

Game of kings takes shot at mass market

Rooted in a wealthy and impenetrable world, polo hopes to build its image as a serious sport, writes **Bob Sherwood**

When the ponies canter on to the lush grounds of Guards Polo Club near Windsor Castle this weekend, they will herald one of the highlights of the English summer society calendar.

Sunday's Cartier International Polo day is the sport's showpiece event of the year, likely to draw crowds in excess of 25,000. The aristocracy, society, sporting and showbusiness celebrities who attend are drawn as much to the glamour of the event as to its sporting spectacle.

And while the event for many epitomises the wealthy and impenetrable world of polo, the game is increasingly keen to be taken more seriously as a sport. Mainstream media coverage is generally restricted to the society columns, and the game's television presence is virtually non-existent. At a time when many sports have capitalised on media rights, those opportunities have largely passed polo by.

This is all the more strange considering that polo has all the commercial fundamentals to succeed. Showpiece events such as the Cartier day offer luxury brand sponsors valuable exposure to an affluent clientele and unrivalled product associations.

The fast, aggressive game has glamorous star players. Played internationally, it is a perfect vehicle for corporate hospitality and its influence on fashion is undeniable – and its global reach is spreading.

Initiatives are under way to make polo more accessible and to create a more compelling business proposition, but at the same time, there are signs that the game is healthier than ever at the grassroots.

There has been a notable rise in women players, and the number of polo clubs across the UK has increased dramatically in the past decade.

It is, however, an undeniably expensive game to play, which is why at the top level it usually requires a patron – a wealthy player who funds the team and pays the professionals.

This unusual system has hindered polo's ability to market itself to a television audience, admits David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA), the game's governing body. "We still don't get what you would call serious

sports coverage... because much of polo is patron based. It's like trying to get coverage for pro-am golf."

And while there is a clear desire to stage more all-professional tournaments, funding is an issue. "What polo really needs is world-class four-man polo," Mr Woodd says. "We need a World Cup for polo and to just accept that Argentina would win it. But there would be lots of cracking matches."

The growth of the game internationally offers potential. The leading countries have been the UK, Argentina, US, Mexico, India, New Zealand and Australia, but the sport is growing quickly in Hungary, Russia, Poland, China and the Middle East. But perhaps the greatest business impact of polo so far has been in the fashion world, most obviously Ralph Lauren's Polo brand. Other companies that have taken polo chic to the leisurewear market are Hackett, La Martina and Polistas.

It is an area the HPA is now looking at closely. The US Polo Association has a merchandis-

ing operation that has proved to be successful, and it is a model that the HPA is considering following.

There are signs, too, that polo is changing to reach a wider audience. London's O2 Arena will in February host the Gaucha International, an indoor "arena polo" event that will bring professional polo to a mass-market venue in the capital in the depths of winter for the first time. As well as international matches between Scotland and South Africa, and England and Argentina, there will also be celebrity and pro-am games.

Nacho Figueras, the Argentine player who is an ambassador for the Gaucha tournament, says: "Polo is growing so quickly now, and the introduction of such a great tournament to the UK during the winter off-season is a welcome addition. Arena polo is such an exciting form of the game and it will be truly special to play it at such an iconic venue in front of so many supporters."

The second Polo in the Park event was also held recently in London's Hurlingham Park. An attempt to bring polo into the city and make it accessible to people who would not normally attend matches, it has simplified some rules, slimmed the teams down to three players – all of whom are professionals – and decreased the size of the pitch. The aim is not only to accommodate the tighter confines of the city, but also to improve the viewer experience and quality of television coverage.

Rory Heron, chief executive of World Polo, which stages Polo in the Park, says the game is becoming more commercially aware.

"Polo has been confused, as a sport. The polo world has to get a lot more savvy – and they are doing that now," he says.

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Polo

Gauchos' game at the heart of the pampas

Argentina

The country is polo's global superpower, and its people have a passion for the sport second to none, writes Tom Hennigan

When British engineers were laying out Argentina's railway network in the second half of the 19th century, the more equestrian-minded among them realised the cattle country they were crisscrossing was ideal terrain for a game that was becoming increasingly popular with British army officers in India. Just as football clubs followed the British railways out across the rolling pampas, so too did polo. "The British realised the landscape and the weather were ideal for polo. There is a lot of land – flat land – available, and the climate means you do not have to keep horses under cover at any time during the year," says Pepe Santamarina, president of polo at Buenos Aires' illustrious Hurlingham Club, which was founded in 1888 by the Anglo-Argentine community.

Where British expats and Argentina's horse-mad Irish community led, the sons of wealthy local landlords quickly followed. Thus polo was introduced to the South American country that today is the game's undisputed superpower.

Yet it took more than landscape and climate to turn Argentina into the world's premier polo-playing nation. Equally important was the role of the gauchos: the tough, semi-nomadic horsemen of the pampas whose equestrian skills are legendary.

"The horse is at the heart of the pampas and Argentine tradition," says Edgardo Iriarte, who runs the Cañada Rica polo school and stud farm 93 miles west of Buenos Aires.

"The gaucho did not have a house – his horse was his home. His saddle was his mattress and his poncho his pillow," says Mr Iriarte.

"Everything he earned he spent on his horse. Even today, it is impressive to see the relationship the people of the pampas have with horses."

The legacy of the sport's adoption by the gauchos is that it has become considerably more accessible than in most other countries, where it largely remains the preserve of the wealthy.

"In 99 per cent of the world, polo is for the very rich and is seen as snobbish. But here in Argentina, while it is not a cheap sport, it is not as expensive as elsewhere," Mr Santamarina says.

"There is so much land available, and you can keep horses outside and play all year round. In Europe and the US, the season is just six or seven months. Then you have to pay to keep them inside during the winter. This is a big advantage we have in Argentina."

Today, nearly all the world's top-ranked polo players hail from the west bank of the River Plate, and the country's ponies are highly prized by aficionados. Argentina exports roughly 3,000 polo ponies a year, which are bred at the world's most extensive network of polo farms.

The country's success has led to an increasing number of international teams establishing polo ranches on the pampas, and members of the England team have trained here. It also gives up-and-coming Argentine players a chance to display their skill for the sport's wealthy patrons, and perhaps bag a place on the team of a rich benefactor.

"In Argentina there are lots of examples of guys who started out as grooms who today are

professionals. As there are many more polo schools and ranches, so there are many steps for someone from a humble background to take to become a pro, which is something that in Europe does not exist," says Mr Santamarina.

Indeed, the great Argentine player Manuel Andrada, who led his country to polo gold at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin – the sport's last outing at the games – started off as a groom.

Those Argentines who do turn professional make most of their money playing in the northern hemisphere for teams from Europe and the US bankrolled by wealthy patrons.

While the season is now in full swing in the northern hemisphere, many Argentine players will return home in the autumn to prepare for the Triple Crown – two prestigious tournaments held at the Tortugas Country Club and Hurlingham Club (this year holding its 117th edition, making it the oldest polo tournament organised by a club), as well as the Palermo Open.

Organised by the Argentine Polo Association, the latter is the sport's premier event and a yearly demonstration of the country's prowess played out in front of 30,000 spectators who pack the stands in the leafy Buenos Aires suburb of Palermo.



Top of the game: Martin Valent of Argentina takes part in the Coronation Cup polo match between England and Argentina at Guards Polo Club in Surrey, UK

Getty

Barbados Work hard, play hard in this island nation

With about 50 local players and the same number of visitors and resident professionals, Barbados is a minnow in terms of numbers. But in growth over the past decade and its potential as a polo holiday spot, the island is riding a wave.

Since 2000, its club count has risen from one to four, and further grounds are due to be carved into its palm-fringed terrain in the next few years. Barbados has now moved firmly on to the radar as



The royal game: the UK's Prince Harry plays in this year's Sentebale Polo Cup in Barbados

a desirable place to play polo. Lucy Taylor, a UK professional who spends four months a year on the island, says: "Barbados is becoming popular with pros and patrons. There is golf and nice beaches, and everyone speaks English."

Polo's key figure in Barbados is Sir Charles Williams, the charismatic construction mogul who continues to play despite being well into his 70s.

Sir Charles played in England in the 1970s and 1980s, sometimes crossing the Atlantic every weekend to compete. In the early 2000s he laid Barbados's second ground, Waterhall, later developed into Apes Hill golf, polo and country club. Under that name, he sponsored an all-professional British-led polo team in the UK, which last year won the Queen's Cup, Europe's second-biggest title.

Sir Charles's son Teddy is among the best players on the island today, while the likes of England international Tom Morley are among regular visitors.

James Mullan, the deputy editor of Polo Times, who has watched the past

three Barbados Opens, says: "The attitude is work hard, play hard. After matches there's a bash in the clubhouse. There's no pretension; it's not smart – everyone's in there together slinging beer around. It's the sort of place you can talk to anyone."

Yolanda Carslaw

Australia Polo's attraction overcomes long distances

In one of polo's best poems, tough Aussie bush-dwellers battle city slickers in an epic match that leaves every player dead – and one spectator with a broken leg "from merely looking on".

Banjo Paterson's "The Geebung Polo Club" (1893) is a homage to the rough-and-tumble early days of polo down under, but Australia has come a long way since. Pre- and post-war players the four Ashton brothers and Sinclair Hill put their homeland on the world map.

From the 1980s, Kerry Packer, the media tycoon perhaps best known for his cricket ventures, built a polo empire by laying laser-levelled grounds as flawless as new carpet, pioneering embryo transfer and increasing professionals' fees exponentially.

One of the few countries where grass polo is played all year, Australia has 50 clubs and a player tally approaching 1,000, from 700 five years ago.

"It's growing, especially in Queensland, Windsor [an hour west of Sydney] and Melbourne," says Glen Gilmore, Australian captain. "We have a great polo culture – although distances mean it's hard to get everyone together."

Almost half of Australia's clubs are in New South Wales. The biggest is historic Scone, four hours north of Sydney, with 100 players.

Peter Haydon, a third-generation player and former club president, says: "We have farmers and graziers, professional people from Sydney and 50 juniors."

Among Windsor's thriving clubs is Riverlands, Australia's answer to Ascot Park (the UK learners' hub), formed in

Kerry Packer, the Australian media tycoon known for his involvement in cricket, also built a polo empire in the late 1980s and 1990s

2003 by coach Adam Meally. "We started as a lively stable," he says, "but it became apparent there was a huge gap in the market [for tuition]. We now teach 150 newcomers a year, providing a quarter of New South Wales' playing members."

"Our main market is young corporates, and half our enquiries are

from women; female polo is the fastest growth area here."

Riverlands is heavily involved in the Sydney leg of a popular series that showcases the game in five cities, as well as, this year, Cable Beach in Broome.

"We get a lot of media attention through the city events – in print and on television," adds Mr Meally.

Privately run clubs include Garangula, owned by the Swiss Schwarzenbach family, who are well established in UK polo, and Timor, set up by Bobby Aguirre, vice-president of Banco Filipino.

But the venue that players rave about is Ellerston, the Packer headquarters near Scone, where visiting teams are treated like royalty. Indeed, Prince Charles played there during Australia's bicentennial in 1988.

Ruki Baillieu, a Victoria-born professional player, says: "Ellerston's grounds, setting and organisation are phenomenal: it's the world's best set-up. Teams stay for a fortnight in lovely houses, using the clubhouse or cinema in the evening, and there's no mobile service: it's paradise."

Ellerston, managed by Jim Gilmore, uncle of renowned player Glen Gilmore, is also Australia's biggest polo breeder, producing 70 world-class foals a year. Playing patrons include James Packer, Kerry Packer's billionaire son, who is soon to make a comeback in UK polo; and Peter Higgins, who founded Mortgage Choice, the mortgage broker, and Sydney Polo Country Club.

Next season's newcomer is Peter Silling, a German hotel design magnate, who is travelling to Australia with the British professional Henry Brett.

Australia's eight top polo teams follow a circuit between clubs in Queensland, Ellerston, Windsor, Garangula and Victoria, where the Melbourne Cup coincides with the racing title of the same name. "It's a moving circus: the trucks converge on one town for a fortnight, then move on," says Glen Gilmore.

Away from the circus, low-key play continues apace – at clubs with such enchanting names as Biddaddadda Creek, Quirindi Carnival, Kurri Kurri and Moondyne.

Yolanda Carslaw

Dubai The game grows in popularity in the city-state, but plenty of work remains to be done

In horseracing circles, Dubai's reputation stretches far and wide. Not only is the emirate home to the world's richest flat race, the Dubai World Cup, but its ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, is a major force in the sport through his multimillion-dollar Godolphin operation.

Now, however, the city-state is seeking to build its name in another part of the equestrian world – polo.

Dubai earlier this year hosted its first international polo tournament, the Gold Cup, which attracted teams from Argentina, Chile and the UK. Such was its success, that the tournament, sponsored by Threadneedle, the investment bank, will be repeated next year.

Yet the driving force behind the rise of polo in Dubai is not the equestrian-loving sheikh. Rather, it is private Emiratis who are pumping large amounts of money into the sport.

This includes Rashid and Mohammed Al Habtoor, the founders of Al Habtoor Polo, Mohammed, the younger of the two brothers, assembled the committee that organised the Gold Cup and invested \$500,000 (£330,000, €395,000) in the tournament.

It is a far cry from when Rashid started playing 20 years ago, when Dubai had just one club and less than 20 players, including former British military officers and a few Emiratis and Pakistanis. When they took to the field, they galloped not on grass, but on compacted sand. The original club was forced to close when a new highway cut a path through its grounds. In its place, however, there are now two better-equipped clubs, the Desert Palm and the Dubai Polo and Equestrian Club, which combined serve more than 100 players, proof of the sport's recent growth.

The Habtoor brothers are planning to develop their own private club, which, if it goes to plan, will add another three fields. The hope, Rashid says, is for Dubai to cement its place as a hub for polo and, ultimately, to be as successful as Spain's Sotogrande or Chantilly in France.

"We can handle another two or three clubs, maybe another six to nine fields would be great. That would make us bigger than many countries," he says. "Our biggest problem is horses, and you need people to put their hands in their pockets."

A lack of quality ponies is a major obstacle in the game's development in Dubai. Most have to be imported, as there is little local breeding experience, while stifling summers make this a harsh environment for horses.

The hope, however, is that the Gold Cup will raise the game's profile and level of professionalism in Dubai. "It hasn't been a big enough sport to attract the level [of player needed], but it is certainly improving and growing," says Adam Snowdon, who was brought in by the Dubai Polo and Equestrian Club in 2005.

And while the summers are brutally hot, winter months can be more bearable. The season in Dubai also runs from September to May, when little polo is played in the UK.

"[Dubai] could emerge as a centre for polo, but the first thing to do is to make it attractive for people to come here," Mr Snowdon says.

"It is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation – you need the quality of polo to improve to warrant people coming here."

Andrew England

Sporting innocence versus modern demands

Comment

MIHIR BOSE

In February 1922, one of the greatest polo matches of all time took place in Delhi. Even allowing for exaggeration, no other match has ever attracted such an illustrious crowd: among the 150,000 spectators that day was the future King Edward VIII; Lord Reading, then viceroy of India; Lord Mountbatten, who would become the last viceroy; and 50 Indian maharajas. They had come to watch two star teams, Jodhpur and Patiala, battle for the national championship.

Jodhpur had a 20-year-old grudge to settle from a previous defeat, and duly extracted their revenge. But what made the event significant – and so typical of polo – was what

happened afterwards. Bhopinder Singh, the maharaja of Patiala, was so mortified by his team's defeat that he ordered the ponies to be let loose in the streets of Delhi and told his players to burn their sticks. After that, he focused his energies on cricket, helping to turn that sport into a near-religion in India.

At the end of June this year on New York's Governors Island, when Prince Harry came off worse in his encounter with Ignacio Figueras, one of the great Argentine stars and a Ralph Lauren pin-up, he did not contemplate setting his pony free in Manhattan and setting fire to his stick. But the maharajas gathered in Delhi would have understood the way the Manhattan Polo Classic was reported: the media

coverage was as much about the prince's unfortunate tumble as about actress Susan Sarandon, who watched the match, and her recovery from a foot operation.

Polo, in its pursuit of profits, has not differed from other sports in seeking marketers who talk not of spectators but of customers. Yet, at its heart, it can still make us believe it retains the ethos of the Edwardian era when being an amateur was not a mark of inferiority and acquiring riches not the object of the game.

Even today, an amateur team can compete with the professionals merely by hiring well-handicapped pros for a tournament – reminiscent of cricket before the distinction between gentlemen and players was abolished in the 1960s, and a way of

bridging a gap in experience now impossible in any other major sport. This explains why polo still retains an air of innocence.

Just more than a year ago, Felix Crespo, an Argentine vet, injected 21 elite polo ponies with a



'The game will have to change into something more centrally run'

vitamin supplement shortly before a championship match in Florida, US.

Within hours they were all dead. The explanation given was that the Florida pharmacy that had prepared the supplement had got the strength of an ingredient wrong. "I am not living," Mr

Crespo was quoted as saying. "I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy ... I don't know if I am going to be back to the same person."

The journalist described Crespo: sombre, soft-spoken, sitting in a room decorated with pictures of horses, just feet from the stables. He stroked his moustache, his head drooping from lack of sleep. To drive home the picture of a mortified man, the journalist added: "The grief in Crespo's eyes speaks volumes. Deep pain lurks beneath the brim of his ball cap."

In few other modern sports would an event like this evoke such sympathy. Given the history of drugs in sport, a similar tragedy would arouse terrible rumours and suspicions: a man at the centre of the

scandal expressing his grief would be doubted. How long polo will manage to tread the narrow path between sporting innocence and modern demands is hard to say. So far, it seems to have managed well enough that even China is starting to use polo to advertise the fact it has emerged as a world power with money to spend.

Gene Wang, a polo player in Shanghai, earned enough money from financial trading in the city to be more interested in fun – including polo – than work. He told the BBC in June last year: "For a certain type of person, who has bought the big house, the fast cars, the designer labels, who has the mistresses, there is a point when you think, what else can I spend my money on?" The

US polo experts the Chinese have hired are already rating their players as capable of challenging the best in the world. Perhaps therein lies the danger for the game. In a sense, the Chinese are imitating the Indian maharajas, who took up polo to curry favour with their British masters. The attraction was heightened as the game was seen as a substitute for war, allowing them to score points against their rulers. Should China become a major polo-playing nation, the game will have to change from a cottage industry led by Argentine professionals into something more centrally run and, perish the thought, more like any other sport.

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To enter polo's top ranks, just pay the fee

Patrons

The sport attracts the wealthy, who pay huge sums to play, writes Jenny MacArthur

Imagine playing in the football World Cup or in a doubles final at Wimbledon. For the amateur, however good, this is the stuff of dreams – teaming up with the best to compete for a sport's most cherished prize. In polo it can become a reality.

Amateur polo players can buy their way into the top echelons of the sport by becoming a patron of a high-goal (top-level professional) team. All they need is a spare million or two to fund it. They can then rub shoulders with players such as Adolfo Cambiasso, the world number one, or Gonzalo and Facundo Pieres, ranked second and fourth, respectively.

"It's like playing on the same terms as three Tiger Woods," says Richard Britten-Long, patron of Cirencester Park team.

Polo's handicap system makes this possible. Players are rated by handicap, the worst being 2

and the best being 10. For high-goal tournaments such as the Gold Cup, the total handicap of the team cannot exceed 22. Patrons are generally zero or one, which enables them to employ two top players (handicapped between seven and 10) and one player with a medium handicap (four to six). A patron no more weakens a team than does the patron of the opposition. A balance is struck and the patrons play their part.

No other top-class team sport – except perhaps sailing – offers this opportunity. Roman Abramovich can buy the best footballers, but he is unlikely to be able to play for Chelsea, even though he owns the team.

In polo, Ali Albwardy, patron of the Dubai team, can play alongside Cambiasso and help win the biggest prize.

The high-goal patrons are fabulously rich. Among the 20 in the Gold Cup are Lyndon Lea, one of the founders of London-based private equity group Lion Capital; Victor Vargas, the Venezuelan banker and owner of the Banco Occidental de Desarrollo; Edouard Carmignac, head of France's Carmignac Gestion fund management house; and fellow Frenchman Jean-Francois Decaux, chief

executive of JCDecaux, the advertising firm.

Although he retired from high-goal polo a couple of years ago, Urs Schwarzenbach, the Swiss financier and founder of Interexchange, the foreign exchange dealership, is one of the more high-profile patrons with his Black Bears team.

For these multimillionaires, the cost of running a polo team – consisting of 40-60 ponies worth an average of \$100,000 (£66,000, €79,000) each, three players, up to 20 grooms, a manager, a vet, a farrier, a trainer, fitness experts and sports psychologists – is small change.

Mr Vargas transports some of his 60 ponies in his own jets. Mr Albwardy, a businessman from the United Arab Emirates, is understood to retain Cambiasso for the English high-goal season for a fee in excess of £1m.

Why does polo exert such a powerful attraction for wealthy people?

"To play on a

beautiful, fully trained animal at such incredible speeds is far more exhilarating than driving a Ferrari around an ice rink," says Mr Britten-Long, founder of Laird Finance and one of only a handful of British high-goal patrons. "I can't think of another sport that offers such quality of life, a sense of speed, danger and exhilaration."

Most speak of the sport's addictive quality. Alfio Marchini, 45, patron of the Loro Piana team, started playing at the Rome Polo Club in 2000 and was intoxicated by the sheer thrill it. "It combines the speed of ice hockey and the hardness of rugby," he says.

Jérôme Wirth, 39, co-founder of the Internet company Beweb and patron of the Enigma team, might have been a professional rugby player – until deciding he was not going to reach the very top. Nine years ago, he was watching polo in Chantilly and a friend invited him to play. "I was hooked 100 per cent on polo, just immediately," he says.

Mr Lea, patron of the Zacara team, says it was purely the adrenaline rush that attracted him to the sport. "There's nothing to compare it with," he says.

Once hooked, patrons have only one aim. "It's all about winning," says Robert Thame, former polo manager to Mr Albwardy. "And in particular, it's about winning the sport's two highest prizes – the Queen's Cup at Windsor and the Gold Cup at Cowdray. When you've got yachts, aeroplanes and grand houses, there's no monetary prize that can tempt you. What you want is a piece of history, and all the better if there's a chance of brushing with royalty in doing so."

Seven years after taking up polo, Mr Marchini, an Italian businessman, had a proud moment when Loro Piana won the Queen's Cup: he received the trophy from the Queen herself.

In return for their money, patrons expect meticulous preparation for the matches. Masseurs, physiotherapists and fitness trainers are employed. The ponies and players must be immaculate, and alcohol is forbidden in the run-up to a tournament.

As the high-goal game has become more intense, the camaraderie between patrons – once a feature of the

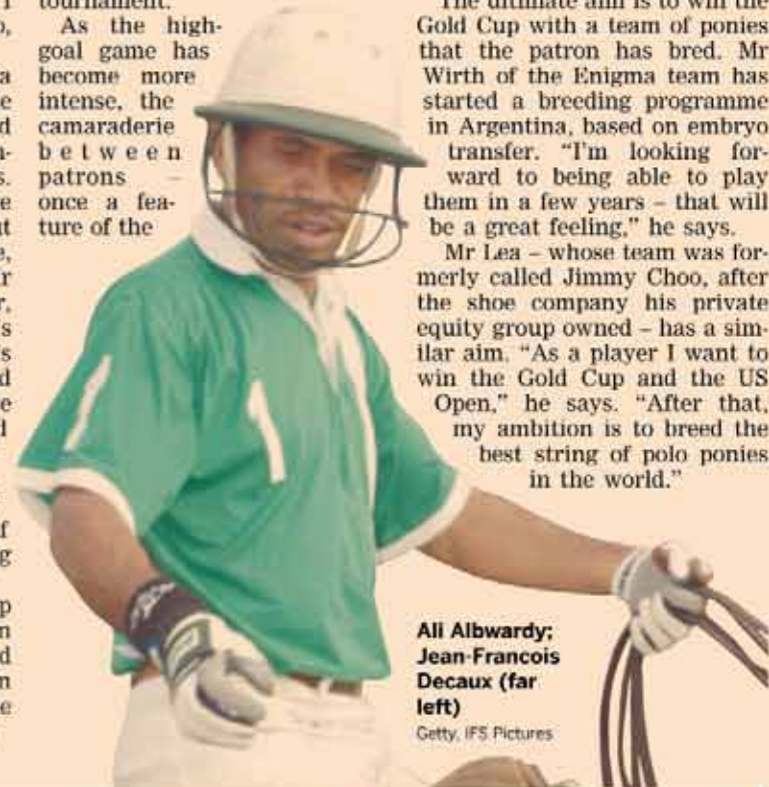
sport – has lessened. Many guard their privacy ferociously. "I just want to keep my life private," Mr Lea says. "I'm not interested in the polo 'scene' – I keep well away. I just come in and play polo and go away again."

The ultimate aim is to win the Gold Cup with a team of ponies that the patron has bred. Mr Wirth of the Enigma team has started a breeding programme in Argentina, based on embryo transfer. "I'm looking forward to being able to play them in a few years – that will be a great feeling," he says.

Mr Lea – whose team was formerly called Jimmy Choo, after the shoe company his private equity group owned – has a similar aim. "As a player I want to win the Gold Cup and the US Open," he says. "After that, my ambition is to breed the best string of polo ponies in the world."



Ali Albwardy; Jean-Francois Decaux (far left)
Getty / IFS Pictures



A successful steed comes at a price

Ponies

Equine costs add up, says Elizabeth Robinson

It used to be said that a good polo pony could turn on a sixpence. These days, that is more likely to be a peso or the cut-up fragments of a maxed-out credit card.

While the opinions of those playing high-goal and low-goal polo differ on what breed makes for the best pony, they agree on one characteristic a pony must possess: a calm temperament. The most agile horse in the world is nothing on the polo field if it cannot handle the pressure of rapidly changing commands.

Henry Brett, a former England captain, says: "The ideal polo pony has to have the right temperament. During a game, it gets given many commands – turn here, stop now, ride off – and it has to process that quickly and not get rattled."

The hardy South American Criollo horses – descendants of conquistadors' mounts – are more common at the low-goal level. They are easy to ride, agile, durable and reasonably affordable at roughly £5,000 (£6,000, \$7,500) for a good player. Their hardiness is well suited to the low-goal game, which is often played on rougher grounds and involves less experienced riders.

Criollos, though, can lack the speed necessary for high-goal polo and are sometimes crossed with thoroughbreds to increase their pace. This has contributed to the low-goal game becoming faster in the past decade, players say.

In South America, Argentina has had its own Polo Argentino breeding register for the past 25 years, and Britain is setting up a similar scheme to start in 2011.

Professional and serious players at the high-goal level often choose a thoroughbred, which can cost more than £20,000. While a thoroughbred's speed is unquestioned, it demands more from the rider. David Morley, chairman of the Hurlingham Polo Association's pony welfare committee, says: "The thoroughbred's drawbacks are that it is more highly strung and less tolerant of a rider's mistakes."

There are three routes to "creating" a thoroughbred polo pony: training, importing and breeding.

Although training is perhaps the most cost-effective route, a

successful outcome can never be guaranteed. Polo trainers scour racehorse sales for likely candidates; often, racing's rejects can make for a good polo pony.

With the height of racehorses averaging 16 hands (one hand is equal to four inches), smaller horses that are rejected for racing can be snapped up at auction for £800-£5,000. It is, however, still a gamble whether the horse will come good for polo, as training does not generally start before the age of three and it could still be a year or two after that before it is tested in chukkas (periods of play).

There has always been a steady demand for thoroughbreds from the polo world, says Jimmy George, marketing director for Tattersalls, the bloodstock auctioneers. "Our impression is that it may have slightly increased in the past few years. Obviously you need a certain type of thoroughbred, but there's value to be had," he says.

Breeders can also "make" polo ponies – breeding from selected bloodlines and training the animals to be "ready-made" for play. Argentina, New Zealand and South Africa are skilled at making ponies thanks to their lower costs for keeping horses. Yet while buying a ready-made pony in this way helps assure its suitability for polo, importing it is not cheap.

Lina Churchward, who runs Equine Logistics, a UK shipper of horses, says: "The Argentine government raised export taxes several years ago. Export tax is payable on the commercial value of the horse. Then there is the import tax payable in the UK."

Breeders who want to be even more selective on bloodlines can employ embryo transfer, whereby the fertilised embryos of proven mares are transferred to surrogate mares.

In 2002, Emma Tomlinson, daughter of Claire Tomlinson, one of the UK's best-known woman polo players, was the first to set up an embryo transfer business in the UK, Beaufort Embryo Transfer. Nearly half of her business comes from the polo world, and the company now produces roughly 100 embryos a year at a cost of £3,500-£4,000 per pregnancy. Yet Ms Tomlinson admits even selective breeding is a gamble: "You don't really know until the horse is four to six years old whether it was successful."

Mr George of Tattersalls says "you'll never get a return out of a polo pony", but some mounts are selling for huge sums.

Fina Pepa, a nine-year-old mare, fetched \$490,000 at auction this year, a record for a polo pony.

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Polo

Noble Indian tradition puts on a new face

India

Polo has a long history in this country, writes James Lamont

On the shimmering Jaipur Polo Ground, a stone's throw from the prime minister's house in New Delhi, young and old are battling it out at "tent-pegging".

In this cavalry sport of ancient origin, a mounted horseman rides at a gallop using a lance to pick up and carry away a cardboard ground target, symbolising the tent peg, while above the gallantry, an excited, derring-do commentary gives the particulars of the rider and his feats.

The impromptu championship comes at the end of an afternoon of high-handicap polo. In front of the massed crowds, which had earlier been entertained by a pipe band in full tartan regalia, two old boys' teams from Lawrence School in Sanawar in the Shimla Hills have traversed the field in chukka after chukka.

To the casual observer, the equestrian festivities of the Old Sanawarian Society are a charm-filled throwback to the British Raj. Far from it.

Polo was popular in India long before British officers took a shine to the game in the mid-19th century and helped spread it across the sub-continent. Indeed, many believe the game originated among villagers in Manipur, now a state in India's north-east, bordering Burma.

The Manipuris called it "pulu" or "sagol kangle", and its history stretches back to 3000BC. Later Mughal-era manuscripts and illustrations show the popularity of the game among emperors and their courtiers. While Akbar, the 16th-century emperor, is famed for his humanist outlook and his interest in world religions, what is less well known is that he was also an exceptional polo player.

The game's revival in the modern era is ascribed to Joseph Shearer, a British officer in the Bengal army, who became hooked after playing with the Manipuris in Silchar in 1854. After establishing the European Polo Club in the city, he set up the Calcutta Polo Club in 1862 in what was then the

Around the world

Polo facts and figures

● **Handicap** Players are rated by handicap, the worst being -2 and the best 10. A team's patron nearly always has the worst handicap in the team.

● **Uniform** Boots are not cheap. Those made in Argentina cost up to \$230 (£150, €180); in the UK, boots can cost up to £1,000.

capital of British India. The game spread with the army to its cantonments in cities across northern India, such as Kanpur, Bharatpur and Meerut.

Polo quickly became a way of life among British army officers in India and was seen to promote the virtues of soldiering. Winston Churchill, who began playing polo when he was stationed in India in the 1890s, said of the game: "A polo handicap is your passport to the world."

Enthusiasm for the game soon spread to princely states, such as Jodhpur, Bhopal and Patiala, where sporting valour gave a competitive edge to royal families, and teams of polo ponies and their mustachioed, liveried riders were popular vanity projects.

The first Indian polo team travelled to England in 1897, led by the maharaja of Jodhpur's brother, Sir Pratap Singh. And while "Sir P", as he was known, is regarded as the father of Indian polo, the golden era was between the wars.

Independence from Britain considerably changed the status of royal houses, and consequently the patronage of polo. From the 1960s, the Indian army – in particular, regiments such as the 61st Cavalry – returned the game to the officer's mess patronage typical of the second half of the 19th century.

Yet as India's economic potential has grown over the past few years, so polo has again taken on a new face. Aside from cricket, it is one of the few sports that India counts as its own. With the liberalisation of the economy and higher economic growth, the game has renewed its appeal to India's young, affluent elite and to a host of new corporate patrons.

Corporate houses, many still family owned, now field their own polo teams, such as the



Long-standing tradition: Indian polo players photographed in 1885

Corbis

At high altitude A rugged south Asian take on traditional polo

Polo-like games become less genteel, but no less honourable, further north in this part of south Asia, writes James Lamont.

Afghanistan's national game is "Buzkashi". Often compared to polo, the aim of this muscular mêlée is for riders to try to propel a headless calf's carcass towards a goal. The free-wheeling and highly competitive game is played on special occasions such as weddings and religious festivals.

Pakistan long ago embraced the more conventional game, where it is the preserve of its powerful military. Indeed, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, once looked out of his

office in Karachi on to a polo ground. Today, the three-day, high-altitude Shandur polo festival in Pakistan's north-west is one of the country's most celebrated sporting events, in spite of political difficulties and no-shows at this year's tournament.

Every summer, teams converge on the world's highest polo ground surrounded by snow-covered mountain summits. Rugged riders spur on a single mount throughout a match.

The game has more of the cavalry charge about it, and is a world away from the patronage of western luxury brands seeking recognition among high society.

Oberoer Blues, named after the luxury hotel group. Businessmen Navin Khanna, Buchi Prakash, Navin Jindal and Vijay Mallya also have their own teams, and even the venerable Jodhpur team is now sponsored by Essar, one of India's biggest industrial conglomerates.

The interest of business tycoons has brought with it corporate sponsorship by the likes of Kingfisher, Bulgari and Dom Perignon.

"Sponsorship has brought with it the glamour of grand marquees, high teas and flowing champagne that has become

synonymous with the sport, and this has changed the face of present-day Indian polo," according to Jaisal Singh, author of *Polo in India*.

He adds: "Watching a game of polo is now the fashionable thing to do on a crisp winter afternoon in Delhi."

Polo and wine come together amid the hills

United States

The game is alive in California's winelands, writes David Gelles

It is the Fourth of July weekend in northern California, and the small wine-country towns are adorned with patriotic flags and bunting. But on a nearby grassy field surrounded by forested hills, a small band of locals is engaged in a more timeless pursuit. The players of the Wine Country Polo Club are just finishing their sixth chukka of the morning.

Geri Dardi, a petite, middle-aged blonde, leaves the field and dismounts. "We have the most beautiful polo field in the world," she says, surveying the lush landscape around her.

Dubbed the "Valley of the Moon" by *The Call of the Wild* author Jack London, the region that is home to the Wine Country Polo Club is rustic and verdant, with vineyards cascading down steep hills and tall redwood forests shading great swaths of land. In the centre of the valley is Trione field, abutted by a clubhouse, a swimming pool and a church.

Founded in 1969 by Henry Trione, a banker turned vintner and polo player, the Wine Country Polo Club has earned a reputation as a small but respectable amateur club. In the US, as elsewhere in the world, polo is still a speciality sport with no league structure to join. Instead, the members play other clubs from around northern California, and enjoy the simple pleasures of a match in the morning.

Its roots in wine country, however, give this club a unique flavour. "Every time we have a polo event, we have a wine tasting along with it," says Roger Schaufel, a barrel-chested former prison warden who serves as the club's president. "They very much go hand in hand."

It is an appropriate pairing. Winemakers, in a sense, are the royalty of this region, overseeing large tracts of land, their own fiefdoms. And fine wine has become synonymous with a lifestyle of luxury.

But despite their royal airs, the players try to keep a low profile. Captains of industry though they are, "they are not treated as royalty," says Mr Schaufel. "They are treated as successful farmers."

Nonetheless, the sport suits these Californians. Kenwood Vineyards, a large winery nearby, is a regular supporter of the club. Robert Mondavi Jr, heir to

the Mondavi wine empire, played for many years.

In spite of its amateur feel, the Wine Country Polo Club has produced some skilled players. Mr Schaufel's son, Steiner, is a three-goal contestant. Richard Mansfield, another local, is an adept two-goal player. Many players compete in national and global tournaments.

Mr Trione, the club's founder, has had a lasting influence not only on the Valley of the Moon, but also on the global polo community. He founded an international vintners' polo tournament, which this year was held in Argentina.

"There's a lot of history here," says Ms Dardi after finishing her match. "For some reason, polo and wine come together, not only in California, but all over the world."

This is California, however, and some quirks are inevitable. "Many polo clubs have an orthopaedic surgeon on the field," says Mr Schaufel. "We have a psychiatrist."

To maintain its strong roots in this agricultural community, the club hosts three fundraisers each year. A recent event raised more than \$40,000 (£26,200, €31,500) for wounded veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Dozens of local wineries sponsored the day, providing tastings to spectators who feasted on roasted meat, a nod to polo's Argentine influence. Mr Trione, now 90, fought in the second world war, and came out to watch the match.

And while the club does not attract large crowds to every match, the members are a tight-knit bunch, with a few core families that have been playing together for decades.

"The children who grew up playing on swing sets are now playing polo," says Ms Dardi. "A lot of people think it's just the sport of kings, but it's not. The family that plays polo together stays together."

After finishing the match at Trione field, the players load their ponies into trailers and rumble off. But Mr Schaufel and Ms Dardi have not had quite enough. They are travelling an hour south to the Cerro Pampa Polo Club, owned by J.P. Theriot, the son of Paul Withers, the accomplished English rider.

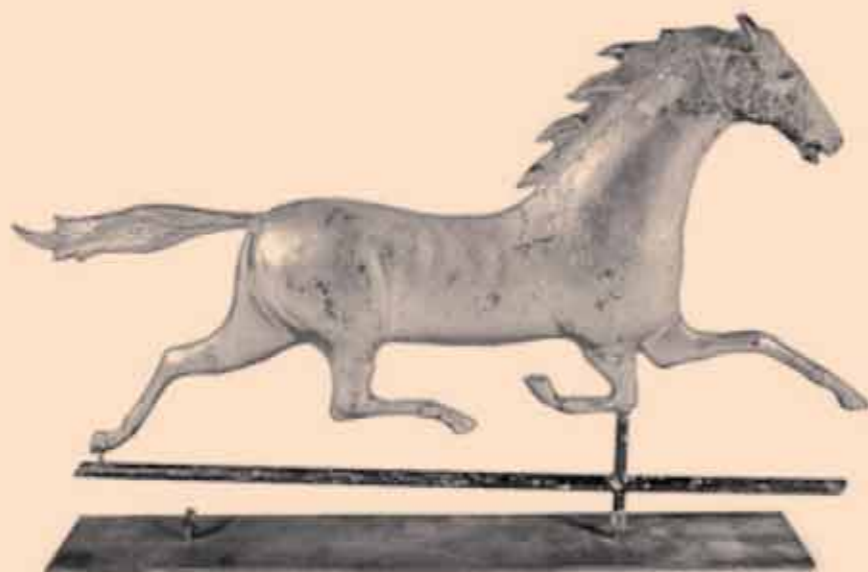
This club, closer to the banking and technology wealth of San Francisco, attracts the city's elite.

"It's almost a billionaire boys' club," says Mr Schaufel.

Eliteist or not, Cerro Pampa is throwing a picnic. Six teams will compete. And, in a US take on polo held on Independence Day, there will be a barbecue.

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On horseback in a London park

United Kingdom

Bob Sherwood on a move to give polo a wider appeal

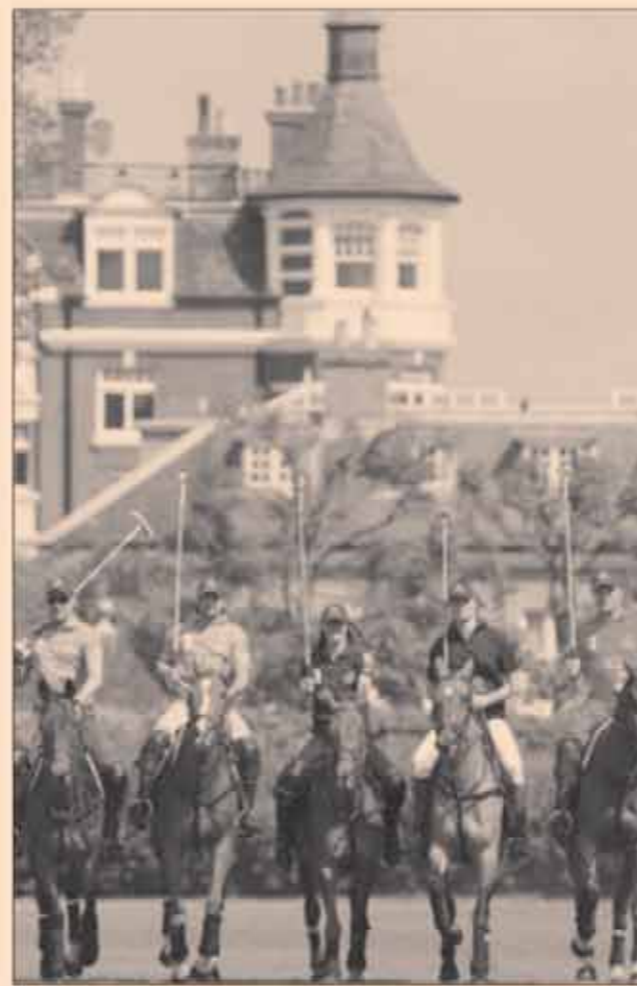
When the "Polo in the Park" event was held last summer, it was the first time the sport had returned to Hurlingham Park in London since before the second world war.

Though Hurlingham is known as the headquarters of polo, and the Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) is the sport's governing body in the UK, polo had not been played there since the grounds were ploughed for wartime allotments.

But the event, which returned in June this year, is no attempt to return to tradition. Instead, it is a move to create a more dynamic, accessible and commercial version of polo, along the lines of the "Twenty20" games that have changed cricket.

The concept is to take polo into large financial centres, such as London, with teams made up of professionals representing different world cities. Eventually, a series of tournaments is planned in financial centres globally. The organisers believe this can present polo to a new audience, attract television coverage and bring new sponsors and greater corporate hospitality into the game.

Taking polo to a wider audience is an ambitious project. But Rory Heron, chief executive of World Polo, the company behind the scheme, and a former executive of the sports



Match ready: players line up in Hurlingham Park

Getty

agency IMG, is confident the concept will appeal to sports fans.

"Polo has not exploded like many other sports as a commercial entity, so it is not saturated like many other sports," he says. "But it is very appealing for brands, and it is a fantastic vehicle for corporate entertainment. People think it is a game played by toffs, but it is in fact an extreme sport, an adrenaline sport.

"The way World Polo is going to grow is by educating people about polo as an exciting sport."

The World Polo Series – yet to happen, but the company hopes to add another one or two events at other financial centres next year – is the brainchild of financier Daniel Fox-Davies. His idea was to simplify the sport, removing unnecessary rules or those that slow the game down.

Last year's Polo in the Park was a "demonstration" of the concept, the organisers concede, but this year it was fully competitive polo, backed by the HPA. The matches featured some of the top British players including Jack Kidd, Jamie Morrison and Henry Brett.

Among the rule changes are a smaller pitch, three players a side rather than four, the abolition of penalty lines to stop competitors deliberately playing to win fouls, and the introduction of a D-ring around the goal to encourage spectacular long-range shots that score more points.

The event was first greeted with some scepticism among the traditional polo fraternity, but has won approval from the governing body this year. David Woodd, chief executive of the HPA, says: "I think it is a clever idea to take polo to cities, and it is an initiative that has potential."

The rule changes are designed to make polo more appealing to a TV audience – arguably the most crucial factor that has limited polo so far – and the tournament did get some terrestrial television airtime.

But Mr Heron says the format provides numerous other commercial benefits. By taking the game into the City of London, the event attracted 29,000 people over three days, three-quarters of whom had never been to a polo tournament before. The event also featured a children's play and activity zone – something not often seen at polo tournaments.

In addition, it was able to offer corporate entertain-

ment during the week, something polo has not traditionally been able to accommodate. "We made the second day 'City Friday', and sold out all of our corporate hospitality on the Friday," Mr Heron says.

He adds that the event was also able to attract business brands as sponsors, as well as luxury and prestige brands that have been the bedrock of polo support in the past.

For example, Mint Partners, an independent agency trading house, became title sponsor of the event, while teams were sponsored by Thomson Reuters, IG Index, City AM and Otkritie, the Russian investment bank. Other sponsors included Audi, Veuve Clicquot and Savills.

"Traditional polo offers a one-day event," says Mr Heron, "but we wanted to provide a vehicle for sponsors, so we held events such as networking dinners and visits to trading floors and Audi showrooms in the six months before the tournament. We wanted to get the most we could out of the lead-up to the event."

He adds that the sponsors "were pleasantly shocked by the spending power of the people at our event", held in affluent south-west London. "This is unashamedly a commercial venture, and Mr Heron says the event will be "totally profitable next year", while the company spent heavily on marketing this year.

Bringing polo out of its niche appeal will never be easy. Nevertheless, Mr Heron says: "The simple fact is that we are introducing a new audience to polo."

Sport gives life to global fashion empire

Fashion

The world of polo has inspired famous clothing and accessory empires, writes **Nicola Copping**

He took a word that was simple, very easy to remember, worked in every language, and also happened to represent his fantasy. Then he made that meaningful to millions of people. The word was polo; the man, Ralph Lauren.

As Hugh Devlin, a lawyer and brand consultant at Withers law firm in London, points out, it was a young buck from the Bronx who patented a four-letter word in 1967 that epitomised a luxurious lifestyle and went on to create a global fashion empire – Polo by Ralph Lauren.

"The line was named after a sport that embodies a world of elegance and classic style," says David Lauren, senior vice-president of advertising, marketing and corporate communication, and son of Ralph. "Polo is a lifestyle, not just a sport. What was built is a concept of a brand that people come in and ask for. For that naturalness, for that realism, it's about unfashionable fashion, it's about elements of style."

Four decades on, this "unfashionable fashion" line boasts roughly 300 stores across the world, and is still producing countless collared T-shirts with the iconic mallet-swinging, male horse-rider logo, as well as other polo-inspired products, including jodhpur-style trousers, stirrup clasp leather handbags, knee-high boots, quilted gilets, hacking jackets and a leather watch called the Stirrup.

Polo's influence has permeated myriad other brands, too, from Hackett to Joules and Jack Wills, who likewise lift the leitmotifs of the sport – the white jeans, the collared cotton T-shirts, the man-on-horseback silhouette, the glamour – to target the aspirations of consumers.

The typical polo attire of bright polo shirt and chinos has become the classic western male weekend uniform, though many would not realise the sporting connection.

Luxury brands such as fine jewellers Cartier are swift to align themselves with the sport, enhancing its aspirational status.

"Ultimately, for luxury brands, it is polo's clientele that is appealing," says Arnaud Bamberger, managing director of Cartier, who has hosted the annual Cartier International Polo day for the past 18 years.

"Polo attracts an intelligent, elegant and, of course, wealthy crowd," he says. "The sport is played and supported by potential clients."

According to James Lawson, director of Ledbury, the luxury market research group,

roughly 25,000 people in the UK who each earn a salary of more than £100,000 (£120,000, \$150,000) will attend a polo event in a year. Yet few polo-inspired fashion brands have a direct link to the actual playing of

the sport. Ralph Lauren used it for brand leverage, playing on its cachet of wealth and aristocracy. The sport itself had little resonance in the US when Mr Lauren patented the brand, according to Mr Devlin.



"Mr Lauren could create his version of what the word meant," he says.

"It was not about polo the game, but about the people who played it, the lifestyle it represented."

It was polo according to Ralph Lauren. At British brand Hackett, the story is similar.

Although the company has been involved with the sport since 1986 and has sponsored the British Army polo team since 2005, Jeremy Hackett, founder, says: "While most of our customers probably do not play polo, myself included, there is something intrinsically glamorous about the sport that they appreciate."

It is a matter of lifestyle over sport – and as many sartorial connections as possible.

Hackett's polo-inspired line includes scarves, wallets, key rings, wash bags and belts, as well as shirts and blazers bearing the Army Polo logo and Army Polo-themed holdalls.

Indeed, Ralph Lauren's relationship with the sport has been rather complicated. The fashion brand has entered into several legal tussles with polo associations over trademark issues.

That has included a contest with the Royal County of Berkshire Polo Club in 1997 over the use of polo player images on the club's perfume and soap, as well as a dispute with the US Polo Association in the 1990s and 2000s, when the fashion brand

contested the association's right to use both the word "polo" and images of polo players astride horses.

"When Ralph Lauren registered the mark," says Mr Devlin, "it was at a time when no sport was really thinking about developing its own products."

"Polo, and what it represents, is completely in keeping with Ralph Lauren's advocacy of the anglicised dream."

He adds: "Having done that, the fantasy is potentially in a position of cannibalising the reality."

In 2007, Ralph Lauren announced its sponsorship of the Black Watch polo team, creating a full circle between the sport and the fashion brand. Ignacio "Nacho" Figueras, Argentine polo professional and Ralph Lauren ambassador, is a member of the polo team and encouraged the brand's involvement.

"Three or four years ago, I thought it would be great to have Ralph be part of the polo team," he says.

"Polo is very sexy, with a lot of heritage and tradition. There's something very powerful about that, a man and a horse together, that goes back thousands of years."

"I see polo as a lifestyle, not just a sport. A lot of brands are using it as a platform; I have seen a very big growth in that area in my time as a player."

A new wave of fashion brands, however, may allude to the future of polo fashion.

Argentine polo brands such as La Martina, Etiqueta Negra and La Dolfina are having increasing resonance in Europe as consumers seek a more direct link to the sport.

Since polo in Argentina is, in many respects, as popular as football, people are buying the shirts that are relevant to the teams they support.

La Martina, for instance, makes not only polo shirts but also saddles, sticks and balls – all the kit involved in the sport.

The line has stores in St Tropez in France, Spain's Puerto Banus and Dubai, and London department store Harrods opened a La Martina in-store boutique this year following a successful trial of the brand's spring/summer 2008 collection.

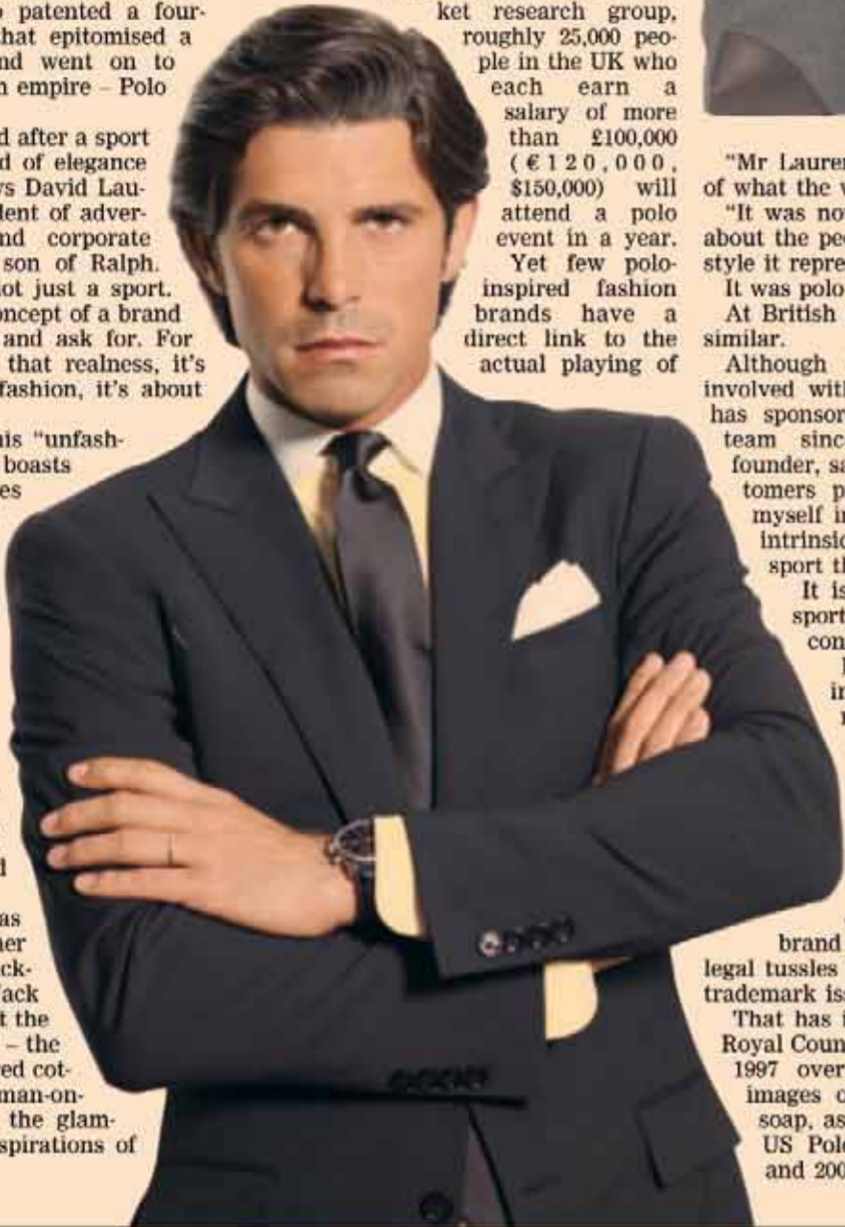
As Mr Devlin says: "These brands constitute a different type of demand, and this is now at a level where they can actually take on Ralph Lauren."

It is not just a game – not, at least, for fashion.



Fashion play: Polo by Ralph Lauren canvas shoes; a Hackett Klosters snow duffel bag (top left); polo star Ignacio Figueras is a Ralph Lauren brand ambassador (left)

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Polo

Who's who among polo's star attractions

Players

Yolanda Carslaw reports on the names to watch out for in the game

Adolfo Cambiasso

Champion playmaker, horseman extraordinaire and master of ball control – after more than a decade at the top, the world number one still leaves seasoned aficionados gasping in awe. The closest polo has to a household name, the 35-year-old Argentine reached the sport's uppermost rating aged 17 and has won all the main competitions since. Cambiasso, who reputedly commands a fee of more than £1m for the UK season alone, ploughs virtually every penny he earns back into his horses. The more than 400 animals he keeps in Argentina are the envy of fellow professionals. He is married to Maria Vásquez, a model and television presenter, with whom he has a daughter and a son.

The Pieres dynasty

Pushing at Cambiasso's perch is Facundo Pieres, 24, who has grown up immersed in polo. His father, Gonzalo, a shrewd Argentine businessman as well as a polo great in his own right, made an inspired move by hooking up with Kerry Packer in the 1980s, helping the Australian media tycoon build a polo and horse-breeding empire in Argentina, Australia and England. Playing alongside his steadier brother Gonzalito, 27, Facundo is the flashier and more talked-about of the pair, although this year it was Gonzalito who was named best high-goal pro at the sport's Oscars, the Audi Polo Awards.

La Dolfina

Cambiasso's home team have dominated polo's pinnacle, the Argentine Open, in the 21st century, with five wins and nine

finals. At their latest victory, in 2009, against arch-rivals Ellerstina, led by the Pieres brothers, both finalists fielded four 10-goal players. Among La Dolfina's other players are Lolo Castagnola, who is married to Cambiasso's sister, and Lucas Monteverde, Cambiasso's protégé. Their success looks set to continue: their newest team member is Uruguayan Pelon Stirling, 29, a rising star who has been based at La Dolfina for several years.

Luke Tomlinson

England's captain comes from the UK's answer to an Argentine-style dynasty. His grandfather helped revive polo after the second world war; his mother became the first woman to reach a five-goal handicap; his father and sister are handy players; his cousins are England veterans; and his brother plays for England. The bilingual 32-year-old has a seven-goal handicap at home, and is an eight in Argentina, where he is one of few non-natives to play in the Argentine Open. Tomlinson's easygoing demeanour belies exceptional on-field toughness, and he is determined in other ways: he was one of the pro-fox-hunting "Westminster Eight" who stormed the UK's House of Commons in 2004.

Nina Clarkin (née Vestey)

As the world's best female on four goals, England's Clarkin, 28, is one short of the all-time women's record of five. In 2003 she made history as the first woman to win the Cowdray Park Gold Cup – with the Tomlinson brothers and her future husband, New Zealand captain John-Paul Clarkin. In 2007, she was the first woman to play for England seniors, in South Africa. Focused and cool, Clarkin holds her own as a professional. "It's highly physical and there's constant pressure," she says, "but it's always possible to go further if you work hard, and I hope I'm chosen for teams regardless of gender."

Champions: Nina Clarkin (bottom left), Luke Tomlinson (below) and Adolfo Cambiasso (right)

Getty, WireImage, PA

Victor Vargas

The publicity-shy Venezuelan owner of Banco Occidental de Descuento is the only current patron to land important titles in Florida as well as England – which necessitates separate strings of elite horses both sides of the Atlantic. The 58-year-old banker won the Cowdray Park Gold Cup in 2007 with Argentine brothers Pite and Sebastian Merlos, whom he later sacked after getting fed up with their on-field bickering. Vargas's re-formed team won Palm Beach's Piaget Gold Cup last year, but weeks later lost 21 horses to poisoning from botched supplements. His daughter, Maria Margarita, is married to the Duke of Anjou, a cousin of Spain's King Juan Carlos.

James Packer

The Australian tycoon is building a new set-up in West Sussex, where he has played on and off since his father, Kerry, took polo by storm on three continents in the late 1980s and 1990s. Last month, bulldozers moved in on a farm he has leased from the Cowdray Estate, where he is laying two polo grounds just miles from those Kerry laid 20 years ago. James, who is playing in Sotogrande this summer, plans to sign up one of the Pieres brothers to his side, which is named Ellerston after the family's New South Wales polo club.

Lyndon Lea

At 41, the Lancashire-born financier is one of polo's youngest patrons – and one of its biggest spenders, with operations both sides of the Atlantic and plans to sign Facundo Pieres in the US. Before calling his team Zacara (a blend of his children's names), Lea played as Jimmy Choo and Typhoo – among the firms he has acquired and shaken up in his capacity as a private equity executive. A founder member of Hicks, Muse, Tate & Furst and a co-founder of Lion Capital, he took up polo in 2001 after playing at a Palm Springs business retreat.

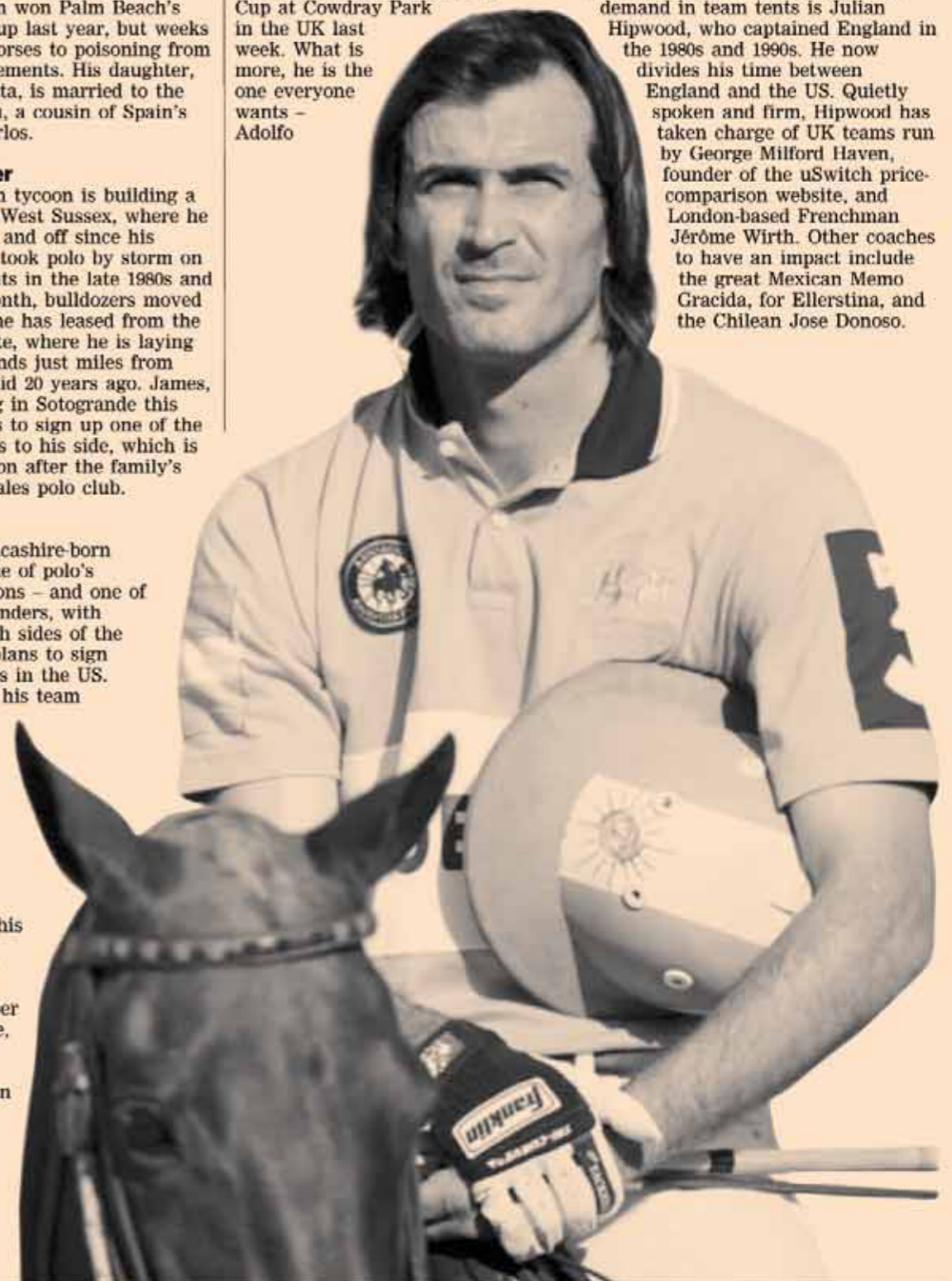
Dubai

Up to 20 teams enter the fray in UK high-goal tournaments, and the green-and-white shirts of Ali Albwardy's Dubai side have been consistently hot favourites for a decade – either with Albwardy (chairman of Albwardy Investment) in the patron spot or one of his sons, Tariq or Rashid. Unusually for a pro team, Dubai has held on to its main professional for a decade, winning the prestigious Gold Cup at Cowdray Park in the UK last week. What is more, he is the one everyone wants – Adolfo

Cambiasso. The team has a pristine private ground in Berkshire, and the family owns Desert Palm, one of Dubai's two polo clubs. The other is owned by the Al Habtoor family, also a growing force in UK polo.

Julian Hipwood

Coaches in polo come and go more frequently than in football, and it is often just a matter of having a brother or father at the sidelines. One former nine-goaler highly in demand in team tents is Julian Hipwood, who captained England in the 1980s and 1990s. He now divides his time between England and the US. Quietly spoken and firm, Hipwood has taken charge of UK teams run by George Milford Haven, founder of the uSwitch price-comparison website, and London-based Frenchman Jérôme Wirth. Other coaches to have an impact include the great Mexican Memo Gracida, for Ellerstina, and the Chilean Jose Donoso.



St Moritz exchanges grass for snow

Polo on snow

Haig Simonian reports on a version set on a frozen lake

Few forms of polo are odder than the annual spectacle of top players riding on the frozen lake of St Moritz, framed by the high peaks of Switzerland's Engadine mountains, and watched by thousands of warmly clothed onlookers.

Since its inception in 1985, St Moritz's polo on snow has been mimicked by other ski destinations. But when it comes to top-class competition, none matches the event that takes place in the plush resort 5,900 feet above sea level every January.

In 2009, the 25th anniversary of the competition, 20,000 spectators attended the four-day event, flanked by 250 media representatives, the resort's resident celebrities and even a Bollywood crew using the spectacular setting to film their hero in simulated action.

The idea for polo on snow came from Reto Gaudenzi, an ebullient Swiss player then managing Badrutts' Palace, one of the resort's famous five-star hotels.

But only with the 14th contest were the event's finances put on a solid footing, allowing marketing to take off.

"We had to put things on a more professional basis," says Heinz Reber, a director of the St Moritz Polo Club and head of the company created to stage the event and advise others.

Part of the transformation involved upgrading the Swiss event into a high-goal competition, requiring teams with a handicap of 18-22 goals and thereby restricting competitors

to the top international players. Holding a high-goal contest also raised the financial stakes. Each competition has a SFr5m (£3.1m, €3.7m, \$4.7m) budget. "About SFr1.5m of that is attributable solely to holding a high-

goal competition," explains Mr Reber. The cost includes importing 80-90 ponies, along with international stewards. Lavish hospitality and logistics account for the rest.

Playing on compressed snow on a frozen lake makes for a slower game than on grass, while the traditional white ball is replaced with a bigger orange substitute. Although the St Moritz version of polo sounds

like a recipe for disaster – and there can be skids – Reber says there has never been a serious accident.

For most spectators – especially the VIP guests of the sponsors in whose names the teams compete – the atmosphere and hospitality probably matter more than events on the lake. Top-class catering and the draw of St Moritz have turned the event into an attractive channel for luxury goods and financial services companies.

The game's backers, which include Bank Julius Baer and Brioni, the exclusive clothing brand, have remained broadly stable, although this year, Maserati, the Italian carmaker, replaced German rival Maybach.

In the same year, the competition's title was switched from Cartier Polo World Cup on Snow to St Moritz Polo World Cup on Snow to avoid highlighting any single sponsor and to draw attention to the resort.

The event is well established, but next year's competition is facing problems and, at best, is likely to be smaller than in recent years. Differences have arisen between the polo competition and White Turf, a separately managed and even longer-established horseracing event on the same frozen lake.

The organisers are also looking for a bigger commitment from St Moritz itself: with planning for each high-goal event starting 18 months in advance, they complain the town has been slow this time in clarifying key details.

Mr Reber says he needs information on safety and other issues.

"We're not after taxpayers' money," he says. "The local authority contributes a modest SFr20,000 each year and that's fine."

If all goes well, next year could see a slimmed-down contest that could potentially herald some form of national winter championship, with matches at different ski resorts, to bring polo to a wider audience.

Ideally, the full international spectacle would return from 2012.

"But you need the right regulatory conditions and infrastructure for a high-goal competition," warns Mr Reber. "The clock is ticking."

A violent, do-it-yourself ballet on two wheels

Bike polo

Not for the faint-hearted, writes David Gelles

If polo is the game of kings, then hard-court bike polo is the game of gutter punks and bicycle messengers. Played on vacant basketball courts, with beat-up mountain bikes for ponies and modified ski poles for mallets, it is as grungy as real polo is glamorous.

On a recent night, two dozen suspicious-looking characters gather at a rundown playground in San Francisco's Mission District, a fashionably low-rent neighbourhood that attracts immigrants and artists alike. They have odd nicknames: Shitty, Finger, Maya and a man called Susan. Many are pierced, most tattooed. They wait to begin their match as a trio of teenagers finishes a game of hoops. To pass the time, they drink from cans of beer wrapped in paper bags, and Bulleit Bourbon from the bottle.

"This sport definitely attracts a lot of blue-collar people who work at bike shops," says Doug Lohf, a wiry player. "If grass polo is one side of the spectrum, this is the other side."

Teams are three to a side. Games last 15 minutes, or until five goals are scored. Hubcaps the size of bicycle wheels keep mallets out of spokes, a potentially treacherous situation.

In spite of the inelegance of bike jousting, the players are not unskilled. They dribble the ball fluently and pass the ball between their wheels. If they put their feet down, they must pedal to the half-court sideline and check back in.

Although it is enjoying a modern renaissance, bike polo has a long history. An Irishman, Richard J. McCreedy, is credited with inventing the sport in 1891. The original game was played on a large grass field, and gained favour around the globe early in the 20th century. It was a demonstration sport at the

1908 London Olympics and peaked in popularity during the 1930s, when a league was established in Britain.

This more rarefied version of bike polo still exists, but it is the urban version that is catching on across the globe. As urban cyclists have grown in numbers and become more creative, they have adapted the game. "A lot more people ride bikes than can afford to own a horse," says Mr Lohf.

Today, hard-court bike polo is played in dozens of cities across the globe. Tournaments in New York and Los Angeles draw hundreds of players. There is a US tournament, and the world championships are in Berlin this autumn.

"It's like snowboarding in its early days, just taking off," says Mike Schriever, a photographer who has documented bike polo in San Francisco. "It's all do-it-yourself. They make their own

ON FT.COM

Polocrosse is an amateur – and cheaper – version of the game www.ft.com/polo



mallets and bikes. It's free to play. It's like watching a really, really violent ballet."

Indeed, bike polo is a rough sport. "There's definitely a bit of shouldering and stuff," says Mr Lohf. During an hour's play in San Francisco, several players tumble to the pavement, and a few have their fingers pinched between the handlebars. Mr Schriever once saw the man called Susan brake hard during a game and launch from his bike, suffering a concussion.

A treacherous sport, bike polo seems limited in its mainstream appeal. "I don't think it will ever get super big," says Mr Lohf. Like traditional polo, it appears destined to remain a speciality, enjoyed by an exclusive few. So, given their kinship, do bike polo players follow the ups and downs of traditional polo? "Not at all," says Mr Lohf. "Zero interest."



Slippery challenge: a player thunders across the snow in St Moritz

Rex Features

Around the world

Polo facts and figures

● **Player salaries** Adolfo Cambiasso, one of the best, has earned an estimated £1m for the UK season alone.

● **Numbers** 3,250 players are registered with the Hurlingham Polo Association, double the figure in 1995.