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Mixed-Blood Arena

Polo Cup Match & Festival

PHOTOGRAPH BY LYNN BREMNER

Last year's Polo Cup, Caliente Racetrack, Tijuana

Steve Lewandowski, polo-match announcer, is asked if Ralph Lauren has been good for polo. He doesn't like the question. "I don't think there's any relationship between the two." But in the popular mind there is, wouldn't he agree? "In the popular mind there is a relationship between polo and the perceived surreal world that Ralph's trying to create, the one which you theoretically become a part of when you buy something of his. But wouldn't *you* agree that the majority of people who wear polo shirts don't know what polo's all about?"

So maybe Ralph Lauren has been responsible for a distortion? Lewandowski understands the line of questioning better now. He offers that another distortion was perpetrated by the polo scene in the 1990 movie *Pretty Woman*. "It lasts for only a couple of minutes, but that's the biggest singular reference that people have these days to polo. Julia Roberts and Richard Gere are at a match. It's extremely Rolls Royce and champagne and formal clothes. And although there's some of that in reality — because the people who play polo, by and large, have a good bit of money — it's a lot more down to earth and a lot more friendly."

LOCAL EVENTS

Lewandowski is asked about the match that he'll be announcing this weekend. Who is favored to win? The U.S.A. or Mexico? He avoids answering directly; instead, he says, "The U.S.A. does have a legitimate star playing, and that's Billy Sheldon. He'll be the highest-rated player on the field, I'm sure. He'll lean so far out of the saddle, it'll look like it's not humanly possible, and yet he does it, with ease. Billy's someone who dispels polo's Grey Poupon image. He's a full-on cowboy. His father helped found the Poway rodeo 30 years ago, and Billy's been a part of that rodeo since he was a kid. Billy's just as comfortable in a cowboy hat as he is in a polo helmet."

Horses are a major expense for polo players, and each player needs more than one. But how much of a match's outcome depends on the player's skill and how much on the horse's? "They say the horse is responsible for 80 to 85 percent," says Lewandowski.

Saul Flores, captain of Mexico's team, offers the same percentage. "The horse is the main part of the whole show, no?" he says, speaking by phone from Tijuana.

Flores has 22 horses. They will come in handy this weekend, because he will provide them for both teams. "It is difficult to cross the border with horses; it is particularly difficult to get them out of here. So we have solved the problem. Players have only to bring themselves and personal equipment."

Flores's horses play polo exclusively. But have they done so from birth? "No, we buy horses wherever we find them with good bodies, good height, and especially good power. It doesn't matter what kind of blood they have. We have racehorses, quarter horses; we have Mexican *criollos*, which have mixed blood. And the *criollos* may be the best polo ponies around."

What's the story on polo in Mexico? The sport isn't usually associated with south of the border. In 1936, says Flores, at the Munich Olympics, a Mexican won the bronze medal for polo. Even before that, the Gracida family was a famous Mexican name in international polo; both male and female Gracidas continue to compete at top levels. But there aren't many Mexican polo clubs. "In the state of Baja, California, this is the only one," says Flores, referring to his own Tijuana-based club, which he founded and sponsors.

Flores is also responsible for creating the indoor arena, at the former racetrack, where the upcoming match will be played. "It's a huge arena, which I designed." Usually, arena polo is played in an indoor space smaller than the fields on which outdoor polo is played. "But I decided to change that, because top players don't want to play in the smaller space."

For spectators, the arena's advantage is proximity. "You can see the players' faces; hear all their communication. Outdoors, you are too far away."

What he describes sounds like a hockey rink. "*¡Exacta!*" says Flores. "In fact, I took the idea from there."

Now, hockey players get rowdy. They have fights. Has there ever been a brawl at a polo match? "Polo is rough, tough," says Flores. "But the horses are going 35 miles an hour. You are not allowed to do anything that will threaten someone's life." Momentarily forgetting that women — and children — play polo, he says, "It is a sport of gentlemen."

Lewandowski compares polo to hockey, too, but submits that polo is harder. "Hockey players have to master two skills: stick handling and skating. For polo players, it's stick handling and riding. But the horse has a mind of its own; hockey skates don't."

— Jeanne Schinto

2nd Annual Polo Cup Match & Festival
Mexico vs. U.S.A.
Saturday, October 19, 10:30 a.m.–11:00 p.m.
Caliente Polo Club
Caliente Racetrack, Tijuana
Buses leave from San Diego Polo Club, 14555 El Camino Real (corner of Via de la Valle and El Camino Real), Rancho Santa Fe
Cost: $79
(includes bus, VIP seating at match, private-party admission, post-match dinner, unlimited wine/beer at club)
Info and reservations: 858-794-8804