



# Rule changes promise exciting season

Patrons have rethought teams, raising expectations of a year of surprises, writes **Bob Sherwood**

The English high-goal polo season is shaping up to be one of the most open and unpredictable for years, with all of the 16 or so teams that will compete at the top level having undergone significant reshuffles of professional players this year.

Add to that the return of one of polo's great forces, Ellerston – whose patron is James Packer, son of Kerry Packer, the late Australian media tycoon and polo enthusiast – to UK high goal for the first time since 2008, and expectations of a classic season have rarely been higher.

Unusually, polo insiders have been loath to make predictions. Even the professionals chose to sit on the fence when contributing to the annual Polo Times predictions for the season.

"So many teams and combinations have changed that it is difficult to know how it's going to turn out," says Max Routledge, the 21-year-old five-goal professional and one of the English game's rising stars.

Alterations to handicaps forced some of the changes. However, Routledge believes changes to polo's rule book in 2011, designed to speed up the game and stop the strongest professional from hogging possession of the ball, have forced patrons to rethink their sides.

The changes were credited with leading to some surprise results last year – notably the Zacara team's victory in the Gold Cup. Previously, the best players were able to keep possession of the ball by continually changing direction to avoid tackles, a tactic that often won them penalties.

But the altered rules stopped players turning if an opponent was following closely, forcing more backhand shots and consequently more changes of possession.

Routledge thinks this altered team dynamics in such a way that the standard format of two strong players plus a weaker professional to help out by blocking opponents, along with the patron, is no longer necessarily the



Alterations designed to speed up the game and stop the best players from hogging the ball have contributed to some surprising results

Reuters

best option. The combined handicap of a high-goal team must not exceed 22.

"Before it was two big players and a lesser player. But Zacara won the Gold Cup last year with a strong three-man team. Now it is not so much about blocking and it is going to be much more about three strong players," Routledge says.

Routledge will join the brothers Nico and Facundo Pieres at La Bamba de Areco, one of the strongest teams in recent years, and likely to be so again this year.

Aficionados say much will depend on the improvement of Nico Pieres, who has captured much attention and joins the team in place of his other brother, Gonzalito, who has switched to Ellerston.

Zacara are again expected to prove challenging, while Salkeld, the team of patron Nick Clarke, has reportedly been lining up new horses. It will undoubtedly attract support as it

includes Luke Tomlinson, the England captain.

One potential cloud that threatened to cast a shadow over the season also seems to have lifted. Early in the year, diplomatic relations between the UK and Argentina became frayed ahead of the 30th anniversary of the Falklands conflict.

In the midst of the tensions, the England team was due to play at the famous Palermo polo grounds in Buenos Aires, which is owned by the Argentine military. To head off any potential trouble, the English team was asked to play as the "rest of the world".

"They [the Argentine polo authorities] were very grateful and we were not too fussed as there was no sponsorship involved," says David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association, the sport's governing body in the UK.

Unlike the disruption caused by the

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Falkland's conflict in the 1980s, when Argentines stopped travelling to the UK, Woodd insists the raised tensions will have little impact on the sport. "It would have to get a lot worse before it really affected polo. There is

no animosity between British and Argentine players," he says.

Another high-profile issue that was resolved recently was the question of sponsorship for prime events.

After 27 years of sponsorship,

Cartier, the jewellery maker, switched its backing from the International Day at Guards, the biggest attended polo event of the year, to the Queen's Cup, one of the top two high-goal tournaments.

That left a gap for sponsorship of the international event. Woodd concedes the task of finding a sponsor was not helped by the 2012 London Olympics. "The Olympics has eaten up a huge amount [of sponsorship]," he says.

However, Audi, the carmaker that already sponsors the England national team, recently announced a deal to back a new series of internationals, called the Audi International Polo Series. This will include not only the International day at Guards in July but also new internationals at Beaufort Polo Club in Gloucestershire and Chester Racecourse Polo Club in

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Polo



Players in the pipeline: a band performs at the recent Cartier International Dubai Polo Challenge, one of the United Arab Emirates' most prestigious tournaments

Getty

# Dubai club belies desert city's reputation

**Gulf**  
The UAE's casual polo scene is a hit with ex-pats, writes **Tom Gara**

To get to the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club, a home for the emirate's small but growing polo community, take a turn off Sheikh Zayed Road, the 12-lane artery that cuts through the city. As you leave the highway, the Mall of the Emirates is to your right, home of the desert city's iconic, and much-mocked, indoor ski slope.

Continuing on through the desert you find a fully-functioning autodrome, the headquarters of the International Cricket Council and a multipurpose sports stadium that hosts international cricket matches. And, if you set out to find it, you will also find one of Dubai's three polo clubs. The polo club is an improbably low-key – verging on the rustic – sporting ground that would not feel out of place in a pleasant country town. While the oversized mansions that ring the ground are familiar in Dubai, the sight of families picnicking on the grass bordering the field has a more subtle charm.

In Dubai, which has a tendency to turn even the most pedestrian of life's moments into a platform for extravagance, a day at the polo is a surprisingly casual affair. "It's one of the most popular picnic destinations in the city – no other venue attracts the kind of people that come to the club," says Vasken Vartanian, its sales and marketing manager. Alongside its equestrian facilities and more than 300 stables, it sees hundreds of visitors every Friday during the polo season, who come to enjoy the novel – by Dubai standards – experience of a picnic on grass combined with a match. "It is a bit of a hidden gem," says Marie, a US

expatriate visiting the club for the first time. Her two children play on an inflatable castle nearby while she sits on the patio of the clubhouse with a group of friends and watches as the first match of the day gets under way. As horses begin thundering across the field, she says she was worried that the combination of polo and

Dubai would mean the event would be "a bit over the top". Instead, she is taken aback by how relaxed it all feels. On this day in April, the club is hosting its end-of-season tournament, a series of matches played by teams made up of the small number of players that form the backbone of the club. Some play multiple games on different teams, and the games have the atmosphere more of an exhibition than a fully functioning league final. A commentator narrates the play over a loudspeaker system that rings the ground. His commentary is geared towards newcomers, explaining the intricacies of

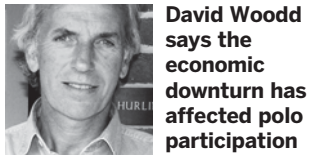
the game in a way that occasionally raises eyebrows among the regulars. Casual or first-time visitors tend to stick to the clubhouse side of the field, seated at shaded tables where waiters serve food and drink. The regulars, many of them friends and family of the players on the field, gravitate to the opposite side, parking their cars at the edge of the pitch and setting up picnic rugs and folding chairs to watch the match. A few dozen cars, mostly large sports utility vehicles, line this side of the ground on the day of the finals. It is a clear, sunny day, and the weather is pleasant. But

within weeks, the Gulf's notorious summer will make these kinds of days a distant memory. After the season closes, match play at the club is over until mid-October, as is the prospect of sustained periods outdoors when temperatures cross the 45-degree mark. "This is a family game, and from the time we start the season until the very end, you see so many families just enjoying the whole experience," says Farhang Sadeghi, who manages the equestrian activities at the club. "They love the game and they love coming here, and it is more than just the sport. It's a very special place for them."

## Changes promise exciting season

Continued from Page 1

Cheshire, the latter being outside the traditional venues for the sport. "This will allow a new audience to witness and enjoy the thrills of international polo," says Richard Thomas, chief executive of Chester racecourse. It is not the only non-traditional venue for polo, of course. Alternative forms of the game have made strides in recent years, including the Polo in the Park tournament at west London's Hurlingham Park, the Gaucho International at the city's O<sub>2</sub> arena and the British Beach Polo Championships, held at Sandbanks in Dorset. Yet while the top end might be poised for a potentially classic season, lower levels of polo are feeling the pinch in the tough economic climate. The HPA expects player numbers in the UK to remain steady at about 3,000. But, Woodd says, "participation has held up quite well at the top and bottom end – but it could be because the middle is slipping downwards. If low-goal participation is increasing, it is because it is stealing



David Woodd says the economic downturn has affected polo participation

from medium-goal rather than new people coming in." For example, patrons who previously ran two medium-goal teams are tending to run just one. Given the cost of participation and the current economic climate, it is not hard to see why. Woodd says medium-goal polo, including three professional players, would probably cost in the region of £6,000 per game and up to £250,000 a season for a team, all expenses included. "Even for a six-goal team, you would not be seeing much change out of £100,000 for a season," he says. That means it is not easy for many of the group who seem to lead the most charmed of lives – the professional polo players. Some are not getting as many medium-goal matches as they were previously and, as costs have gone up, most professionals are charging about the same fees as they did four years ago. "Expenditure on polo probably dropped 25 per cent [during the downturn]," Woodd says. However, such austerity is unlikely to be apparent should you happen to find yourself on the lawns at next month's Cartier Queen's Cup final or the International day at Guards later in the summer.

## ‘Rugby on horseback’ wins fans down under

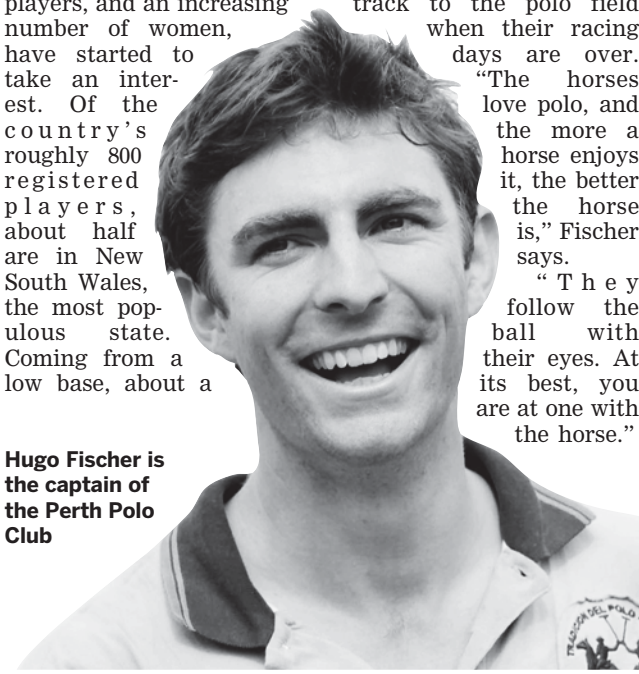
**Australia**  
Laid-back approach matches the local mood, says **Lachlan Colquhoun**

Having "grown up on the side of a polo field" in south-east Asia, Hugo Fischer has taken his passion for the game to the Western Australia capital of Perth. The 23-year-old engineer spent his early years in Malaysia and Singapore, where his father managed the Singapore Polo Club. "I started playing at about 11 years old and it was natural for me to continue that interest when we moved back to Perth," says Fischer, who plays as an amateur and is captain of the Perth Polo Club. "I have dabbled in other equestrian sports, but polo has always been my main focus. I have a real passion for it – I guess the best way to describe it is as rugby on horseback." While polo has an exclusive image in some parts of the world, it is more accessible, and even casual, in Australia – perhaps reflecting the country's laid-back attitude. Although polo's patronage by Kerry Packer, the late Australian media tycoon, once gave it something of a patrician image, those involved say it is no more elitist than any other equestrian activity, such as show jumping, or even a country town pony club. Fears that Packer's polo-playing son James could lose interest in the game following his father's death a few years ago proved unfounded. He has continued in his role as patron of the country's most prestigious club and tournament – at his Ellerston property in New South Wales's Hunter Valley, about 200 miles from Sydney. Indeed, Ellerston is set to return to UK high-goal this year, having spent more than £20m developing a new polo centre in the West Sussex countryside.

Currently, there are about 20 riders in Australia who would be termed professional, often combining polo with other equestrian activities such as breeding and riding. They typically earn about A\$100,000 (£62,300) a year locally from match fees and retainers, although they could more than double that if they followed the polo seasons overseas. Their numbers are augmented by professional riders from New Zealand, the UK and Argentina. "Our game is quite recognised and the international players do enjoy coming here to play," says Ian McDuie, president of the NSW Polo Association. "Internationally, we compete well. We recently had a test against South Africa and we won that. And we made the finals of the World Cup in Argentina this year." According to McDuie, polo has gained in popularity in Australia in recent years as metropolitan-based players, and an increasing number of women, have started to take an interest. Of the country's roughly 800 registered players, about half are in New South Wales, the most populous state. Coming from a low base, about a

fifth of those are women. "Some of these people are already involved with horses, but polo has become attractive to people from the city in the last few years. They are not necessarily rich, but they are wealthy enough to be able to rent the horses without owning them," he says. In Australia, the sport originated on cattle stations, where horses used to muster cattle were also used for polo. However, as McDuie points out, there are not so many people with horses in the bush any more. "That tradition of farm-based polo is not as strong as it used to be. Our game is changing to be more professional, and more city focused," he says. At this lower level, the competition is no less fierce than among the professionals. McDuie notes that at the recent New South Wales state championships, four of the eight teams were there purely as amateurs, and a professional team beat one of the amateur teams in the final only during extra time. The ponies are almost exclusively sourced locally, or from New Zealand, whose polo scene is closely associated with Australia's. The amateurs of Perth Polo Club, Fischer included, ride former racehorses, which transfer from the track to the polo field when their racing days are over. "The horses love polo, and the more a horse enjoys it, the better the horse is," Fischer says. "They follow the ball with their eyes. At its best, you are at one with the horse."

Hugo Fischer is the captain of the Perth Polo Club



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# Drive to lift profile of international game

## Competitions

Playing for your country is not always the pinnacle of the sport, writes James Mullan

In most sports, the pinnacle of success is to be selected to represent your country. Yet, in polo, this is not always the case.

Broadly speaking, there are two reasons for this. First, national associations have not worked hard enough to protect the image of their international sides. Second, the game's handicap system means that nations are regularly prevented from selecting their best teams in order to ensure that no side has a significant advantage over another.

This levelling of the playing field is particularly important in international competition, given that all the game's top players come from so few countries. Without restrictions it could be virtually guaranteed that Argentina – the only country able to field a 40-goal team – would never be beaten.

Audiences are largely aware of this, which undoubtedly makes it harder to engage as enthusiastically with polo internationals as they do with other sports, which usually place no limitations on the selection of a country's very best talent.

Polo also has additional logistical issues that other sports rarely have to contend with: not least the problem of horses.

If an England team is invited to play overseas, it makes a difference to the selectors if some players already have a string of ponies available to them there.

Players are also less likely to be selected if they have to be flown in from a far-flung part of the world where they might already be earning a living. This is particularly relevant in the European winter, when polo professionals spread themselves far and wide.

In the polo world, this is acknowledged and understood.



Top of their game: the England team of Luke Tomlinson, Malcolm Borwick, Mark Tomlinson and James Beim celebrate victory in the Cartier International

The Picture Library

However, those striving for more interest in, and sponsorship of, national teams and events are facing a further problem: the tarnishing of the game's image by numerous "international" competitions that are entirely unsanctioned.

Tournaments often opportunistically boast the participation of "England" or "Great Britain" when the sides in question have nothing to do with the Hurling-

ham Polo Association, the UK governing body.

In 2010, the HPA appointed an independent consultancy to carry out a full-scale audit of the association's commercial assets. The upshot was that they actually own surprisingly little. Their most prized possessions, it was revealed, are the intellectual property rights to the international polo brands of the countries and regions over

which they have jurisdiction, such as "England polo".

The consultants recommended that the HPA should take far greater pains to protect the image and reputation of their brands.

When a team calling itself "United Kingdom" appeared in a recent Nations Cup event in Dubai, it apparently did so without the HPA having any advance knowledge. The team

The Snow Polo World Cup was won by two Argentines and an ex-pat English pro playing under the flag of Hong Kong

consisted of two virtually unknown British low-goal players and, worse still, two Argentine professionals.

"There is not much we can do about foreign professionals if they do not play in the UK," admits David Woodd, HPA chief executive.

"But any player on a team that purports to be representing a region of the UK without the approval of the HPA's stewards

will now most likely face a ban if they expect to take part in any subsequent HPA tournaments," he adds.

The HPA's threat does at least signal the way for improvement in the international protection of UK polo as a brand. However, one country cannot act alone, and support is also required from other associations – not least the Argentine Polo Association and the United States Polo Association.

The Americans have long recognised the value of their brand, earning millions of dollars in revenue from their USPA clothing line, though the extent to which they prioritise Team USA's international performances is open to debate.

According to Woodd, it is the job of the Federation of International Polo, the game's official worldwide governors, to ensure the international issue is taken seriously.

However, the recent Snow Polo World Cup, held in China and sanctioned by the FIP, was won by two Argentines and an ex-pat English professional playing under the flag of Hong Kong, a territory without a single active polo club. "Hong Kong" even dispatched Argentina, England and South Africa on their way to victory.

All this serves to dilute the sense that international polo is important in its own right, when it actually serves a valuable role in giving players experience in high-pressure environments and against talented opposition.

Yet in the eyes of spectators and sponsors, it continues to be undermined by the uncomfortable feeling that one is rarely actually watching the best each country has to offer.

None of this will be an issue when England's best players ride out for the four test matches this summer, including the newly labelled Audi International Day at Guards Polo Club in July, when they will face a 26-goal South Africa team in what will be the showpiece game of the season.

For these players at least, a place in the team will be the highest honour that the game can offer.

# Beach game leads charge to pull in new spectators

## Different formats

Fresh ideas are helping to make the sport more accessible, reports James Mullan

This year marks five years of the British Beach Polo Championships on the upmarket Sandbanks peninsula in Dorset, four years of Polo in the Park in west London and two years of Gaucho International Polo at the O<sub>2</sub> arena in London.

Such mini-milestones are part of a trend that is breathing new life into polo's hitherto stuffy and often exclusive reputation.

"That stigma is exactly what we wanted to change," says Rory Heron, chief executive of World Polo, the company behind Mint Polo in the Park, which brings a sexed-up, three-a-side version of the game – roughly analogous to what Twenty20 is to cricket – to Fulham's Hurlingham Park in June.

"Our aim is to make polo inclusive, accessible and ideal for fun, young Londoners. Key to that is not overpricing the event. A £25 ticket gives access to all the main tents and enclosures," he says.

Heron hopes 25,000-29,000 spectators will attend over three days this year, which would make it the UK's best-attended polo events.

Establishing Polo in the Park has meant learning to work in partnership with polo's traditional community, notably the Hurlingham Polo Association, the UK's governing body.

Having not consulted with the HPA when it launched in 2009, Heron concedes that the event may have alienated some members early on.

"The rules of polo have existed for hundreds of years for a reason, and it was probably true that [Polo in the Park] organisers meddled with the game a little too much in the inaugural year," Heron admits. "These days, we have learnt how far to take



The British Beach Polo Championships at Sandbanks, Dorset

it in terms of innovation, and so it is more about tweaking the game, with the advice of the HPA, rather than making wholesale changes."

The same was true at the Gaucho International, played in March at the O<sub>2</sub>, previously known as the Millennium Dome. With the HPA given a say, the rules were adjusted to make the game easier to follow for uninitiated spectators, while achieving the organisers' common aims of fluent, attacking, end-to-end polo.

"The changes we made in close consultation with the HPA ensured a quicker, more succinct and better spectacle," says Martin Williams, operations director for Gaucho Restaurants group, which devised the event. "Plus, by gaining the association's support and endorsement, it helped bring people from the polo set to the event."

Mingling with the traditional polo community appears to be key for all these new forms of the game. At the Asahi British Beach Polo Championships in July, a condition of the deal with the local authority to stage the event was an area from which passing members of the public on the Sandbanks beach could watch for free.

"Polo purists want grass polo played at the highest level. But there are variations of every sport and polo should be no different," says Johnny Wheeler, director of the British

Beach Polo Championships. "Our event is a chance for people to try something they have had preconceptions about. There is not much evidence that it inspires new viewers to go and take [polo] up, but it gets people curious and our numbers are increasing each year, which suggests guests are either coming back or they are passing on a recommendation."

Alex Webbe, chairman of the Florida-based International Beach Polo Association, says these events

'Any effort that brings new people to any form of polo is good for the game'

Johnny Wheeler

"deserve the support of the polo community".

"Even in the cases of events that look more like parties than polo tournaments, it attracts people.

"And my thinking is that any effort that brings new people to any form of polo is good for the game.

"They go to beach polo or snow polo and get excited. The next thing is, you see them at Guards, Cowdray and so on."

This view is echoed by many of the professionals, even those that do not benefit from them directly. "More events mean more exposure for the game,"

says Luke Tomlinson, England polo captain, whose seven-goal handicap and professional contracts mean he is unlikely to play in such lower-handicapped one-off events himself.

"All the feedback I hear is positive. It is good to have diversity and, if people are willing to invest in the projects that create this, they should be encouraged."

Polo in the Park's Heron adds: "Modern sport is all about appealing to the spectator. Polo has always been really exciting but, with large fields, people are often a long way from the action."

"In order to guarantee entertainment for first-time polo-goers it is essential to get them alongside the speed, agility and physicality of the game."

Gaucho Restaurants' Williams says securing the O<sub>2</sub> as a venue has been a huge plus for his event. "Because of the seated layout right around the playing arena, they [spectators] have no choice but to engage with something they might otherwise find intimidating. For our Gaucho regulars, they come because they know they can rely on good hospitality, but they also leave being surprised by how much they enjoyed and were energised by the sport. Polo ticks their boxes as an entertainment spectacle."

But Tomlinson insists there needs to be a balance, arguing such events should be an "enticing exhibition... without focusing on entertainment so much that they border on pantomime. New projects should probably be treated with some caution," he adds.

"But the UK model appears to be pretty good because the HPA has now been consulted in each case. While none are likely to rival the Coronation Cup, they do seem to have carved out a valuable niche," says Tomlinson.

Whether such new forms of polo can sustain their popularity over the long term remains to be seen, but the early evidence suggests that – whether the traditionalists like it or not – they do have a role to play.

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Polo

# Wealthy elite revives the spirit of the emperors

China

The country is once again playing an ancient game, writes **John O’Sullivan**

England, Argentina and the US may be the most celebrated polo-playing nations, but the sport is enjoying a remarkable renaissance in one of the first countries to embrace the game. The ancient game originated on the plains of Asia along the famed silk routes between China and the west. First played by the Persians 2,500 years ago, polo was later adopted by the Tang Dynasty, who ruled China from 618-907 AD, and became the game of choice for the Chinese elite, with high-ranking officials building playing fields in their own gardens. The game was particularly popular in the former capital Chang’an (modern-day Xian) and there is evidence that the game was widely played by women and children. Polo, or “jiju” as it was called, was viewed more as a form of entertainment rather than a competitive sport and was also used by the Tang emperors as a tool of diplomacy. But the pastime that some argue came to the country as long as 1,800 years ago was dead by the time the Cultural Revolution started. A decade ago, China did not have a single polo venue to its name. But polo’s popularity in China has risen sharply in recent years and, backed by the country’s growing wealthy elite, the world’s most populous nation is set to become a significant force in the years to come. Four big-spending clubs have opened in the past eight years, and more are planned. Yet it is not the

number of clubs that makes China’s return to polo so notable. Rather, it is the ambitions they have. Tang Polo Club near Beijing and Tianjin’s Goldin Metropolitan, backed by Goldin Group, the investment company owned by Pan Sutong, the Hong Kong property magnate, have already hosted 16-goal international tournaments on their impressive grounds, and each has imported more than 100 ponies from Australasia and Europe. In February, the Metropolitan underlined its ambitions by hosting the world’s first fully-sanctioned Snow Polo World Cup. While the decision by the Federation of International Polo, the worldwide governing body, to award such a prestigious event to a country without a national polo association raised eyebrows, the tournament brought a dozen international teams to China, including top players such as Pablo Jaureteche from Argentina and Australia’s Glen Gilmore. The Metropolitan paid \$2m to create artificial snow for the ground and mounted all the teams with a string of more than 200 ponies. Some 3,500 spectators turned up, and the tournament was shown live on Hong Kong’s TVB television channel. Harvey Lee, vice-chairman of Goldin, says events such as the Snow Polo World Cup are helping the game in China to grow. “The tournament was a great success,” he says. “The problem is that awareness of polo in China is low compared to other sports, but what we are seeing is that people are interested in finding out more.” Next for the Metropolitan is a four nations tournament, played at 22-goal or 24-goal level, the same level as the British Open. According to Lee, it will not be long before the world’s leading players appear in China. “We are hopeful we



Argentina took on Chile during the recent Snow Polo World Cup, when Tianjin’s Goldin Metropolitan polo club played host

WENN

The Metropolitan paid \$2m to create artificial snow for the ground and mounted all the teams on a string of more than 200 ponies

will have a 10-goaler playing in Tianjin before long,” he says. “In the long term we have ambitions to hold a 40-goal tournament, but we will need to improve our horses before then.” The Metropolitan’s ambition is matched by Tang Polo Club. The club’s chairman and owner is Liu Shilai, China’s most recognisable player. Shilai has a one-goal handicap (10-goal being the highest and minus-two the lowest) and has played in Argentina, Australia, the US, Europe and Thailand. His vision is to pass his passion for the game on to his countrymen and create a legacy for polo in China. “I really want our members and guests to get a true polo experience and to see polo tradition passed down from generation to generation,” Shilai says. With two international standard polo fields and China’s first indoor arena, Tang last year hosted the 16-goal China Open, its most prestigious tournament to date. Yet to take polo to a high level in today’s China, there is much work to be done. “For polo to develop we need to be able to breed polo ponies. “Additionally, we need to make sure there is quality training, so we will need to develop more Chinese coaches,” Shilai says. The club’s desire to encourage Chinese players is illustrated by this summer’s zero-goal Amateur Open, featuring eight all-Chinese teams. “This is important in the development process. It will enable more players to become involved in the sport and will make it more interesting for the local audience,” Mr Shilai says. Elsewhere in China, lower-goal tournaments for ex-pats and up-and-coming locals are held regularly at China’s two oldest clubs, Beijing’s Sunny Times club, founded in 2005, and Shanghai’s Nine Dragons club, which opened three years later. Sunny Times was founded by Xia Yang, a businessman, after he was inspired by watching Prince Charles

play at Cirencester Park Polo Club in 1996. Although Tang and the Metropolitan are grabbing much of the attention, it was Sunny Times that started the ball rolling, according to Han Bing, the club’s general manager. “Modern polo was spread in China by Xia Yang, our chairman,” he says. “He set up the first modern polo club in China and started to hold international polo tournaments. We have 92 horses in our club, which are all bred and trained by ourselves.” A fifth Chinese polo club, the Beijing International Polo Club, is set to open next month, while the Goldin Group has plans to add to its polo portfolio in the near future. It has identified a potential site for a club in Shanghai and is also looking to set up clubs in Shenzhen and Hong Kong. So, while it may be some time before China is able to field a world-class team of its own, developments across the country suggest it is well on the way to becoming the world’s next big polo destination.



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L I N D B E R G



# ‘Work hard, play hard and be honest’

## Interview Lyndon Lea

The well-known investor talks to **Yolanda Carslaw**

Lyndon Lea is a former Goldman Sachs banker who co-founded Lion Capital, the private equity company that has invested in a host of well-known brands, from Jimmy Choo shoes to Wagamama restaurants and Findus frozen food. He is also a passionate polo player. He owns a ranch in Santa Barbara, California and his Zacara team (named after his children Zachary and Chiara) won last year's Gold Cup and the recent US Open.

**Describe your role.**  
Private equity investor in the consumer goods sector.

**What are your three best features in business?**  
I am insightful and focused, with a “can do” attitude.

**And your worst?**  
Impatient, demanding, too trusting.

**How do you fit month-long tournaments into your schedule?**  
Work comes first. Focus and time management are critical and good organisation of grooms, horse trainers and managers means you need to spend less time on polo than to play, say, golf off a 10 handicap. Staying fit and healthy is also important: riding a 1,000lb animal at 40mph in a full-contact environment is dangerous – I have broken at least one bone every year I've competed. I played the Gold Cup with my left hand broken in four places.

**What are the advantages of playing in the US compared with the UK?**  
The US weather is more reliable, and high-goal polo is faster and more exciting because it is played at 26 goals. The UK has more history, and it is more competitive because more teams enter high-goal (at 22 goals). But both governing bodies [HPA and USPA] struggle to understand the needs of high-goal sponsors, and both



Riding a 1,000lb animal at 40mph in a full-contact environment is dangerous – I have broken at least one bone every year I have competed

are incredibly political. Umpiring used to be better in the US but now it is stronger in the UK. However, in both countries it is the area most in need of improvement.

**How did Zacara get the edge in last year's Gold Cup?**  
We had a young, hungry team detached from the families that dominate polo. We had great team spirit and plenty of good horses, many of which had not been used much with previous players.

**How do you keep fit?**  
I have a physical training regime and study Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

**Which is your favourite pony?**  
In the US, Sweet and Low, Toro, Happy Trap, Mexicana and Antoinette have speed, lateral ability and good temperaments. In the UK, Molly can do two amazing chukkas and never miss a game. Salsa may have been my best ever, but she retired after we won the Gold Cup.

**Which is your favourite playing field?**  
For pleasure, the Zacara and Les Lions fields. For competition, Cowdray Park.

**What have you learnt from Facundo Pieres, your US Open team mate?**  
I have never seen an athlete with such talent yet such humility. His hand-eye coordination is easily the best in the game today. Facundo has a passion to win, and he makes you realise that what appears impossible is possible.

**How would your PA describe you?**  
Stretched – that's why I need three.

**And your head groom?**  
Loco, as every year I break or tear something.

**How do you celebrate a big win?**  
The team celebrated the Gold Cup win with a glass of champagne. The pros then went to be with the horses and grooms for *mate* [a traditional South America hot beverage]. I ordered pizza at home and cracked open a special bottle of wine [a 1995 Chateau Haut-Brion].

**Which sports do you enjoy watching?**  
I prefer to participate, but I will watch and enjoy football and Ultimate Fighting Championship [mixed martial arts].

**How high a handicap do you hope to achieve?**  
Given how competitive the game has become it is difficult for a sponsor to exceed a one-goal handicap and maintain responsibilities away from polo. Going beyond one would be like having a single-figure golf handicap while holding down a demanding job: I do not see it as realistic. To me, one goal is like a 12 handicap in golf: respectable, but it does not consume your life. I am happy to stay on one until I make the graceful retreat to zero.

**What is your golden rule in business?**  
Work hard, play hard, but above all be honest. Make sure you can look in the mirror and feel good about your day, whether you have won or



Lyndon Lea (in black) in action for his Zacara team, winner of last year's Gold Cup and the recent US Open

Lila Photo

lost. You get one chance at life: don't lose it through deception or dishonesty to others or to yourself.

**Who has been your biggest influence in life?**  
My mother gave me my passion and my integrity; my children give me my appreciation for life and the desire to embrace every moment.

**And in polo?**  
The Grace family at Ascot Park

taught me to play polo, then pushed me to aim higher, while Ruki Baillieu, the Australian pro, introduced me to high-goal polo. My horse trainer, Matthew Gonzalez, taught me the little I know about horses and the Argentine pro Eduardo Novillo Astrada taught me about organisations and flow – not just about riding off an opponent, but about positioning, too. Spending time with players such as Carlos Gracida and Mike Azzaro and

playing against today's 10-goalers is an influence in itself. Some patrons have shown me what to avoid; others what to emulate. Tom Barrack, for instance, plays with soul, athleticism and sportsmanship. And my Gold Cup team mates from 2011, Hilario Ulloa, Nachi du Plessis and Gonzalo Deltour, taught me that having hearts of lions and teamwork is the ultimate combination. I believe the same is true for business – and life.

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## Polo

# Four legs good, two wheels much better

### Hardcourt bike polo

Urban hipsters are reinventing the game, finds **Serge Debrebant**

It is a rainy evening in north London, and six grown men on bicycles are tearing around a tarmac basketball court in pursuit of a small street-hockey ball. Andrew Todd, a fashion designer with an impressive bushy beard, collects the ball with his mallet and hits a long, high pass towards team mate Rupert Evans-Harding, communications director at a furniture company. Evans-Harding pushes down hard on the pedals and races after the pass. When the ball arrives he strikes with his mallet, placing it flush between two traffic cones – goal! This is hardcourt bike polo. And while it may be a little-known game for now, it is starting to gain traction. “It is really a sport in its infancy,” says Todd, who has been playing since 2008. “But that is what is great about it.” Some of the moves these men are making would be hard for the average cyclist. They hop sideways, pivot their bikes almost on the spot and ride while dribbling the ball fluently. With their mallets they resemble polo players of a sort, but the way they move around the court and block one another is more reminiscent of ice hockey. Hardcourt bike polo’s origins are not entirely clear, although it is thought to have been invented by cycle couriers in Seattle in the late 1990s, spreading across North America, and arriving in London in 2006, brought by a Londoner who had seen cycle couriers playing while on a visit to New York. The first UK matches were held at a basketball court near Brick Lane in the city’s fashionable east end. Today, about a hundred hardcourt bike polo enthusiasts compete regularly at six venues across the capital. Most are men in their 20s or 30s. On the Tuesday in April



Players from the London Bike Polo League in action at a basketball court in Islington, north London

Getty

when I visit, some are waiting on the sidelines with beer cans in hand, chatting while watching the game. “It is a mixed crowd, but we are all bike enthusiasts,” says Josh Cohen, who is on a gap year after university. He is the chairman of the London Hardcourt Bike Polo Association, a body founded in 2009 to promote the game. Cohen estimates that there are about 25,000 participants in 370 cities. But despite being slower off the mark than its US counterparts, “London has the biggest

community of all the cities in the world”, he boasts. As much as traditional polo players adore horses, so bike polo players love their bicycles. Most use single-speed bikes with low gear ratios that make them easy to manoeuvre, though the sport used to be associated with the fixed-gear bike scene. “I like fixed-gear bikes and have one myself, but it is not convenient during the game because you have to pedal constantly,” says Todd. Most players customise their bikes – some have fixed home-

made discs to the front wheels to protect the spokes and block the ball. Mallets are made out of ski poles or golf club shafts, with plastic water pipes as heads. “There is a DIY spirit to the community,” says Cohen. Rules are in constant evolution and vary from city to city, but usually two teams of three play against each other until one scores a set number of goals – typically three or five. Players can hit the ball with any side of the mallet head, but scoring is only allowed with the small end.

Players report broken arms and wrists, while others talk about mallet hits to the face

If a player puts a foot on the ground he has to move to a designated point at the side of the court and “tap out” before continuing to play. Cyclist-on-cyclist contact is allowed, and bike polo can be a rough sport. Players report broken arms and wrists, while others talk about mallet hits to the face. For this reason, most wear protective gear including pads, a helmet and a face cage. “People still get injured, but it is a more controlled game,” says Todd. When played on grass, bike polo is actually an old, and

mostly forgotten, sport. It is said Irishman Richard Mecredy invented the game in 1891, and it even made it to the Olympic Games in London in 1908, where Ireland won gold. By the 1930s, a hundred clubs were competing in the UK alone. Even today, some clubs still compete on grass, but they mix little with the hardcourt bike polo crowd. There is even less crossover between the hardcourt bike polo scene and those who play polo on horseback. “None of us have ever played that,” says Cohen. Some teams have found sponsors, while niche brands such as Milwaukee Bicycle Co and Fixcraft have begun to cater to players, selling mallet shafts and heads, helmets and bike forks suited for the rough play and quick manoeuvring required by the sport. While hardcourt bike polo is still a small, tight-knit community with flat hierarchies and limited organisation, this is beginning to change. “Some players would like to see the sport grow because it makes it easier for us to find courts, but others would prefer that it stays underground,” says Dan Howarth, a hardcourt bike polo enthusiast and photographer. National and international competitions have been introduced in the past few years – Todd’s team, Cosmic, came second at the most recent European championship, which was held in Geneva in 2010. Back at the court in north London, the game is over and Todd’s team has won. Those who have been watching from the sidelines now throw their mallets on to a pile – a sign that they want to play. Todd picks up the mallets, shuffles them behind his back and selects new teams. The two sets of players then line up behind their respective goals and Cohen shouts: “Three, two, one, polo!” Four men and two women race to the centre of the court where the ball is waiting: this is the “joust”. The fastest player collects the ball and starts to dribble, but quickly loses possession. A new game has started.



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