

Horses Spin Like Cats

Polo Tournament Finals



Del Mar polo field

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

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Tom Goodspeed, general manager of the San Diego Polo Club, is asked if polo can accurately be compared to golf on horseback.

"I've heard polo compared to hockey on horseback," says the former polo professional and current instructor, who is speaking by phone from home on a Monday ("the only 'down day' in the polo world," as he characterizes it). "But, yes, if you try your golf swing while you're up on top of a horse galloping at 35 miles an hour, you're going to get close. Or you could speed up your golf cart to 35 miles an hour and try it from there. Still, a horse has a mind of its own; a golf cart doesn't."

Since the 2003 Spreckels Cup championship began at the club on September 17, some of the best professional players in the world have been competing. And they are riding some of the finest polo horses. But why is it that, while most people know the names of a least a few famous racehorses, they can't name a single famous polo pony?

It's unfortunate that the sport has been "a little bit slow" in marketing itself to the general public, says Goodspeed, who does know polo's

Hardtack and Seabiscuit equivalents, as do all insiders. "That's because, knowing the horses — knowing who's coming out on which horse and when — is very much part of the game. And the relationship between a player and a horse is probably tighter than any other relationship in the player's life. For performance's sake and for the safety of both the horse and rider, it's essential that they operate as a single unit."

Racehorses are bred. Are polo horses born or made? "There are two main sources of horses for polo, one of them being the ranch, especially ranches in South America, where the gauchos work the horses with cows. All the traits desirable on a ranch are transferable to a polo field."

The second source is the racetrack. "But it's much more of a task to retrain a racehorse than it is to retrain a ranch horse, because all that the racehorses know is running out of that gate as fast they can. In polo, you want them to do that up and down the field" — which is the length of nine football fields. "But then they have to slide and stop, spin around like a 900-pound cat, and take off in another direction. So a racehorse needs about two years to learn to play polo." A ranch horse, by contrast, may be competing in six months.

Where and how are the horses trained? "Almost every professional carries some number of what are called

'green horses,' " says Goodspeed. Most carry three to six that they gradually introduce into the game during practices.

We know a jockey's body type. What's the ideal for a polo player? "A lot of top players are coming out of Argentina, and they're not necessarily small or short, but they're slender. They don't want extra weight; it puts their horse at a disadvantage. But the players are also pretty physically capable. There are pretty decent upper bodies on these guys."

One thing they need upper-body strength for is getting better drive on the ball, which is slightly bigger than a tennis ball and made of solid plastic. Men would naturally do better than women at that skill. Can we expect to see many women competing for the Spreckels Cup? "In fact, the defending champion is Lisa Bosstick's Madison Square team," says Goodspeed. "Lisa is a local businesswoman, mother of three, and obviously a talented athlete." Three male professionals complete her foursome. "She may not be the strongest hitter, but she has to be really good at positioning herself; that alone is a full load. And if she can actually help by moving the ball around, that's a bonus." Bosstick scored two goals to win the cup last year.

In addition to the pro-am and male-female combinations, polo teams

traditionally mix players of various ages to balance competition at different levels, says Goodspeed, who just turned 50 and began playing polo at age 12. But is it really true that 89-year-old Willis Allen, a club founder, is competing this year? Goodspeed says, emphatically, yes, adding that Allen, Allen's son-in-law Harry Collins, and Collins's son and grandson are the members of the four-generational team known as Rancho Valencia.

Those new to the sport may benefit from listening to the instructional commentary as well as the play-by-play to be broadcast to spectators in the stands. Beforehand, newcomers may want to read the rules and glossary at www.sandiegopolos.com. There they'll learn about another tradition. Spectators are asked at intermission to do something caddy-like, which is to stomp back flat into the field the divots that the horses' hooves have made.

— Jeanne Schinto

2003 Spreckels Cup finals
Sunday, September 28
Matches begin at
1:30 and 3:00 p.m.
San Diego Polo Club
14555 El Camino Real,
Rancho Santa Fe
\$5 per person; parking, \$5
858-481-9217