

# THE SUNDAY FIELD

Reflecting on the demise of Brackenridge Park field in San Antonio, USPA chairman Stewart Armstrong proposes a trio of initiatives to keep the sport of polo thriving and vibrant

ILLUSTRATION: PETER JAMES FIELD



MUSEUM OF POLO ARCHIVE

The San Antonio Polo Club was founded around the turn of the 20th century, and is one of the oldest polo clubs in the USA. The field that was the genesis of the club's formation was donated by George Brackenridge, founder of Brackenridge Park, in 1899. He dedicated a regulation-size grass polo field, in perpetuity, for the use of the public as a part of the 343 acres that constituted his land donation in the heart of the city. There were other fields located on private property around the outskirts of San Antonio that were owned by horse dealers and ranchers but none were as centrally located. So the Brackenridge Park field became the "Sunday field", and with boards and bleachers it became the showcase for polo in San Antonio.

Many of the USA's top players developed their games in San Antonio. Cecil Smith, Charles Smith, Joe Barry, Ray Harrington Jr, Bobby Beveridge, Roy, Bill and Harold Barry (pictured, in order of appearance from left to right) and more all played extensively in San Antonio on weekends in Brackenridge Park.

In the 1970s Steve Gose came to San Antonio and constructed the Retama Polo Center. Retama's history is well known, as many US Opens were played there and one Cup of the Americas. It enjoyed a great run for two decades, but because of Retama one of the casualties was the Brackenridge Park field. No one needed it anymore, or so we thought, and the city of San Antonio, which had been operating a golf driving range when the field was not being used for polo, decided to enlarge the golf component and basically destroyed the field for use as a polo field.

Today, the San Antonio Polo Club is made up of a small group of players with no regulation polo field. There are no serious "patrons" among them. Considering the club's history, it is small by comparison.

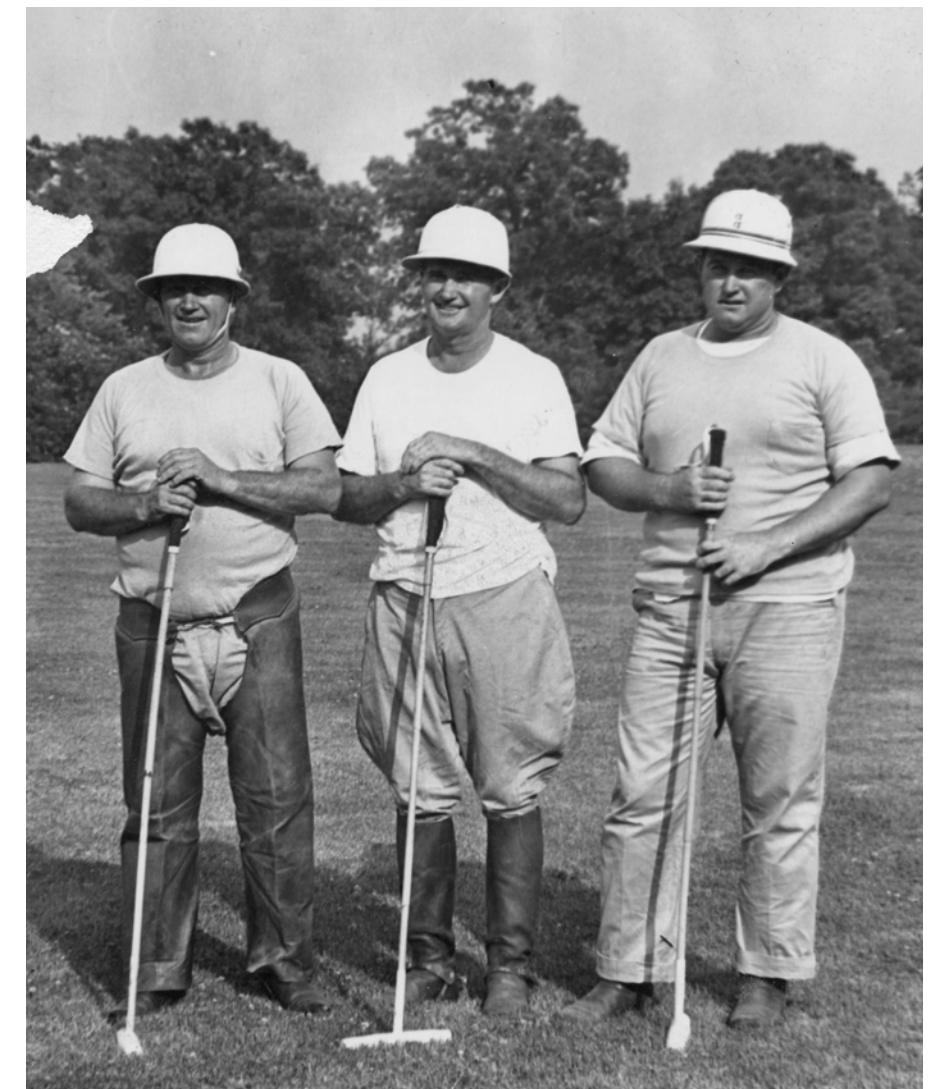
This brings me to my point. A perpetual Sunday field is a principal element in the health and wellbeing of a polo club in a particular area or region. Practice games can take place on private fields or a "skin" field if necessary, but polo will not thrive without a centrally located Sunday field to underpin growth, showcase teams, players and horses as well as unite the wider community.

The Houston Polo Club reiterates this fact. All the polo that has grown up around Brookshire has taken place in large measure by leveraging the Bayou Club field. Without the presence of that Sunday field in central Houston, uninterrupted by any one individual's lifespan or financial fortunes, polo in Houston would not be what it is today. The spectacle of fast polo on a good field with the flags waving and the band playing invites new members and, most importantly, new patrons drawn to the opportunity to play in front of a crowd in serious competition.

In combination with a Sunday field there are two other strategies that work hand in glove to sustain our sport. We must recognise

that the patron sponsor is the backbone of the sport, and that is true today at almost all levels of polo. We need to create an outreach programme that invites and welcomes new prospects from sectors of the business community with the financial resources to evolve into long-term players and sponsors. Polo is dependent on sponsors and always will be, unlike in days gone by when there was an abundance of higher-rated amateurs. Polo struggles as a true spectator sport due to the inability of spectators to relate, and without a significant fan base, polo has no other foundation besides the team patrons.

Next we must help clubs to elevate (e.g. lessons, coaching league, low goal and higher-goal matches) new players up the polo







## POLO NEEDS CENTRALLY LOCATED PERMANENT SUNDAY FIELDS, LOCATED IN LARGE METROPOLITAN AREAS

ladder. Strong local clubs are imperative, and the experience of playing polo needs to be enhanced to make polo a great experience. At the same time, we should work to reduce the difficulty faced by new players trying to navigate the polo ecosystem. This may be accomplished by developing a trained staff of experienced polo professionals, paid by the USPA either through the training of existing club resources or by providing outside advisors, to help clubs with coaching, mentoring and advising new players in regard to horses, teams and professional players. And importantly, this service needs to be provided without conflicts of interest such as selling ponies, playing as a pro on teams or collecting commissions.

Finally, it would be great if we could reduce the cost of polo. Along with everything else in the world, the cost to do

just about anything that is not reliant on cheap Chinese labour has spiraled upward over the last two decades. For polo, the principal culprit is the cost to be well-mounted. This rise has resulted, in large measure, from embryo transplant technology. The Argentines have utilised this technology to rapidly reshape the polo pony breeding industry. The net effect has been a rapid improvement in the quality of polo ponies, combined with an escalation in the price.

Today, it is not the great horse that stands out on the polo field but rather the bad horse. Players are better mounted than ever before, at much greater cost, and this has raised the ante to field a competitive team. Limiting the number of ponies brought to the field by each player may be worth trying. Or reinforcing penalties for turning the ball in an effort to reduce the individualistic style

of polo and the reliance of teams on star players – anything we can do to reduce the cost and increase the enjoyment.

In summary, polo needs centrally located permanent Sunday fields, located in large metropolitan areas, where we can draw enough spectators to entice a few commercial sponsors to support the club as well as attract an audience to witness the patrons' teams as they battle on Sundays. And if need be, we should implement a strategy of buying the Sunday field in communities where an important club is liquidating. We should implement a "club pro" programme manned by seasoned players who have been taught how to mentor, coach and generally improve the members' experience. And we need to invite and welcome new financially able recruits to our ranks in an effort to build the base of patrons interested in polo.

*From left: CC Armstrong, Pablo "Clavito" Mira, BP Lenador and Stewart Armstrong at the North American Cup 2019 played in Aspen, Colorado.*

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