

“*Let others play at other things
— the king of games is still the game of kings.*”

WHERE POLO IS KING

Inscribed over a millennium ago on a stone tablet next to a polo ground in northern Pakistan, this verse expressed an intense passion felt for the game by its players. Judging by those who play the game today, little has changed.

BY GLENN SWIFT



(L-R) Polo players at practice; A horse anxious to get back on the polo field; Kris Bowman, club manager of the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club, takes a break during a practice game.

Many are surprised to hear about the ancient origins of what many historians claim to be the oldest organized sport in the world. The common myth is that polo was invented in the 19th century by members of the English aristocracy who were utterly bored with cricket yet far too civilized

for rugby. The truth is very different.

With all due respect to this most noble of peoples, the Brits were still running around with horns on their heads when Central Asian and Persian tribesmen began playing “the game of kings.” In fact, the first recorded polo match occurred roughly six centuries before Christ between the Turks and Persians. Just for the record, victory went to the Turks.

Credit can rightly be given to the Tenth Royal Hussars, a British cavalry unit, for bringing the game west in 1869—and for drawing up its first set of formal rules. One aspect of the game quickly deemed unpalatable by the English was a rather unpleasant tradition that had been introduced by the Mongols in the era of the “Great” Khans—the use of a vanquished opponent’s severed head for the “ball.” This constituted the first “rule change” and led to the creation of the sport’s first governing body, the Hurlingham Polo Association, in 1874. The HPA remains the governing body for polo in the United Kingdom and many of the association’s original rules are still in effect. The sport quickly became popular among the European nobility, but during the early part of the 20th century, under the leadership of Harry Payne Whitney, polo changed to become a high-speed sport in the United States. This differed markedly from the game in England, where strategy primarily involved utilizing short passes to move the ball toward the opposition’s goal. Whitney and his American teammates used the fast-break, sending long passes down field to riders who had broken away from the pack at a full gallop.

Since the end of World War II, Argentina has established itself as the major power in polo and dominated international play. The country is also home to the majority of the game’s top players. However, things might be changing. In recent years, interest in the sport has skyrocketed in the United States. With new clubs popping up all the time and more Americans participating everyday, the pendulum may very well be swinging in a different direction.

One place where interest in the sport is experiencing explosive growth is Vero Beach. And it all started at a place called Windsor.

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Established in 1989 by Hilary and W. Galen Weston of Toronto, Canada, the Village of Windsor spans 416 acres and is located just north of the Disney Resort on the barrier island. Featuring breathtaking riding trails that weave majestically through an abundance of tropical foliage, Windsor offers an unsurpassed quality of life. Designed by renowned New Urbanist town planners and architects, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Windsor combines the best of village life with architectural sophistication.

Windsor also deserves credit for something else—bringing polo to Vero Beach.

“Two of Windsor’s founders, Galen Weston and Geoffrey Kent, were big-time polo enthusiasts who owned and played on



(Clockwise from top) DeAnn Carroll, a consultant for Windsor who has been organizing their polo matches for 13 years; The youth polo group of the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club; two polo players at practice; John Walsh, Peter Busch and his daughter Tiffany with Sam Beauchamp of Jaguar Land Over, Fort Pierce.

their own teams. They wanted to establish a polo tradition for Vero Beach,” said DeAnn Carroll, who handles public relations for the upscale community. “Windsor offers the opportunity to watch high-end polo in a very sophisticated atmosphere.”

Carroll was quick to emphasize that despite Windsor’s high-end approach to the game, the community maintains a distinctly familial style.

“Windsor is all about class and style, but we love dogs and children. We’re definitely not the ‘heels and hat’ crowd at all. In fact, most of our women members wear linen suits when watching matches,” she joked.

Over the years, Windsor has kept true to its word to bring the very best in polo to

Vero Beach. Yes, they’ve even had their share of some of those Argentine superstars.

“We’ve brought in many world-class players, including some ‘nine- and 10-goalers’ last year,” Carroll said.

Now if you’re wondering what a nine- or 10-goaler is, it goes something like this: Polo players are ranked internationally on a scale of -1 to 10 (the higher the better). Although the word goal is used in the rating system, it bears no relation to the number of goals scored by the player. (Definitely a British kind of thing.) Instead, a player’s horsemanship, hitting, quality of horse, game sense and sportsmanship are the factors considered in determining the rating. That old adage, “It’s not if you win or lose, but how you play the game,” definitely plays a part in polo.

As for the game itself, polo is definitely one of the most complex games in the world.

George Kahle, president of the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club; Kris Bowman, club manager; and Dolph Kahle, vice president of the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club.



The United States Polo Association (USPA) Web site lists 55 pages of rules, which at first glance appear to require a team of attorneys to interpret. (More evidence of British influence.) There are a few basic rules, however, that aren’t too difficult to understand.

When played outside, as opposed to the arena variety, polo is played by two teams of four players each who are mounted on horseback. A regulation USPA field is 300 yards long and either 160 yards or 200 yards wide, with a goal on both ends. The objective of the game is fairly simple—to hit the ball into the goal.

The game is divided into periods (called chukkers) of seven minutes. Depending upon the rules of the particular tournament or league, a game may have four, six or eight chukkers. (In case you’re on a game show, six is most common.) Matches are typically played with a handicap, with the sum of the individual players’ handicaps compared to each other. For the sake of civilization and to maintain the game’s esprit de corps, the team with the worst handicap is given a few goals before the start of the game.

“The USPA won’t allow low-level play-

kees.” Although Steinbrenner isn’t likely to take up polo anytime soon, Windsor has certainly had its share of colorful celebrities grace its field of play.

“In the early 90s, Prince Charles brought a team from England, and Tommy Lee Jones competed a few years ago with his championship San Saba team. We’re very excited that Tommy Lee’s returning with San Saba to compete in our main event in late January,”

Located on the grounds of Pointe West off Route 60, the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club was founded by Dolf Kahle, a former Windsor polo club member. Known by locals as the “Polo Grounds,” the club offers miles of riding trails, a practice polo field, three regulation polo fields and an emerald green tournament polo field that doubles as a neighborhood park.

Throughout the magnificent grounds

“Horsemanship is key. If you have good riding skills, then you’re apt to pick up the game much more quickly.” —DeAnn Carroll

ers to compete with high-level ones, for that would make for an unsafe match.” Carroll said.

When asked as to what generally makes for a good polo player, Carroll was quick to answer.

“Horsemanship is key. If you have good riding skills, then you’re apt to pick up the game much more quickly,” she said. “That’s why the Argentine players are so good. They come from a very strong equestrian tradition in addition to being great athletes.”

One of the most unique aspects of polo is that the team’s owner, or patron, is usually an active member of the team. As one sports writer once exclaimed, “That’s like George Steinbrenner playing first base for the Yan-

Carroll said.

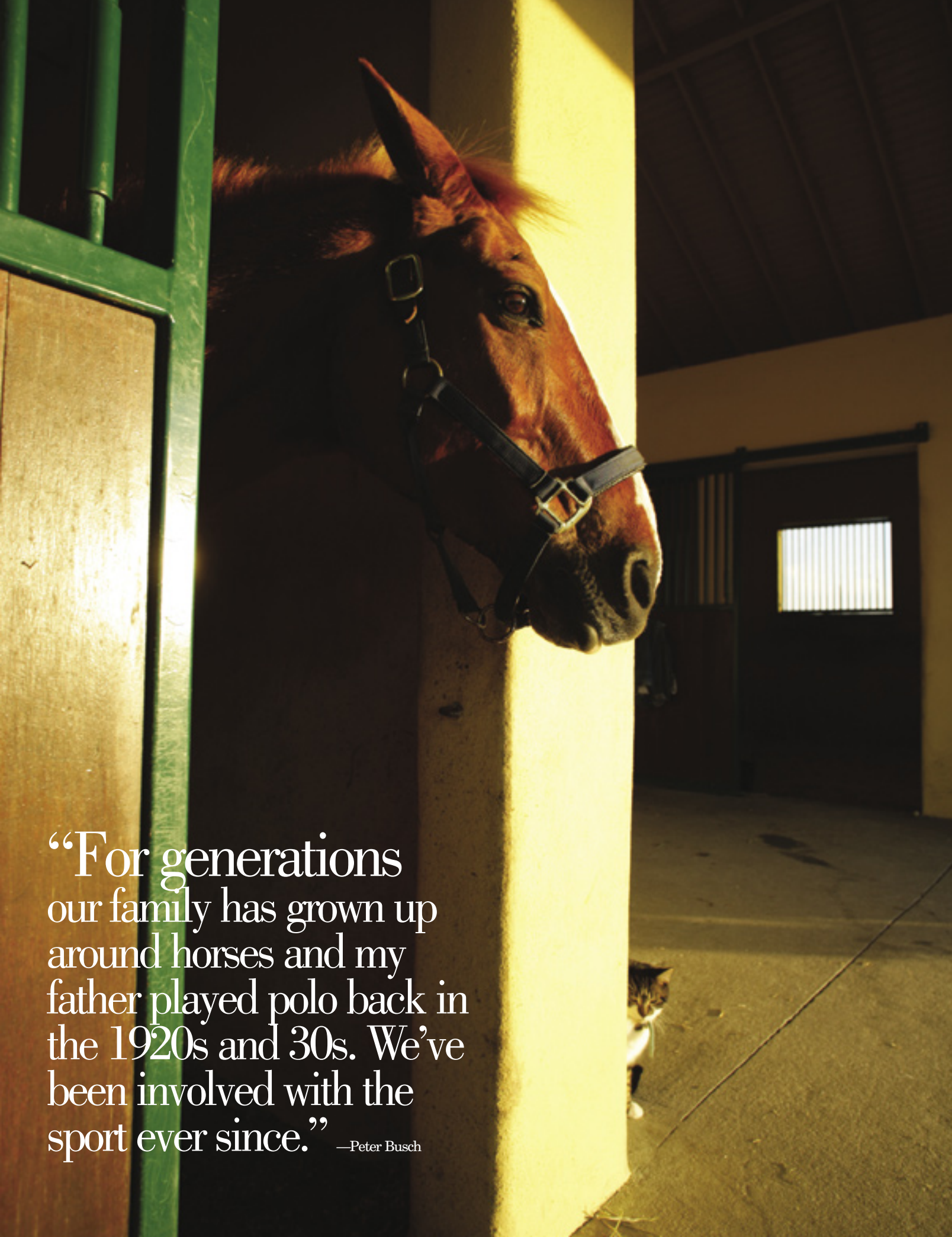
Each year Windsor sponsors one main event—a high-powered exhibition featuring world-renowned players. For the third year in a row, Windsor’s special occasion benefitted The Breast Cancer Research Foundation. As always, it featured top-notch talent. The festivities were held on Jan. 29 with a luncheon followed by the exhibition match.

While Windsor appears to have a lock on bringing in those nine-goal superstars and high-powered celebrities, across town another polo club is enjoying phenomenal success—by taking a very different approach.

of this pristine area in western Indian River County, one encounters herons and egrets nesting among towering sabal palms and water oaks. Great care has been taken to provide protected habitats for indigenous wildlife and to incorporate native plants into the landscape design for this gracious horse community.

The natural beauty of the Polo Grounds is undeniable, as is one other indisputable fact. At the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club, polo is king.

“Our growth has been incredible,” polo club manager Kris Bowman said. “Six years ago we began with just six members. Back in those days, you pretty much had to schedule teams in Palm Beach County if you wanted to play competitive ‘lower-goal’ polo. Now, we



“For generations our family has grown up around horses and my father played polo back in the 1920s and 30s. We’ve been involved with the sport ever since.” —Peter Busch

have an eight-team six-goal league, a six-team eight-goal league and a coaching league for beginners. So, not only are we very competitive, but we offer those just learning the game and who might not even own a horse the opportunity to play. We call this ‘country polo.’”

This is a far cry from the game’s traditional blue-blood image and epitomizes the desire of many enthusiasts to expand public participation and interest in the sport.

“Our membership comes from many walks of life, from cowboys and school teachers to doctors and stockbrokers. We have several husband and wife, father and son and mother and daughter teams. That makes what we do very special,” Bowman said.

One family that’s very involved is that of Peter Busch of Anheuser-Busch fame.

“For generations our family has grown up around horses and my father played polo back in the 1920s and 30s. We’ve been involved with the sport ever since,” Busch said. “It’s especially great with children. My 19-year-old daughter, Tiffany, and I play together in a four and eight-goal league. We’re lucky...there are very few places like Vero Beach where you can do that.”

Lucky indeed.

“The Polo and Saddle Club’s niche has paid off in large part because there is no longer any lower-goal polo in Palm Beach. The nearest club doing what we do is in Ocala,” Bowman said.

While the polo season is limited in Florida to the cooler months (November through April), the number of events at the Polo and Saddle is another distinguishing factor.

“We have an event scheduled every Sunday beginning Jan. 6 and running through April 3. Each one supports a different charity while offering exciting, competitive polo,” Bowman said.

As for the future of polo in Vero Beach, the folks at the Polo Grounds couldn’t be more positive.

“Our founder has recently purchased a 4,000-acre tract in western Indian River County,” Bowman said. “We’re planning on building a stadium and a truly state-of-the-art polo facility.”

Of course, the local passion for polo isn’t limited to the playing field.

Local restaurateur John Marx has found a unique way to capitalizing on the town’s intense interest in the sport.



(Top) John Marx, owner of the Polo Grill; (Above) The youth polo group of the Vero Beach Polo & Saddle Club gears up for practice; (Right) Polo player Avery S. Chapman poised for action during a practice game on the field.

A resident of Vero Beach for some 30 years, Marx owned and ran Chelsea’s for 19 years in addition to another popular eatery, the Lemon Tree. Recently, he opened the Polo Grill, but he did it for a most unusual reason.

“I had purchased some polo prints a couple years ago and my wife didn’t like them. I needed a place to hang them,” Marx laughed.

In all seriousness, Marx is very proud of the Grill. Located on south Ocean Drive in Portales de Vero, the upscale bistro specializes in fresh seafood entrees at moderate prices.

“We offer a comfortable, friendly, club atmosphere that has been embraced by the local polo community,” he said. “The vast majority of our patrons are repeat customers and that says a lot. The Grill is very ‘Vero Beach.’”

Gone are the days when Vero Beach

played second-fiddle to “other” polo communities. With first-class facilities and a dedicated core of supporters, Vero Beach is well on its way to developing its own worldwide reputation in the rapidly growing sport. Whether it is high-end, celebrity-studded polo, or the competitive country variety, there’s something for enthusiasts of this ancient game from every walk of life.

Eat your heart out Palm Beach... ■