to 38mph.

That came under threat in recent years, says Javier Tanoira, a former high-handicap player who published a book of his criticisms in 2009. The patron system, which allows for rich

horse owners, often with limited polo skills, to play alongside top players who need to keep shining to continue getting hired, makes polo stars “slaves of circumstance”, he says.

“The main problem with polo now is that it’s very slow because players keep control of the ball,” says Tanoira.

Fernández Funes, however, believes recent rule changes are helping polo revert to a classic style with faster play in straight lines.

The polo association, he says, is also working to democratise the sport further and open it up to a wider audience, including hosting polo tournaments all year round in Buenos Aires.

In a country with about 200 clubs and 4,000 players, as well as vibrant youth and women’s polo, “we think we can multiply audiences by the thousands”, he says.

New rules, more drama

Continued from Page 1

has increased even though we have slightly fewer members,” because members are playing more.”

Global interest in the sport is stronger than ever, with more countries taking up the game, while talk of greater television coverage continues. While it is difficult to film such a fast-moving sport that takes place over such a large area, new ideas for smart camera work are emerging.

Meanwhile, Higgins says international interest in the Cowdray Park matches, from Argentina to Australia, is “huge”.

Commercial events, such as the all-professional Polo in the Park, staged at London’s Hurlingham Park, and the indoor Gaucho International held at the city’s O2 Arena, also appear successful and attract a different audience. “I went on the Friday [of the Polo in the Park event], and I didn’t see a single person I knew,” remarks Woodd.

Whether polo can convert those audiences to supporters of the regular game is an open question, however. Hobday comments that the polo playing princes, William and Harry, have also helped attract favourable attention. Prince Harry hosted a polo tournament last month, in which his elder brother also played, in aid of the Sentebale charity that he co-founded to help children in Lesotho.

Some clubs, though, are clearly shifting to a more commercial focus. Hobday, for example, is a former Scots Guards officer (Guards has links with Britain’s premier regiments) but was a newcomer to polo when he took over as chief executive. He credits his predecessor, Charlie Stisted, who died in a helicopter crash last October, with putting the club on a firm financial footing, but acknowledges there is “a lot of potential for business growth”.

He says he will look at ways of attracting sponsors from sectors that have not previously been linked with polo. With the cachet of polo and its wide influence on high-street fashion, he also believes Guards can build on its brand and capitalise on greater merchandising and licensing opportunities. “We are looking at taking our brand and expertise into emerging markets such as the Middle East and India,” he says.

The club already sells branded clothing in association with La Martina, the Argentine leisure clothing group, but Hobday believes it has room for expansion. “We have a strong brand and a licence to sell,” he says.

Pedigree on which to trade

China

Argentina is exporting its skills to a country eager to learn, writes **Jude Webber**

Argentina is gearing up to sell its polo expertise to China as the booming communist nation embraces the game of kings.

“We are looking very carefully at how we can support initiatives to open China up to the polo of the Argentines,” says Mauricio Fernández Funes, executive director of the Argentine Polo Association.

One idea, he says, is to develop Chinese players in Argentina – either by playing with Argentine clubs or through clubs established in China. As well as having the cream of polo’s talent, Argentina prides itself on the expertise of its grooms, scientists and breeders.

China has five polo clubs, none of which have Argentine participation, although an Argentine-led group called China Polo Clubs is building a club in Beijing that is set to open by the end of the year.

China Polo Clubs has been operating training clinics since 2009. It works with Hanxue horses, an ancient breed whose name means “sweating blood”, and is planning a high-tech embryo operation, a breeding facility in Inner Mongolia and a rehabilitation centre.

The group says it will seek investors as the Chinese market develops – something that Fernández Funes reckons is “only a question of time”.

Ellerstina, Argentina’s most multifaceted polo enterprise and last year’s winner of the Triple Crown, has begun discussing with Chinese officials a coaching strategy for a national team and the organisation of clubs, although “we’re still at a very early stage”, says José Cavanagh, the club’s vice-president. Another idea, he says, is a six-month apprenticeship at Ellerstina for Chinese players.

But he acknowledges all this will take time. “You



Growth market: players training at the Tianjin Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club in China

Panos

need pitches, infrastructure, sponsors – it will depend on how quickly all this grows in China,” he says.

Although polo’s privileged image appears to be at odds with China’s commitment to communism, the sport is the new pursuit for the growing ranks of the elite. But breaking into the market demands lots of patience and cultural sensitivity.

Take the export of polo ponies, for example. Argentina lacks the requisite export permits, so Argentine ponies that are sold to China have to be sent first to another destination that does have an export licence and then transferred – a long and costly process.

Meanwhile, polo boots, saddles and other equipment worth \$400,000 are ready for export to China, says Horacio Moschetto, head of the Argentine Chamber of Footwear, and “this is just the beginning”.

La Martina, the polo clothing and equipment supplier, is also supplying equipment to China, and in 2007 it sponsored a tournament in Shanghai at the Nine Dragon Hills Polo Club for which it also provided exclusive merchandising. “There’s no limit to the possibilities in China in the next few years,” says Adrián Simonetti, the company’s director.

Derek Reid, a former Australian captain and head polo professional at Tianjin

Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club, believes it will take another 12 months for the top-handicap players to be seen in China, and for the country’s events to become a fixture on the international polo calendar.

Lesser-ranked Argentine players took part in a snow-polo event at Tianjin in February, and Eduardo Huergo, the Argentine president of the Federation of International Polo, has attended a tournament at the club.

Nacho Figueras, the Argentine polo player who is the face of Ralph Lauren, the luxury brand, hopes to organise a polo event in China next summer. “Argentina should be look-

ing at polo as an export – players, horses, know-how, club management,” he says. “There aren’t many things we can say Argentina is the best at by a mile, but polo is one. Companies could use polo as a vehicle to promote their products.”

There is a long way to go before polo can properly take off in China – a future league will need to secure sponsors and fans, and it has no good players yet.

But as Harvey Lee, vice-chairman of the Goldin group, which owns the Tianjin club, says: “If polo is going to be in China, there must be a role for Argentina because Argentina is just the best.”

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Packer lays foundations for title challenge

Patrons

Australian seeks to follow in his father's footsteps by building a state-of-the-art English headquarters, reports Yolanda Carslaw

When Kerry Packer arrived on the English polo scene in 1989, he made headlines by bulldozing his way into the sleepy West Sussex village of Stedham to set up a "turf farm".

The Australian media tycoon and his Ellerston team quickly set about revolutionising polo in much the same way as he had done to cricket in the 1970s, transforming the sport's traditional approach to grounds, horses and organisation. The Stedham turf proved pivotal – Packer's fields quickly became the world's most envied and emulated.

More than 20 years later, the finishing touches are being added to the English base of another Packer, Kerry's son James, 12 years after the late "KP" withdrew from the sport due to ill health – selling his house to Roman Abramovich, the Russian oligarch, and his polo fields to Filipino banker Bobby Aguirre.

For more than a year, contractors have been levelling, draining, seeding and rebuilding at Manor Farm in the Sussex village of Selham, a former dairy that is being leased from the Cowdray Estate.

While James has yet to set eyes on the 120-acre property – the 43-year-old is playing polo in Spain this month – he is expected to fly in imminently to inspect the base from which he will launch an assault on the English season next summer.

To test the facilities, a handful of high-goal Gold Cup matches were staged at Manor Farm last month.

According to Gonzalo Pieres, the Argentine former 10-goaler who played with Kerry throughout the 1990s, "Selham will be the new Stedham. They have done everything right and the grounds are amazing."

At least one of Pieres' three sons – Gonzalo, Facundo and Nico – will also play with James, who last contested English high-goal polo in 2008.

The hub of the new base is a barn that was once home to more than 100 cows. In its place sit 72 airy stables, as well as offices, grooms' lodgings and storage sheds. A 17th-century farmhouse, ancient oak trees, meadows leading towards the river Rother and

stone stabling that once housed polo ponies belonging to Evelyn de Rothschild complete the picture. At the modest entrance, mares and foals – born by embryo transfer, the technique Kerry first used in 1992 – graze languidly.

This time, however, there has been barely an echo of the furore that accompanied Kerry's arrival in England, when villagers endured a summer of dust and uncertainty.

A former councillor recalls: "Kerry's agent came to a meeting and said they were putting in an experimental turf farm. Then they moved in 10 diggers and wiped out the landscape. It was that initial fib, and the fact they did it without permission, that annoyed people."

Extending an olive branch the following year, Kerry drafted in a team of cricket stars to play a match against villagers and raise money for a cottage hospital.



Gambling on victory: billionaire casino owner James Packer is an accomplished polo player

Getty

His son, by contrast, is largely well liked and admired as a patron and player.

"James was the most gifted patron I've played with in the UK," says Carlos Gracida, the Mexican former 10-goaler. "There were serious talks about putting him up to four goals. He used to be fanatical about fitness and would run for an hour a day."

Unusually for a patron, James takes penalties and hit-ins, and can whack the ball a good 150 yards.

Bearing an increasing physical resemblance to Kerry, according to Pieres, James is becoming like his father in other ways too.

He says: "Kerry was rich and powerful because he had a special brain. While I was able to anticipate things on the field, he did so in business."

"James is getting more similar to his father every day. He has a good brain and the same mentality."

But, he adds: "He is not such a fanatic. He doesn't like to lose, but he wouldn't change his mind about playing with one of my boys if he saw them playing badly."

"His approach is that you play with friends and you try to win, but you don't change your friends if you lose."

So can James have the same sort of success that Kerry had

two decades ago? Gracida believes so. "Ellerston's breeding is still the best," he says.

James has continued to breed horses and produces up to 80 a year in Australia.

"[Ellerston] has more top horses than anyone. Argentines don't want to hear it, but it's true," Gracida adds.

Of course, apart from his victories, Kerry was equally well known in polo circles for his Gold Cup parties. As

James Packer

Age: 43
Nationality: Australian
Business interests: Gaming, and print and broadcast media
Marital status: Married to Erica Baxter, singer, with two children
Net worth: \$4.4bn (Forbes 2011)
Career highlights: Won Gold Cup (1994) and Queen's Cup (2008)

one Cowdray regular recalls: "Everything was lavish and done in great style. There were tumblers of spirits, and people from every corner, from grooms to patrons."

"I remember Kerry sitting outside the marquee on straw bales, chatting to his players. That's where he wanted to be."

Perhaps another reason to keep an eye on James Packer next summer.

Forget gossip – hold the sports page

Media

Game's quest to be taken more seriously as a sport continues, writes James Mullan

Polo's profile has grown considerably in recent years, thanks in part to innovative versions of the game that have taken it beyond its traditional confines and to broader audiences in arena venues and cities, on beaches and even on snow. Conventional grass polo has boomed as well, with the numbers of officially affiliated players and clubs in the UK doubling since 1995.

While the levels of sponsorship and investment in the game have risen, more clubs and events than ever are competing for the revenues available. As such, those with ambitious plans for the future of the game believe expansion into the mainstream media is a necessary requirement if polo is to move forward as a sport.

As well as raising the game's profile and bringing in sponsorship money, column inches in the sports sections of national newspapers and prime-time television coverage are essential to lend polo genuine credibility as a sport, rather than simply as a pastime for the wealthy, which in many places is still the public perception.

And while this view is slowly changing, because polo at present largely appears on the gossip pages of the nationals rather than the sports pages, the task of getting the game to the next level continues to look like an arduous uphill slog.

Argentina has proved that polo can work as a mainstream sport, with live coverage of the Argentine Open final on ESPN, the cable broadcaster, drawing viewing figures of almost 200,000 in Buenos Aires alone, and many more worldwide. Analysis and reaction to the Open also fills the front and back pages of the city's newspapers.

The difference is that the game in Argentina already has widespread public credibility. In the UK, can simply getting the game on television give it more importance and cultivate interest, or does it need to develop organically first?

At present, polo can be seen in the UK on Horse & Country TV, the specialist equestrian channel, and, occasionally, on Sky Sports 2 and 3. Coverage in the sports sections of the print media is little better. The Gold Cup and the Cartier International may get a mention in the quality broadsheets, although these are often little more than a "news in brief".

"The public in the UK don't understand polo like they do in Argentina," says Karen Kranenburg, the polo tournament organiser. "The conundrum for British polo organisers is how to format the game to make it TV friendly and viable for mainstream networks without losing the essence of the game and its special cachet. It's a delicate balancing act."

The inaugural Polo in the Park, which took place at Hurlingham Park in London in 2009, was the first polo event to be screened on prime-time terrestrial television, with a 45-minute highlights package shown on ITV1. The rights, however, were not strictly sold to the broadcaster; rather, Polo in the Park's organisers secured the slot by pre-selling enough advertising to go alongside it.

Since then, highlights of the event have been televised on Sky Sports, which is also where highlights from the UK season periodically appear, produced by Blue Tuna, which has been supplying the broadcaster with footage of the season's main high-goal events for 12 years.

'Polo is great for TV because it's fast, dangerous and really exciting to watch'

"Polo is great for TV because it's fast, dangerous and really exciting to watch," says Steve Katz, chief executive of the production company. "And it still has so much potential, if only someone would invest with a business plan to really up the production. However, the fact is it's still an elitist sport."

There seems little doubt that expanding polo's appeal to a wider market would make commercial sense in the long term. However, those running polo are also wary of pushing too far, mindful of the need to satisfy the sponsors and patrons that currently fund the game at the top level.

Some even question the benefits of the mainstream media to polo, when their viewers and readers are far removed from the high-rollers who play the game.

"It boils down to the nature of your product," says James Turner, head of sponsorship and marketing at Guards Polo Club. "Additional coverage, as long as it is produced appropriately, isn't detrimental to the sport but, from a sponsorship point of view, utilising the mainstream media to reach the general public isn't a relevant interest for the luxury brands we attract at the moment. It simply isn't their target demographic."



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Polo

New generation aims to take on male stars

Women's game

An increase in the number of female players is helping change attitudes, writes **Elizabeth Robinson**

Not so long ago, a place on the sidelines was about as much as was expected of women at a polo match.

The game of kings was just that: a battleground where men on horseback were the charging cavaliers, with women on hand to look nice and cheer them on. But as many kings throughout history have found to their cost, rumblings of a revolution were afoot.

The profile of women in the sport was greatly assisted by Claire Tomlinson, the English player who attained a five-goal handicap in the mid-1980s, proving that women could, and did, outplay many men.

Increasing female wealth and the gradual shedding of polo's closed-club reputation has also brought more women into the game. According to the Hurlingham Polo Association, the game's governing body, the number of female players in the UK nearly doubled in the five years to 2008. Last year, there were 778 female players, representing 27 per cent of registered UK players, up from just 18 per cent in 2003.

As the rules of polo allow mixed teams, the issue for female players today is whether to mix with men, playing with and against them, or whether to support the women-only game.

Top players, however, have little choice because there are simply too few high-goal women to sustain a high-goal circuit.

For Nina Clarkin, 29, who with a four-goal handicap is the world's top female polo star (and the only woman to have won the Gold Cup), it is playing the mixed game that has put her where she is. "Personally, it has been a good thing for me to play with and against men," she says. "It has improved my polo and kept me at a better level."

Clarkin accepts, though, that it is healthier for the sport to recognise that many women prefer to benchmark themselves against their female peers.

"The fact that there is separate ladies' polo is good for polo," she says.

The top female player in the US, Sunny Hale, 42, who holds a three-goal handicap, also applauds the two-tier system, saying: "With the mixed game, women have the opportunity to play with the best players in the world. But we also have the luxury of having women's tournaments." She says the women's game is the fastest-growing sector of polo in the US.

In 2005, Hale established the Women's Championship Tournament to promote women's polo. To participate in the tournament, teams have to play in a qualifier during the year.

"When I started this in 2005, there was not one tournament being played that was above two-goal. Now we have 17 sanctioned tournaments," she says.

"All the girls who play gain visibility. Now there's a template for women getting into the sport."

Ascot Park Polo Club,



Equal play: Gold Cup winner Nina Clarkin says playing against men has helped her game
WireImage

which was established by instructor Peter Grace, has long been the home of women's polo in the UK, thanks in part to the former high profile of Grace's four polo-playing daughters, also known as the Four Graces. It hosts the UK National Women's Polo Tournament every year and is home to the International Women's Polo Association, which was founded in 1997 to provide an information service for players.

Mia Randall-Coath, executive secretary at the association, says the tournament does not have a big-name sponsor but relies instead on "micro-sponsors".

"There isn't the same kind of money in women's polo," she concedes.

Yet there is little doubt that overt sexism is deeply ingrained in parts of the sport, particularly in the macho world of Argentine polo. Clarkin notes the reluctance of patrons to choose female players: "For the patrons, there is a stigma attached to women players because of the physical nature of the game."

Randall-Coath also notes the differences in the culture of a game played by women and one played by an all-male or mixed team.

"The women's game can be noisier, but a lot of fun," she says, adding: "We take it a bit more light-hearted. In a mixed game, the testosterone can sometimes overtake."

Clarkin sees more technical differences. "Women's play is different because there are natural limitations. Passes aren't as long, but it's more aggressive than the mixed game," she says. "When you play against guys, your riding off and your marking has to be good."

For this year, however, Clarkin has had to be content with a more traditional role on the sidelines – as her baby is due imminently. Yet she does not plan to let this deter her for long.

"I'll get a summer season in New Zealand," she says.



Fight for supremacy: Argentine and English players battle it out during the 2009 Cartier International at Guards Polo Club

No quick fix for old issue

Player row

A new push is under way to tackle the lack of home-grown talent in the English game, says **Bob Sherwood**

It is a debate that crops up every time England's footballers flop at an international tournament. With expensive overseas players flooding the top league, pundits complain that home-grown talent is suffering for lack of an opportunity to develop at the top level.

That same debate is raging in polo. With Argentine players so dominant on the international scene, English, Australian and US professionals feel the problem is, if anything, even more acute in their sport.

A glance at the line-up of high-goal teams shows the scale of the issue. Assuming there are 20 teams in a typical English high-goal season, David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association, governing body for the sport in the UK, says that only about 15 of the 60 pros playing would be English. Australian or South African. That leaves as many as 45 South American pros in the leading teams.

The problem for the home-grown players is not just one of gaining experi-

ence of the game at a top level, but also a question of being able to afford even to compete for a spot on the best teams.

Unlike other sports where an athlete's skill is all that matters, the best polo players need the best ponies, which can cost \$60,000-\$100,000 each. A top professional would be expected to come with 10-15 ponies for the high-goal season – and they need replacing regularly due to age or injury.

"You will only earn that kind of money in the high goal," says Woodd. "And unless you play in the high goal, you are going to be left behind on the horse front."

The debate has been going on for a decade but, says John O'Sullivan, deputy editor of Polo Times magazine, "it's very much on the pros' radar at the moment because there are so few [home-grown players] in the high goal".

Not everyone sees it as a problem, though. Liz Higgins, spokeswoman at Cowdray Park Polo Club, home of the British Open championship that culminates in the Gold Cup, says the point of the tournament is to stage the highest-quality polo possible.

Like watching Chelsea or Manchester United, she says, crowds want to see the best players in the world – and that means Argentine pros. "We see the very best in the British Open and we love it."

She also says changes lower down the game are

helping up-and-coming professionals. For example, Cowdray Park started playing four-goal polo a few years ago, which has proved popular and created opportunities for young British professionals.

Nevertheless, O'Sullivan believes a rule to promote domestic professionals would help the game in the UK. "If [the HPA] wants the game to continue to gather support and momentum, then I think a home-grown player rule is something that would help."

The problem is not just one of gaining experience at the top level, but also a question of being able to afford even to compete

However, he points out, it is fraught with difficulty.

The HPA seems to agree and devised such a rule recently, modelled on similar rules in football that require a certain number of home-grown players in a squad. It would require any professional in a high-goal tournament with a handicap of five goals or lower to be "home-grown".

The highest level of polo limits teams to a combined handicap of 22 goals. So, for example, if a team included two 10-goal pros and a zero-goal patron, it would need a

lower two-goal player to reach its handicap limit.

But the suggested new rule has not been implemented in the face of opposition from the patrons who fund the sport at the top level. "Patrons are very anti it," says Woodd. "I didn't expect any one of them to say they supported it."

Unlike football, polo teams cannot get around such a rule by simply leaving their home-grown players on the bench. Patrons who put millions into the game understandably want the freedom to choose whichever players they want. And few would argue that the best players are Argentine.

Moreover, that country's pros typically want to play with their fellow countrymen, who speak the same language and with whom they may have strong bonds.

The rule was not well received on two counts. First, the better, higher-handicapped domestic players said it did nothing to help them. Second, patrons questioned whether there were enough lower-graded English players worth having on a high-goal team.

Some argue that the best players will reach the top anyway. But others question that, pointing to the emergence of the last golden generation of the best British polo players that coincided with the Falklands conflict, when Argentines were not playing in England.

One way around the problem could be a move to handicap young domestic players more competitively, keeping their ratings deliberately lower so that they are considered better value to the team.

Given the overall handicap limit, four-goalers who plays as well as five-goalers will always be in demand, while five-goalers who are seen to play below their handicap will struggle to find a team.

But the authorities are wary of creating "cheap" handicaps, while ambitious players generally want their handicap to rise to reflect their skill level even though paradoxically it means there is less chance of getting a job. After all, the higher they are rated, the higher the fees they can command.

In any case, there is no guarantee that offering beneficial handicaps would prove a solution. O'Sullivan points to the Dubai team that dominated the English season last year, which had two leading pros, including Adolfo Cambiaso, and a previously unheard-of Argentine two-goaler who was "brilliant" and played well above his handicap.

"You can play farm polo in Argentina and get quite good without many people knowing," he says. "That doesn't happen here."

After a failed attempt to address the problem this year, the debate will rage on. "There is no easy solution," admits Woodd.

Breeding industry seeing double

Science

Cloning champion horses is a growing and potentially lucrative business, says **Jane Bird**

When a prized stallion belonging to Adolfo Cambiaso was put down after sustaining a serious injury at the 2005 Argentine Open, the champion player – in a gesture of faith in science – arranged for some of the horse's cells to be taken to a cryogenic laboratory for freezing.

Last month, the first cloned foal of Aiken Cura was born in Texas, where three more of the stallion's cloned embryos are now gestating, due to be born later this year.

The move highlights a growing trend in the sport, with cloning, artificial insemination and embryo transfer increasingly being used to create the world's best polo ponies. The aim, according to Mina Davies-Morel, senior lecturer in equine science at Aberystwyth University in Wales, is to maximise the genetic influence of the star performers.

It is big business. While a stallion can cover 100 mares a year, this can be increased ten-fold using artificial insemination. The use of embryo transfer, where embryos from a favoured horse are implanted into a series of surrogate mothers, can maximise the potential of genetically superior mares. Embryos of potentially world-class ponies can sell for \$500,000 at auction. In one case last year, a yearling clone of another Cambiaso champion, Cuartertera, fetched \$800,000.

Cloning enhances the science of breeding by enabling production of foals genetically identical to an existing horse. The process involves stripping out the nucleus of a donor egg, injecting it with the desired DNA and incubating it in the laboratory for about two weeks

before transferring it to a surrogate mare.

Some people object to such practices on ethical grounds, while other fear it could lead to a reduction of the gene pool. That is why the UK's thoroughbred breeders are largely opposed, says Davies-Morel.

If cloning becomes the norm, then "many more offspring will be related [to each other], and genetic variation [will be] reduced", she cautions. "Twenty years down the line, you could have lost a lot of characteristics that might again become popular."

Another concern is the potential flooding of the market with cloned horses. Yet according to Katrin Hinrichs, professor of veterinary physiology and pharmacology and Patsy Link chair in mare reproductive studies at Texas A&M University College of Veterinary Medicine, who has produced 15 cloned foals from seven cell lines, such fears are overdone. "It is very difficult," she explains. "So many things can go wrong, and it is a huge investment of time and money. It is unlikely we could ever flood the market."

Occasionally, people ask if a gene can be inserted to make a horse run faster, but the team does nothing to the genome, Hinrichs says. "Messing around with genes makes it much more complex because you have to worry about the effects of altering the DNA," she explains. "To my knowledge, no one has yet produced a genetically modified equine embryo."

The goal of cloning is not to flood polo with identical competition horses, but to improve the genetic base for polo breeding programmes worldwide, says Alan Meeker, founder and chief executive of US-based Crestview Genetics, which produced the

Aiken Cura cloned embryos. Crestview, in which Cambiaso has a stake, has just opened "the world's most advanced cloning laboratory" near Buenos Aires.

Yet even though a cloned animal is a blueprint copy of its genetic parent, its performance will not necessarily be the same, says William "Twink" Allen, scientific director at the Paul Mellon Laboratory of Equine Reproduction in Newmarket near Cambridge.

"Although they have the same genetic make-up, it is a different mother, uterus, gestation, birth and upbringing," he says.

Meeker ensures his foals are weaned as soon as possible to minimise the imprint of the mother's personality. He says clones have the potential to perform even better than their "parent" because their characteristics are known from birth, so training can be optimised from day one.



Dynamic duo: Adolfo Cambiaso rides Aiken Cura

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A battle for supremacy fought out at 12,000ft

Pakistan

Age-old scores are settled in a unique tournament played amid the soaring peaks of the Hindu Raj, writes **Matthew Green**

When the summer sun melts the snows of the Hindu Raj, a small army of horsemen gathers to do battle. They may be barbers or bakers, teachers or cobblers, but each July they become the warriors of the Shandur Polo Festival, the world's highest tournament, perhaps the most spectacular, and certainly the roughest.

In scenes reminiscent of a cavalry clash, teams from the rival Pakistani towns of Gilgit and Chitral throw themselves into a pugnacious tilt of flailing mallets, whinnying steeds and few observable rules.

No wonder that the participants here have little regard for the more genteel version of the sport found elsewhere and consider the polo played at international tournaments almost laughably soft. As a plaque in Gilgit attests: "Let other people play at other things, the king of games is still the game of kings."

The tumultuous final marks the high point of the tournament in which men from valley and hillside compete for honour, glory – and a chance to settle old scores.

"They have rivalries that go from grazing to kidnapping each other's goats and running away with each other's wives," says Siraj ul Mulk, who was an organiser of the tournament for 20 years. "They are fighting on the polo ground for supremacy."

Held in a natural arena at about 12,000ft, the festival has preserved the rough-and-ready origins of a sport once played by travellers during breaks on their caravan trails. The contest was played by moonlight until Major Evelyn Cobb, a British officer, formalised the tournament in 1936.

Traditionally supported by the Rajas and the Mehtars, the ruling families in the region, the festival has in recent years won the backing of the government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and attracted corporate sponsorship. In a sign of the competition's rude health, a record number of teams competed for slots this year – a total of 60 players in all.

"The ruling families still contribute in terms of players and support," says ul Mulk, who hails from a clan that has ruled Chitral for five centuries.

The men from Gilgit took the honours this year, beating Chitral by seven goals to four, breaking a streak of four losses.

The horsemen favour sturdy steeds from across the border in Badakhshan province in Afghanistan, rather than their more delicate Pakistani cousins bred in lowland Punjab. A special fund is reserved to compensate players whose horses keel over and die under the high-altitude strain – a serious blow to families who may have made big sacrifices to take part.



Feel the beat: a player dances to drumming at the Shandur Polo Festival Reuters

"Here poor people are participating in polo – keeping horses at the cost of being able to feed and clothe their children," ul Mulk says. "It's the fantastic passion that they have for this game that is being shown at the festival."

With spectators numbering in the thousands, including members of Pakistan's military and political elite, officials hope the event can bolster north-west Pakistan's embryonic tourism industry.

"The provincial government will do everything possible to make this festival more attractive for the tourists in the coming years," Syed Aqil Shah, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa's minister for sports, tourism and culture, told the concluding ceremony.

Security concerns limit the number of foreign visitors. Although Chitral has itself largely been spared the violence that has affected the region, Pakistani troops have fought fierce battles with the Taliban in neighbouring districts such as Dir and Swat.

The risk of violence has prompted growing numbers of army and paramilitary troops to deploy at the festival each year – a phenomenon lamented by ul Mulk, who says the high-profile security cordon detracts from an event that locals consider perfectly safe.

He also worries that the growing amounts of money poured into the tournament by local notables, officials and companies may corrupt the spirit of a spectacle that grew out of a noble love for the game.

"My concern is that every year the amount of money being spent on it is increasing in an alarming way," the former polo organiser says.

"The moment someone shuts that pipe off, the polo players ... will suddenly say, 'I'm not going to be paid, why should I play?'"

But judging from the passion of the players, it seems more than likely that fierce mountain rivalries will keep the contest boiling.

Long history, bright future

Iran

Keeping the game alive in the country where it began is no easy task, reports **Najmeh Bozorgmehr**

It is the final match of what has been a hot and bruising day's play at Tehran's Norouz Abad stadium, but the seats reserved for paying spectators are empty.

Against the backdrop of the Alborz mountain range, a balmy breeze brings some relief to the players, who seem used to the absence of supporters. But in the VIP section at one end of the field, about two dozen devotees are following every goal and turn, determined not to let the "king of games" disappear in the land of its birth.

"Our polo is young despite its 3,000 years of history," says Hamzeh Ilkhanizadeh, head of the Iran Polo Federation and the main sponsor of today's competition.

Although Persian legends depict an even more ancient provenance, Iranian historians say polo dates back to the pre-Islamic Sassanian dynasty, when it was a cavalry training exercise. It reached its height during the Safavid rule from the 16th to the mid-18th century, played by royalty in the magnificent surroundings of Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan.

While polo then fell out of fashion, the silence of about two centuries ended when British officers began playing the game at the UK embassy, according to Azarnoush Azartash, an Iranian polo researcher. This encouraged Iranian officers and some aristocratic families to follow suit.

Yet when the 1979 revolution put an end to 2,500 years of monarchical rule, polo was abandoned due to its links with the kings. In the years that followed, a few old-timers occasionally played polo in the sandy fields, until Iran's federation was officially established eight years ago. This was possible only after Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, praised polo as "part of" Iranians' "culture ... and nationality".

Today's Tehran Province Cup is one of 12 competitions to be played this year. One of these is for women. There are no professional players – the teams comprise more than 100 amateurs, including about a dozen women.

As the tournament draws to a close, the much-anticipated final pits the men from Khargosh-Darreh, or Rabbit Valley, against those from Ghasre-Firouzeh, or Turquoise Palace.



Match winner: Siamak Ilkhanizadeh accepts the Tehran Province Cup Ali Kaveh

The players are dressed in white trousers with red and bright purple jerseys for Rabbit Valley and Turquoise Palace, respectively. Most of their equipment and dress is imported from Argentina and the US.

One player to catch the eye is Amir-Reza Behbodi, 13, from Rabbit Valley, who is among the country's youngest players. His father is a polo coach.

The captains of the teams, meanwhile, fit the traditional image of Iranian players with either aristocratic or feudal backgrounds.

Amir-Ali Zolfaghari from Turquoise Palace represents one of the few families

'Our polo is young despite its 3,000 years of history'

lies in Iran who are still involved in polo despite their pre-revolutionary aristocratic background. His father, who still plays polo, had royal connections.

Relying on the income from his fast-food business, Zolfaghari has taken it on himself to help the game survive. The 37-year-old, who started playing polo a decade ago, keeps 15 horses (which he lends to others for free) at a cost of about \$8,000 a month.

"It is all expenses without anything in return," he says, although his largesse helps him meet others with whom he can play.

His rival is Siamak Ilkhanizadeh, captain of Rabbit Valley, who has a two-goal handicap, the highest in the country. He comes from a very different background – the Kurdish regions of north-west Iran.

For love rather than money

David Woodd

The head of the sport's governing body is confident about the future of the game, writes **David Owen**

You might think that a sport that costs so much to play, at least for those with their own ponies to house and transport, would have been hard hit by the global financial crisis.

Yet according to David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association, governing body of the sport in about 30 countries, including the UK and much of Europe, the sport's finances remain in relatively robust shape.

Polo has not grown rich on the back of a handful of lucrative television deals and sponsorship contracts, which spur rapid growth when times are good but can leave a sport vulnerable when things turn sour.

According to Woodd, most of the money that flows into polo – he estimates it is an industry worth £300m (\$480m) a year in the UK – comes from the few hundred deep-pocketed patrons who finance teams to pursue their love of the sport. This includes competing in the sport's top tournaments if their pockets are deep enough.

"Most of the polo in the country is played at the clubs, which are affiliated to us but completely independent of us from a finan-

cial point of view," Woodd says from the HPA's headquarters in Little Coxwell near Oxford.

"In the past two years, sponsorship has got harder to get for sure ... Certainly at the club level, sponsorship has got much more difficult. But I wouldn't say generally that sponsorship is a major income stream for the clubs. Their income stream is very much member subscriptions and entry fees for tournaments."

In such circumstances, the number of players and matches becomes a good gauge of the sport's financial health. The HPA figures show that the number of registered polo players in the UK fell from 3,253 in 2008 to 3,007 the following year – a decline of about 7.5 per cent. However, the trend flattened out in 2010 and appears to have been reversed this year.

"It takes you time to get involved in polo," Woodd explains.

"Once you are, you've probably got horses and perhaps a horsebox and a groom and stables. That adds up to quite a commitment, so when the recession hits, you scale down rather than stopping."

He adds: "If they had a team of three paid players, they would say, 'I'm going to get rid of one of you and pool the costs of the team with someone else. I think most patrons have pretty much kept going, while reducing a bit.'"

Woodd says that Cowdray Park, one of the country's leading clubs, has played "20 per cent more games this year than last".

He notes that the number of teams competing in the Gold Cup this year has fallen from 20 to 18. "But the Queen's Cup, which had 14 teams last year, had 16 this year, so they are two

up. So it's about the same. The top end of the sport, where it's big money, has not been seriously affected by the recession," he says.

To get a better idea of how much money is involved, I ask Woodd how much it would cost to put together a Gold Cup team.

He replies: "If you said you wanted to play in the Gold Cup and you wanted to enjoy yourself and have a chance of doing reasonably well, I would say £500,000. If you said you wanted to have a chance of winning in a year when you can get the players in without breaking contracts, I think I would ask for a cheque of £4m."

In spite of such substantial figures, few people, with the possible exception of the top international riders, are making their fortunes out of polo in the UK. There is no official betting and no prize money.

"It is a one-way ticket, money-wise, for the guy paying," Woodd says. "Can he get his money back? No, absolutely not."

He continues: "It is a sport of getting hooked, really. The clubs don't make money. Most of the clubs are run by somebody who is an enthusiast, probably has got sufficient resources to fund some of it and whose main aim is to run a club and break even rather than make money."

"Guards Polo Club makes money. Cowdray Park probably makes money."

"Most of the small clubs might be in the black at the end of the year, but nobody is walking away with big bonuses."



Enthusiast: passion, not profit, drives investment in polo, says Woodd

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Polo

Argentina’s poster boy down but not out

Adolfo Cambiaso

Polo legend prepares to fight back after a bruising season. By **Robert Orr**

On a bright Monday morning earlier this month, at the Berkshire polo farm that is his base for the English summer, the world’s best polo player is lounging in the sun among an entourage of teammates, friends, grooms and small children.

Yet as the player who has spent well over half his life at the pinnacle of the game climbs gingerly from his chair to greet me, it is clear that Adolfo Cambiaso is in some discomfort.

“I could hardly walk yesterday,” the Argentine confides. The reason is a blow to the left knee sustained in a collision with another rider during his Dubai team’s surprise defeat in the quarterfinal of the prestigious Gold Cup two days earlier (the team had been winning comfortably until their captain and playmaker was forced off).

Coupled with Dubai’s loss at the same stage of the Queen’s Cup, this adds up to a below-par English season for a player who has dominated polo in the two decades since his remarkable debut season in the UK in 1991, when the precociously talented 16-year-old was a key part of the team that took home that year’s Gold Cup.

But if the player whose record includes eight victories in the Argentine Open, six in the US Open and five in the British Open as well as seven Queen’s Cup titles is angry about the manner of his defeat, he hides it well.

“Last year I won everything [including the Gold Cup and Queen’s Cup], this year I didn’t,” he says with a shrug. “It is worse to lose because you play like shit or you did the wrong thing. Not when you lose because you got injured.”

While Cambiaso appears tired – a look accentuated by his habit of running both hands down his face before replying – there is no hint of the surliness I had been warned to expect. Yet his piercing brown eyes convey the resolve of a player who is famously competitive in the field.

Dressed all in black in a worn track-suit, his famed good looks partially obscured by a tatty baseball cap and several days of stubble, Cambiaso does not fit the conventional image of a millionaire sportsman (“I am no David Beckham,” he says later). He



Legendary horseman: Adolfo Cambiaso keeps his eye on the ball during a Nations Cup match in Buenos Aires

Getty

largely shuns the celebrity and commercial aspects of polo, aside from his relationship with Jaeger-LeCoultre, the watch company for which he is a brand representative. He also professes not to know his own net worth – “I will never be a millionaire, and I don’t want to be,” he tells me before appearing surprised when his representative confirms he is already one many times over.

“I have not changed my life since I was 15 years old. My family is the only thing that has changed for me,” he says as five-year-old Adolfo, the second of his three children, appears in search of his father.

Cambiaso has been married for a decade to Maria Vázquez, the Argentine model and television personality. “I still have the same house and I have enough for a good life,” he says.

The “good life” is funded in part by the £1m (\$1.6m) a season he is reputedly paid by Ali Albwady, the Emirati businessman who is his patron, to captain team Dubai. However, the shock Gold Cup loss has brought a premature end to Cambiaso’s English season. On the day we meet, the stables are already empty, the 80 or so horses taken away to rest ahead of their next assignment.

Not only does this leave the farm eerily quiet, but it also removes the opportunity to see Cambiaso in the environment in which he is happiest – around horses. He was riding at the age of four – his mother’s family ran a polo ranch and his father was a “beach guy” – and had achieved a seven-goal handicap by the age of 15. The prized 10-goal rating he still holds came soon after. A natural horseman, Cambiaso also possesses tremendous ball skills – his trademark move being to gallop at full pelt while using his mallet to keep the ball in the air before smashing it between the posts. So what is the secret of his success?

“I play in good teams,” Cambiaso says modestly. “I have been lucky that Ali [Albwady] has given me the possibility to run this [team], and so far we’ve been very successful. If you have the right horses and the right team, that’s the way to succeed. But you have to work and you have to improve. Every year you must get better.”

For the 36-year-old Cambiaso, who in the past has not been adverse to the occasional cigarette, this means a more rigorous training regime, which includes daily runs, gym sessions and tennis. But for how long can he stay at the top? “Five years,” he replies. “In this game, if you keep yourself fit, you can play until 40 or 41.”

And after that? “Something around horses and this game. I have met a lot of people and have a lot of friends [in the sport],” he says. He is already involved in the lucrative business of horse breeding, and has an interest in Crestview Genetics, a leader in horse cloning and equine science. “This is something that is new to me. But we need to see if they [the clones] can play well,” he insists.

Yet thoughts of retirement will be far from Cambiaso’s mind when he returns to Argentina in the autumn to help his La Dolfina team wrestle the Argentine Open from their great rivals Ellerstina, who took last year’s title, and the coveted Triple Crown, with a thrilling 14-13 victory. “Everybody is talking about the Triple Crown, but I want to win the Open. That is my aim,” he says.

He downplays the rivalry between himself and Ellerstina’s Gonzalo and Facundo Pieres, the polo-playing brothers most likely to inherit his crown.

Adolfo Cambiaso

Age: 36
Nationality: Argentine
Home: Cañuelas, Buenos Aires
Marital status: Married to María Vázquez, model and TV personality, with three children
Career highlights: Argentine Open (8 wins), US Open (6), British Open (5), Queen’s Cup (7)

“Outside the field, it [the relationship] is very good; inside we want to beat each other. We are not ... close friends, but we have good relations.”

Before he can renew that rivalry, Cambiaso must continue to play the role of an itinerant high-goal polo star. A few days after we meet, he is due to fly to California to play for the Lucchese team under John Muse, its patron. For the first time, he looks troubled. “I am very happy with my life, but seven or eight months a year I am away from home. I want to go home – that’s the truth. But I have to [play]. That is part of this game.”

Before he can do that, however, there is the small matter of his injured knee. “I should be back playing soon,” he says confidently.

After we have talked for half an hour, the entourage returns to whisk their star asset off to physiotherapy. Get back on the horse that threw you, goes the old adage. For the world’s best polo player, that should not prove too difficult.

Glamour and exclusivity help fund game of kings

Sponsorship

Luxury brand names in particular continue to be drawn to the sport, writes **Salamander Davoudi**

When polo ponies thundered across the fields of Persia in the fifth century BC, the sport was largely a training exercise for elite troops. Over time it grew into Persia’s national sport, enjoyed exclusively by the nobility, men and women alike.

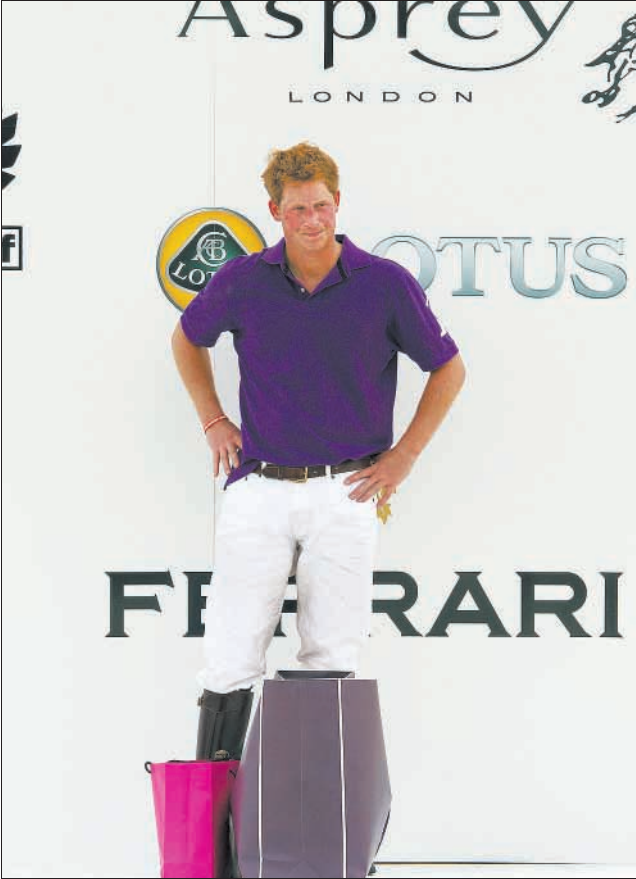
Fast-forward more than 2,000 years and polo continues to remain largely the domain of the wealthy and the influential. Yet it has also become a globally recognised sport, attracting serious sponsorship and investment.

“Polo is very glamorous,” says Andrew Murray, polo manager at Asprey, the UK luxury goods group. “It has always been associated with royals and it was the game of kings. It is very fast and it is very sexy.”

He continues: “Polo is becoming more commercially viable because the game has developed. It used to be amateur, but it’s now much more professional. Players fly in from around the world and the game is drawing more commercial interest. The days of it being an amateur game for the gentry are changing.”

Asprey is one of a number of luxury brands that invest in polo by sponsoring teams and tournaments and by developing lines of clothing and accessories that tap into the sport’s exclusive image. It has sponsored a polo team since 2007 and designed a line of professional polo equipment. “We are very serious about polo. Our involvement is not gimmicky,” Murray insists.

The biggest polo tournaments offer sponsors valuable exposure to an affluent clientele as well as sought-after product associations.



Royal approval: Prince Harry, a keen player, attended the 2010 Asprey World Class Cup at Hurtwood Park

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Like other sports such as tennis and rugby, the game is an attractive vehicle for corporate hospitality. It even has its own celebrity players, such as Argentine 10-goaler Adolfo Cambiaso.

Yet top-level polo is expensive to support. The costly nature of the high-goal game means it relies on sponsors and wealthy players, the patrons, to fund the teams and pay the professionals. It costs between £50,000 (\$80,000) and £100,000 a year to sponsor a low-level team, while a medium-level team costs £250,000-£500,000.

At the top of the sport, the cost of sponsoring a team can be between £1m and £2.5m a year.

Other luxury brands making significant investments in polo include Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Swiss watchmaker famous for its Reverso, a watch developed in 1931 for British polo players in India. “We have a special relationship with polo and a multifor-

mat presence,” says Jérôme Lambert, chief executive.

According to Lambert, polo’s various sponsors pump up to €20m (\$28m) a year into the sport.

Richard Mille, the Swiss watchmaker, not only sponsors the polo team that bears its name but is also working on a modern interpretation of a player’s watch. “The skill, speed and endurance needed in polo make it for me an exciting sport to be involved in,” says its eponymous founder and chief executive.

Luxury jeweller Cartier, meanwhile, has been involved in polo for almost 30 years and remains one of the sport’s most significant sponsors.

“[Sponsoring polo] was the opportunity to support a great sport that we believe is very much within the realm of our brand’s culture. Our patronage is substantial enough to make an influential contribution to the development of the sport,” says Arnaud Bam-

berger, executive chairman of Cartier UK.

The company has, however, decided to end its long-running sponsorship of the International Day at Guards Polo Club, which will have to find a new sponsor for the 2012 event. It has been suggested that Cartier was concerned the event had become too celebrity focused and was no longer attracting the clientele with which it wished to be associated.

“We felt it was time for us to change the formula of our patronage to one that is more tournament focused,” Bamberger says. Instead, Cartier has signed a three-year deal to sponsor the Queen’s Cup at Guards.

Yet it is not just luxury goods groups that are attracted to polo. Among the sport’s other backers are Audi, the German carmaker that sponsors the annual Audi Polo Awards, Veuve Clicquot, the champagne house, and Julius Baer, the Swiss private bank.

And while most sponsors are reluctant to talk about the sums they spend to bankroll polo, for the biggest supporters the numbers run into “into the millions”, according to one person involved in the industry.

In return, as well as brand association in traditional markets such as the UK, US and Argentina, polo’s growth internationally offers access to developing markets. It is expanding in countries such as Hungary, Russia, Poland and China, and in the Middle East.

At the same time, it is beginning to shed its male image, sponsors say, and there has been a notable rise in the number of female players. “Ladies and horses is good in terms of image – the elegance and the aesthetics,” says Lambert.

The returns, however, cannot always be measured in purely financial terms. When asked if the sums spent on polo add up to the benefits gained, Mille says: “Not always.”

He adds: “But then it wouldn’t truly be a luxury product without some sacrifices.”



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