



AHEAD OF THE PACK

Ever since Sinclair Hill took Kerry Packer to Cowdray Park in 1986, Kerry was fascinated with polo. Rosalyn Packer describes how his legacy was created, and continues to endure, at Ellerston

Polo encompassed all that Kerry Packer loved about sport – his eye for the ball, his love of horses, and a competitive game that could be played and enjoyed with amateurs and professionals. Sinclair Hill was retiring from International Polo, and Kerry purchased 18 of his ponies, and four or five from Ross McGilvray, including the famous Onassis, who became Kerry's favourite horse. In November 1986, with Sinclair's advice and encouragement, Jim Gilmore was employed as Ellerston's polo manager, and so the adventure began.

Ellerston, located near Scone in New South Wales, Australia, had its first attempt at a polo game in January 1987, on a level area where the clubhouse, tennis courts, gym, pool and cinema stand today. The Ellerston general manager at the time, Tony Clark, KP, James Packer, Fred Johnson the quarter horse trainer, Lance Shepherd and Jim Gilmore made up the three-a-side game. Only Jim and Lance had played before, but it was very competitive and the first of many 'Ellerston White vs Ellerston Black' battles.

Construction of the polo fields – the stables, the clubhouse, players' homes and other buildings – began in 1987. In 2001, The Ellerston Golf Course, designed by Greg Norman, was completed and it has just been rated #19 in the world.

The first official Ellerston game was the Invitational game with Prince Charles during his Australian Bicentennial visit in late January 1988, and was played on the recently completed River field. The players were: Ellerston White – The Prince of Wales, Lance

Shepherd, Peter Cudmore and Hamish Munro VS Ellerston Black – James Packer, Stuart Gilmore, Sinclair Hill and Alex Makim.

Kerry very soon realised he needed reinforcements, so more players were employed and more horses acquired to form the Ellerston White and Ellerston Black Polo teams.

The first Ellerston Tournaments were held in March 1989 for the Ellerston Challenge Cup and the JD McLeod Cup on the newly built couchgrass fields.

Onassis, Kerry's favourite horse, came down with colic the night before the tournament, and Kerry helicoptered Al Simson from the Scone Vet Centre to save her, which he did. Al was then employed by Kerry, and the Onassis Hilton Vet Clinic was built.

Ellerston subsequently became a pioneer in the world of embryo transplants. Kerry had purchased Longboat, an English thoroughbred by Welsh Pageant to run in the Melbourne Cup. In the UK in 1986, Longboat had won The Ascot Gold Cup, The Doncaster Cup and the Goodwood Cup, but broke down during training in Queensland and was transferred to Ellerston where the Polo breeding started in 1990. He was the first stallion used for embryo transplant with his foals born in 1992.

The Ellerston teams made successful trips all over Australia competing in Club Tournaments, and in 1988, Kerry decided to expand to the UK. Fyning Hill at Rogate near Midhurst was bought, followed by Stedham where two fields were constructed using Kentucky Blue grass.



Opposite: Jeff Fisher leads the Ellerston ponies on exercise. Left: Aerial view of Ellerston

KERRY PROVIDED OPPORTUNITIES FOR MANY YOUNG PLAYERS WANTING TO START A POLO CAREER



Gonzalo Tanoira was Ellerston's first Argentine polo player commencing Easter 1989, followed by many famous players including Gonzalo and Alfonso Pieres; Adolfo Cambiaso; Carlos and Memo Gracida; Bautista Heguy and many more of the Heguy family.

At the time, Argentinians were not permitted to play in the UK due to the Falkland Islands war, but this ban was then lifted for the 1990 UK polo season where Kerry played with Gonzalo Tanoira and Alfonso Pieres, and the following year with Gonzalo and Alfonso Pieres.

Over the years, many Argentinian players competed in the UK and in Ellerston Tournaments and many friendships were made. The first Australian 40/40 Polo Tournament was held at Ellerston on 27 April 1991, and the second at Warwick Farm, Sydney in 1992.

Kerry's desire for excellence in horsepower was unparalleled, and ponies were acquired from all around the world. The stallions used progressed to the purchase of Norman Pentaquad and he became one of the world's most influential sires. Indeed, thanks to Norman, the great mares and the embryo transplant programme, the Ellerston bloodlines became well known.

Devoted to his horses both at Ellerston and Fyning Hill, he would drive to the stables each night to feed them biscuits. The horses knew the sound of his car, and would whinny and kick the stable doors – no discount biscuits, as these were certainly not discount ponies.

Kerry was competitive with his polo and had the best teams possible for all tournaments. He provided opportunities for many young players wanting to start a polo career and he made a lasting contribution to the Polo world in pony breeding and polo fields. The Polo fields at Ellerston, Stedham in England and Ellerstina in Argentina set the benchmark of excellence with drainage and regular sanding to keep them in top condition.

The 10 years the Ellerston teams competed in the UK and Deauville in France were a wonderful time, and the friendly rivalry

between Urs Schwarzenbach's Black Bears, Hubert Perrodo's Labergorce and the Ellerston teams produced some amazing and very competitive matches between the three great friends.

They arranged and hosted a Patrons meeting at Fyning Hill where they asked the HPA to lower Patrons handicaps by one goal, and to allow Patrons to play off a minimum handicap of zero, and this was achieved. The Guards Club Queen's Cup Semi-Final matches are now the Hubert Perrodo Cup, followed by the Kerry Packer Cup.

Kerry closed the UK polo operations in 1999 after winning five Queen's Cups and three Gold Cups, and Fyning Hill was sold. The Ellerston close of season party, which was held after the Gold Cup for all involved in the world of Polo, also came to an end.



From top: Kerry Packer with the Queen after winning one of the five Queen's Cups; Kerry Packer



From top: Nic Fiddian Green's Artemis sculpture, overlooking the Home Field, marks Kerry burial spot; Kerry and Gonzalo Tanoira



Some of Kerry's favourite ponies came home to Ellerston, but many of the great ponies went to Ellerstina, Argentina, where Kerry had bought La Baronessa in 1991 from Peter Brant and renamed the property Ellerstina.

In December 2005, not long before he died, Kerry watched with enormous pride the very best of his Ellerston and Ellerstina bred ponies competing in the Argentine Open. Kerry is buried overlooking the Ellerston home field, with Onassis and Norman Pentaquad not far away.

James Packer took over Ellerston Polo and, in 2006, returned Ellerston White to Stedham in the UK, playing with Gonzalito and Facundo Pieres. A total of 35 Ellerston bred horses were exported from Ellerston to mount the team and they succeeded in getting to the finals in the Queen's and Gold Cups, being defeated in both, but winning the Queen's Cup in 2008.

The spring and autumn tournaments and transplant programme continued at Ellerston and in 2013 Ellerston started a two-day Polo and Golf School for local and visiting kids, with excellent coaches headed by Anto White and Glen Gilmore, which is a huge success.

In 2010, Manor Farm (see page 46 Selham Airfield) was leased from Cowdray Park, and stables and two polo fields were built. James Packer played in Soto Grande in 2010 and 2011, winning the gold Cup in 2010, and being beaten in the final 2011. In 2011, Gillon McLaughlin and Stirling MacGregor were based at Manor Farm, and James Packer played in the UK through the very wet 2012 UK season.

James also started a breeding programme in England, which Jim Gilmore now owns. Polo ponies and stallions have been sold worldwide and the Ellerston horses continue to be well regarded.

Manor Farm was then leased to El Remanso from 2013 to 2018, and El Remanso won the Cowdray Park Gold Cup in 2018. David Paradice's Scone team is now based there, winning the Queen's Cup in 2019.

In 2014, Glen Gilmore was employed as Ellerston's polo manager, and the following year, in 2015, James's mother Ros took over the Ellerston Polo operation and renamed it Ellerston Onassis Polo (EOP). In October that year, Ellerston held a polo pony reduction sale, which enabled many players and breeders

to buy the Ellerston bloodlines. David Paradice is now EOP's main patron and James Harper is contracted to play at Ellerston in the spring and autumn tournaments.

Ellerston is continuing with the embryo transplant breeding programme and has purchased two stallions from Adolfo Cambiaso to strengthen the bloodlines, and we are also looking at cloning in the USA. The friendship with the Pieres family and Luisita Tanoira is strong, and time is spent at Ellerstina.

Ellerston has been stricken with a devastating drought in the last few years and so we have not been able to host our regular tournaments, then this year the Covid-19 virus has led to the cancellation of the Australian autumn tournaments, which is a great shame as Ellerston has finally had good rain and the fields and pastures are back in excellent condition. We will continue to battle on.

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The 18th hole of the Greg Norman course