The Trials of an Unloved Sport by Henry Grabar Sage

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Things began badly for Yale Polo. In May 1904, 14 months after the team's founding, H.D. Babcock, Jr., YC '06, a sophomore from New York City, died from injuries sustained in a match against Princeton in the Bronx. "The serious nature of the accident, however unavoidable, cannot help but cast a shadow over intercollegiate polo for the balance of the season, at any rate," wrote the New York Times. It was the first time in 10 years that a player had died in a game of polo on the East Coast. H.L Herbert, the Chairman of the U.S. Polo Association, insisted to the press that polo was not a dangerous game. Despite a nearly irreparable setback, the Yale Polo team went on to be the most successful collegiate polo team in American history.

One hundred and five years later, I went out for a polo clinic for that same team. On a cloudy fall Saturday morning a few wild-eyed freshmen and I piled into a black Jetta and drove off to the C&S stables in Bethany, CT to learn to play polo. Bethany is where Yale Polo's ponies have lived since their expulsion from the barn at the Yale Armory in 2009.

If you've never seen a game of polo, which is likely the case, it is frequently described as hockey at 40 miles an hour. Polo belies its reputation as a prissy, "gentleman's" game; it is quite physical and at times violent. The first-time spectator is in awe of the stupendous forces at play—a couple tons of horse and rider careening towards each other at full gallop, the thundering of hooves on grass or dirt, the shuddering earth, the thwack of the ball heading towards one goalpost or the other, the other four or six riders off after it at great pace. Polo is a dangerous and endangered game of high thrill content.

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Yale Polo's stables and practice arena are in an old metal frame building. Translucent, corrugated sheets of plastic let the harsh light in on the dirt floor. We are 25 minutes from New Haven but we could be anywhere in Connecticut. The only noises are the hum of a lawnmower and the murmurs of the cows in the enclosure next door.

The six new recruits are met at the door by Liz Brayboy, SY '84, former captain of the Yale Polo team. Liz is short and energetic, with thick shoulder-length hair. She sends Seppi Colloredo, BR '13, the captain of the men's team, and Lucy Topaloff, MC '13, the captain of the women's team, to inflate some polo balls, which look like half-size soccer balls. The rest of us head out to a picnic table to sign waivers.

Afterward, we twist the mallet-straps around our wrists and try to hit balls into the wall. The swing must be perfectly linear. "Tennis player?" Liz asks me. "Sure," I said. Any follow-through across your body, as you might do with a tennis racket, will hit your horse in the face. "I'm not gonna put you on a horse if you're gonna hit the horse in the head," Liz says.

"Are you the coach?" I ask Liz.

"No," she says. "I'm an insurance consultant." She is also, in the evenings and on weekends, the program director of Yale Polo.

The returning team members in attendance—Seppi, Lucy, Rebecca, Matt, and Terry—are by the stables, doing the dirty preparatory work for another year of polo. There are straps, buckles, and saddles to be scrubbed; bags of supplies, most of them donated, to be organized. Liz leads the recruits in a variety of drills. We play polo with foot mallets, running around the arena. We are introduced to the various pieces of polo pony equipment. "Run it through the martingale, run it through the breastplate, put the draw rein through the billet," Liz is saying. Trying to learn the rules of polo, hitting technique, and horse dressing all before lunch on a Saturday morning is nothing like the country club glory I had imagined. I smile and nod. We brush the polo ponies. "Nacho [Figueras, the world's most famous polo player] says the game is 70-80 percent about the horses," Terry Reilly, MC '12, later told me.

Finally, I get on a pony. His name is Billy. I am not a rider. We walk in a shaky circle around the little arena, but Billy wants to go faster. Soon we are cantering wildly across the barn. I feel at risk; I feel great. Liz has seen enough: "I see a casualty here that I don't want on my conscience." I'm not sure if she means me, the horse, or both of us. So ends my attempt to learn to play polo.

As General Patton once said, "If a man's most lethal experience prior to battle has consisted in dodging automobiles on city streets, the insinuating whisper of bullets about his sacred person will have a more disquieting influence on him than would be the case had his same person received a few cuts and broken bones on the polo field."

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The rules of polo are simple. Teams of three or four, depending if the game is indoors or outdoors, face off on horseback and attempt to drive a small ball, using 53-inch mallets, through goalposts that are some

300 yards apart. Horse-to-horse contact is common and riders sometimes fall off; excessive physicality is punished with fouls. A match consists of four to six seven-minute periods called chukkas, after each of which a player must switch his or her exhausted pony.

Like all club sports teams, Yale Polo must recruit a group of players from each freshman class to keep the team alive. And like the nearly 50 other club teams, polo exists in limbo between varsity letters and intramural games. In aspirations, in devotion, in commitment, there is a gravitas in Yale Polo that approaches the level of varsity. In assistance from the University, there is not.

Lucy invited me over for dinner at her apartment on Park St. with Seppi and Rebecca Smith, MC '13, a few nights after the clinic. While I washed a head of lettuce, Lucy and I spoke about how she wound up burning the midnight oil in a barn outside New Haven. Like many Yale Polo players, she arrived as an experienced rider who had never watched an entire game of polo.

Seppi arrived soon afterwards—Seppi, who may be the longest-tenured sport captain in Yale history (going on three years now); Seppi who arrived in Yale Polo's darkest hour with no time to play, and whose gradual assumption of responsibility seemed to augur in an era of hope for Yale Polo. Liz and Jim DeAngelis, who is the coach of Yale Polo, though he too has a day job, took Seppi out for breakfast soon after he arrived at Yale. "You gotta play polo!" Seppi remembers them telling him, "We still have a team!"

Tall and boyish, Seppi comes from the North Shore of Massachusetts, where he grew up riding horses at the Myopia Club. (The club was founded by four brothers with poor eyesight in the 1870s.) When Seppi discovered polo in the summer after high school, it seemed like a boy's ideal elaboration of horseback riding. "Riding in America is not the manliest thing to do. The sport was dominated by girls," he said. (Lucy confirmed that this is not the case in France.) Though he came to Yale as a recruit for the lightweight crew team, and juggled crew and polo during his freshman year, Seppi later quit crew to play polo full time.

Then Rebecca arrived. She's the President of Yale Polo, which means that while Seppi and Lucy are leaders on the field, Rebecca is the one who makes the wheels turn behind the scenes. She is the one who pockets Yale IDs before a big match, so that she can get into people's entryways in the event of an alarm slept through. She makes the match-day schedules, runs the website, arranges matches with other collegiate squads and organizes the training of new recruits. She's the one who had to call Skidmore after the calamitous "dust bowl recreation" at the Armory last year.

Over spaghetti and meatballs, the polo brass discussed life on the team. They clean all their own equipment and dress their own horses, things that Yale Polo has been doing for the last quarter-century but certainly was not doing in the days of H.R. Babcock Jr. Almost everything they have—from bridles to saddles to horses to their trailer—is donated by alumni and other well-wishers. Terry, the treasurer, later put it to me like this: "Your experience playing polo in college is so different. We're cleaning the stalls, we're cleaning the crap off the arena. People who have played polo before college are like, 'I'm supposed to do that?!'"

For a home game, 12 horses must be dressed, loaded into a trailer, and brought to the Armory, where the team is still allowed to play, even though the stables are closed. Then there are four chukkas of polo, and then it's back to the stables in Bethany. Dressing the horses was prohibitively complicated for this reporter on a Saturday morning—"It's pretty conceptual," Lucy said, apologizing for the bewildering tail-braiding process. The 10 hours of work that go into each home game tend to drive away potential recruits.

And then there's the money, that point of tension for over 100 years of Yale Polo. Dues for polo cost several hundred dollars a semester—considerably more than those of other club sports—and for the more advanced players, over 1,000 dollars a year. For the players who spend several nights a week schlepping out to the barn in Bethany, it's a small price to pay: The dues for the polo team are more or less on par with entering one tournament in the real world of polo.

I asked how many people watch each game. A hundred, said Lucy. They laughed; Seppi holds up ten fingers. But even while our polo team languishes in obscurity within the University, in the world of polo, Yale Polo is a respected and admired institution. Their jerseys are sponsored by Lamartina. Some of the team's ponies come from Neil Hirsch's BlackWatch team (sponsored by Ralph Lauren himself), where Nacho plays his game. The trailer that Yale uses to transport their ponies from Bethany to the Armory is likewise a hand-me-down from BlackWatch stamped with Polo(TM) iconography.

The team even commands some international respect. Last summer, for the third year running, British retailer Jack Wills flew them to England to compete against Harvard in front of hundreds at the Guards Polo Club in Windsor. (Polo Magazine called it "the most prestigious polo club in the world"; its president is Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh.) The June event also featured matches between Eton and Harrow and Oxford and Cambridge, live music, and, of course, drinking, smoking, and well-dressed young people. The Bulldogs beat the Cantabs 4-3; it was the first time most of the Yale players had played outdoor polo. For a few days, they were as celebrated as the Yale polo players of yore. And then it was back to picking up poop in New Haven—or rather, in Bethany.

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Polo was invented in Persia, where the first matches may have been played as early as 500 B.C. Polo became known as the "sport of kings," and was enjoyed by generations of Persian, Indian, and, much later, British royalty. During the British conquest of India, British officers enjoyed "going native," a cultural immersion experience that included hunting tiger with the Rajah, taking an Indian wife or mistress, and playing polo. Soon afterwards, the first polo match was played in England between the 10th Hussars and 9th Lancers, and was remarkable primarily for the foul language of the players. From there, it spread throughout the British Empire.

In 1876, the first game of polo in the United States was played on 39th St. and 5th Ave. in New York. In those pre-automobile days, of course, horses still pulled carriages up and down the streets of Manhattan. Stables were everywhere, and riding a horse was not a hobby of the rich but a basic skill that many men and women possessed. Still, polo was not a common man's game. Each game required a number of

ponies—one per player per chukka—and the best polo ponies were (and still are) trained and bred specifically for the sport. Lastly, the game required a large, flat field and an open stable.

The Yale Polo Association was formed in 1903, under the leadership of Louis Stoddard, YC 1900. They practiced and played on Whalley Ave. On Sept. 29, 1906, hundreds of enthusiastic spectators came out to see the Yale Polo team play Rockaway for the Quinnipiac Cups. The team had regained its momentum after the untimely death of H.R. Babcock Jr. According to the special dispatch in the Times, "society was out in force." After four chukkas, the score was tied 14-14. It took five additional minutes for W.A. Hazard to score for Rockaway, making it 15-14, and sending the Elis home without silverware. It was, said the Times, the most exciting match ever played in New Haven.

But polo at Yale was already generating controversy. The sport had acquired a reputation for elitism and exclusivity. In 1915, Devereux Milburn, one of the best Americans ever to swing a mallet, wrote in the Yale Daily News that polo was undemocratic and not appropriate for college play. Drawing on his experience at Oxford, Milburn wrote, "The expense of the game was so great that very few could afford to play it....My idea of a college game is a game in which all can compete on an equal footing. This is true of baseball, football, rowing and the other college games. It could not be true of polo."

In May 1906 the team tried to reassure the student body via a Yale Daily News editorial, urging that "everyone who has ever ridden should try out for the team. Inability to afford more than one pony should not hinder any one from competing, as there were several men last year who played with one mount." Obviously, the standards of collegiate wealth were a bit different in those days—two of Princeton's polo stars arrived on campus with a string of 13 ponies from Colorado. This negative reputation persisted despite, or perhaps because of the sport's growth in popularity in certain circles. In The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald had the despicable Tom Buchanan play polo at Yale, and Gatsby slyly and repeatedly refers to him as "the polo player," a nickname that Tom tries to refute: "I'd a little rather not be the polo player."

With the exception of a few popular matches in the coming years, such as Harvard-Yale in 1969, (for which the team provided a keg of free beer, as they did at every home match in those days), popularity continued to decline and costs continued to mount. ROTC, whose presence was responsible for a number of Yale's ponies as well as for the upkeep of the armory, was kicked off campus in 1969. (ROTC had constructed the Armory in 1916, where they used polo ponies to train cavalry officers.) In the '60s, the team lost its varsity status.

The relationship between Yale Polo and the University also deteriorated. In 1979, polo enthusiast William Ylivisaker, PC '47, reminded the administration that the Phipps family had donated the Intramural fields in 1926 with the condition that they be used to play polo, not "to be discontinued without the approval of the donors." Assessing the legality of the fields' unapproved uses, Assistant General Counsel Linda Koch Lorimer, LAW '77, went so far as to track down 98-year-old Howard Phipps. "It would clearly be advantageous to have a 'tidier' record," wrote General Counsel Jose Cabranes, LAW '65 to President A. Bartlett Giamatti, SY '60, GRD '64, but the University felt it was in little danger of being sued. As one internal memo read, "After all, are there not rooms throughout the University which were given in

someone's name to be, say 'a reading room' and may now be a microfilm area or a catalog area?" The fields remained sans polo.

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In the summer of 2009, the Yale administration quietly announced that the barn at the Armory would close. As the financial crisis ate away at Yale's endowment, the University cited an inability to secure funds for the long-overdue renovations of the site. Since the early '70s, the polo program had been surviving on an annual budget of student dues and alumni donations. Yale's contribution to the sport was a very small portion of the budget: "gas money," as one player put it. (Liz Brayboy, who had taught me to swing a mallet a week earlier, would not tell me the current annual budget, but for the National Championship teams of the early 1980s it was between 15- and 25,000 dollars.)

Where would the 30 homeless ponies go? It seemed like Yale might finally have done away with that anachronistic sport of kings. The Yale Polo Alumni Board, which Michael Dawson, MC '04, had presciently reconvened a year earlier after a long absence, had several meetings with the University that summer. "We talked about getting fundraising to renovate the armory, but that wasn't really the issue," said Liz. "They didn't want polo on campus anymore."

Liz, Michael, and the other alumni convinced Yale to let them take control of the program. They sold half the horses and by October 2009, four months after the closure was announced, they had found room for the 15 others at the C&S Stables in Bethany. This year, she said, Yale Polo balanced the books.

Both she and Jimmy, the coach, rode for Yale at the Harriman Cup, a polo match between Yale and University of Virginia alumni organized to benefit both of the two schools' polo teams. (These days, it is mostly for the benefit of Yale.) On a recent Saturday, Yale lost to UVA on a last-minute goal. Liz considered it to be a good result, since the Cavaliers were the heavy favorites. While Liz and Jimmy thundered up and down the grass at high speeds, the members of the Yale Polo team walked around selling Harriman Cup shirts and tote bags. I watched a self-described "Wall Street douchebag" and Yale Polo alumnus buy a bag from Rebecca. "Keep the change!" he said.

Aside from the initial shock at Yale's announcement, no one on the polo team expressed disbelief or anger that the University had turned them out. It seemed obvious, to me and, I think, to them too, that this costly and unpopular sport was not a priority. A decrepit and little-used barn full of ponies was a liability and an expense in excess for a University that was cutting corners on all sides. As if to confirm the administration's worst fears, a senior at Harvard died from an injury sustained in polo practice a month after Yale shut down its stables.

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So how do we assess the value of a sport? In bird conservation, where scientists regularly debate which species to preserve with limited funds, there is a concept called triage, which argues for saving the most phylogenetically distinct species over more attractive, impressive, or popular candidates. At Yale, polo is that weird, endangered bird, and the alumni and players think it's worth saving: It's the only remaining

team sport played on horseback in America. It is by far the oldest team sport played at Yale. It's one of the few non-Western team sports still played in the world. It's a sport that almost no one plays before or after college; that most people have never seen and know only from the icon on a Ralph Lauren shirt.

But it is a beautiful game to watch. One Thursday night, I went out to the barn to watch the team's first varsity practice of the year. Their first game was in three days, against Harvard, at the Myopia Club in Massachusetts.

Seppi is finishing his breakdown of the Harvard squad while the others sit on the concrete floor of the stables. He points to Rebecca: "You mark Albany," he says. "Take him out to lunch, whatever."

The five of them lead their horses into the ring and mount. Around the ring in circles they walk, trot, canter. Liz throws out the balls. The players collect their mallets. Play can be clumsy at times—the arena is crowded. Sometimes they miss the ball. Sometimes it gets stuck along the sideboards. Once in a while, though, it all comes together—a horse charges across the barn and its rider swings and makes good contact and the ball flies through the air.

And then it's just five people on horses, standing in a barn, rain dripping from the eaves, in the middle of the night.