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POLO: Old Sport For A New Breed

Special Section: A Kenner History
By Mel Leavitt



POLO

A New Breed Of Sport in New Orleans

BY GARRY BOULARD

It seems like one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's visions: a hot summer Sunday afternoon in City Park, an ever-so-slight breeze just barely complementing a relentlessly intense sun. Blankets and picnic baskets are much in evidence as are tired fathers sleeping in the grass and restless children throwing stones in a nearby lake.



PHOTO BY PHILLIP SAGE

Polo is a ballet, a wild, yet civilized game that combines danger, elegance, beauty and fierce competitiveness.

Almost magically, in the middle of this bucolic laziness, appears a gray-bearded man wearing a light-colored helmet, white breeches, brown boots that end just below the knee and a baby blue shirt. He's riding a grade thoroughbred with a clipped mane and bandaged front legs. Some of the children point and giggle. "The horse is wearing leg warmers," a little girl says.

The sine qua non sport of New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Hong Kong, Pakistan and Zambia—not to mention Palm Beach County in Florida and Southampton in New York—has arrived in New Orleans in the unlikely setting of City Park.

"Polo is going to be one of the most popular sports in New Orleans," predicts Safi Kaskas, one of the city's biggest promoters of the game and the financial broker for City Park's riding stables. "We're picking up people right and left to join the team. Although it's still just starting out here, the response has already been tremendous."

The temperature is in the mid-80s. Observers think the riders with their polo ponies (they're called "ponies" even if they're large adult horses) are a little on the daffy side. After all, who would want to maneuver a 1,200-pound animal in the stifling summer heat while trying at the same time to hit a little ball with a mallet and also avoid other horses running around you and other mallets flying in the air?

"If you think it's a strange thing for humans to be doing, then think about the horses," says avid New Orleans polo player, Cynthia Reeves, president of Reeves and Associates. "In polo, three things happen that are totally alien to the horse, and a horse in the wild would never do these things. One is riding straight at another horse. The second is bumping into another horse, and the third is allowing things to be swung around his head."

Continues Reeves: "You have to be in great shape to do this. Both the rider and the horse have to be trained athletes."

The children's giggles cease as the game begins. Those who look at polo as the idle rich at play are partly right—it is a sport that requires vast amounts of money if one hopes to purchase several



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ponies and properly maintain them—but it is also a ballet, a wild, yet civilized game that combines danger, elegance, beauty and fierce competitiveness.

"So here you are," writes Adam Smith in a recent issue of *Esquire* magazine as he tries to explain polo. "You've read the program, glossy and thick as *Town & Country*. Playing the game, you say to the blonde beside you, is like hitting a tennis ball with a three wood while driving a golf cart with one hand. After a couple of chukkers (playing periods of a polo game), you sneer at the understatement. Not only don't golf carts go 40 miles an hour, but they also don't have the nasty tendency to eject you, or roll on top of you when bumped by other golf carts also going 40 miles an hour. Often in opposite or perpendicular directions. In the hands of dedicated professionals whose livelihood is at stake. And who can hit the ball—which is far from fuzzy or soft—backward and forward, up, down, and sideways, hard enough to drive your teeth through the back of your skull."

Those who understand polo, who know—perhaps like Hemingway knew

about bullfighting—when it is "good" and when it is "not so good," say that the City Park regulars are "not so good." "They're amateurs," says one old-time polo player from Florida. "They're weekend players. This isn't life and death for them. I don't know how many of them feel any passion for it."

But as one young man falls flat on his back, another's horse narrowly misses getting hit in the snout with a mallet, the passion—even if only the Sunday afternoon variety—seems to be there.

"We would not pretend to be anything we are not," says Kaskas, who founded and owns Kaskas Oriental Rugs in New Orleans. "This is a sport with various levels. What we have at City Park is the beginner's level. We don't have the fast polo they play at Palm Beach. But we do have a small group that is learning all the time and getting better and better. This is just the beginning of what will be true and good polo in New Orleans. That, I am sure of."

Kaskas, born and raised in Lebanon years before that particular corner of the world exploded, remembers watching

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polo and the ponies as a youth. "They were always very elegant and beautiful," he says of both the animals and riders. "When I came to New Orleans I wanted to introduce my daughters to these customs, and we went out to City Park to see what was going on."

It wasn't long until Kaskas invested a large sum of money in the City Park stables and shortly after that began to think about starting a polo team in New Orleans.

"Why not? The weather here is good for it. It's nice all year around. And other communities in Florida and Texas have extravagant polo tournaments that get worldwide attention. Why shouldn't New Orleans be a part of this?" Kaskas asks.

Across Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana businessman Huey LaPlace asks himself the same questions: Why wasn't polo played more in this area? Wouldn't it be a great sport for Southern Louisiana? How could he promote it?

"One thing led to another," says LaPlace. "About 10 years ago, I decided to build a polo facility in Covington. And it really took off. We've got people from all over the region who come here. Everyone pays dues, and all of it goes to the Covington Polo Club. It's a nonprofit organization with the money used just to keep the place up and pay for the staff. We have a professional polo player who works for us."

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"I tell you one thing," says Kaskas, who wants City Park someday to rival and exceed the Covington facility, "the field that Mr. LaPlace has is one of the best in the nation. It looks like a Persian carpet. Even the Palm Beach field, which is larger, is not as nice."

Kaskas and LaPlace may typify the successful, high-finance image that polo has come to symbolize in many minds. Kaskas, hard-driving and energetic, owns 35 horses, maintains two busy rug shops and oversees a small staff and the daily operations of the City Park stables. LaPlace is an established businessman, who is regularly hit up by area charities, gives generously of his time to various civic organizations and is chairman of the board of the All-State Auto Stores chain. He has, he says, "about 30 horses."

"You can get a good quality beginner's horse for something like \$1,500 to \$2,500," says Reeves, who has seven ponies as well as a 23-horse trailer. "If

you become a high-goal player, you can pay upwards of \$20,000 or \$30,000 or even \$40,000 per horse. And you have to maintain at least six of them if you're playing high-goal polo. I can play a game with three horses. That's taking each horse and rotating it, so they play in the game twice. I don't play that fast a game yet. But if I were playing high-goal polo, one chukker is about all a horse can take."

Although owning several ponies and regularly working out with them is a polo player's dream, Reeves says it doesn't take a bundle of money to play the sport in New Orleans. "You can go to City Park and take lessons and rent a horse and play on a regular basis and never have to spend all the money that you would if you owned a horse. All you have to get is a helmet, boots, kneepads and a mallet. It's no longer just an elitist sport, but a sport for everyone."

Kaskas is more succinct: "We don't require that people have a Rolls-Royce," he laughs. "But it's better if they do."

The perception of polo as the sport of nobility is not something that emanates from the Hollywood image makers. As far back as 2000 B.C., polo was used as a training game for the king's cavalry. It was a rough chaotic game with warlike overtones. Although some scholars believe polo has its roots in Oriental culture, it was in Iran and Arabia that the game first bloomed into the pattern that is familiar today. Sons of kings were rigorously trained in the field of archery, swordsmanship, hunting and polo.

As interest in the sport grew, so did the proportional danger. In China, in 910 A.D., Emperor T'aiTsu ordered all the surviving participants in a local polo game beheaded after a favored relative

fell to his death in the game.

In the 1300s, the game reached mass appeal in India, and in the decades following the widespread acceptance of polo, British calvary units caught the fever.

By 1876, James Gordon Bennet, publisher of the *New York Herald*, happened by his first polo game abroad and quickly decided it was one of the most exhilarating sports he had ever witnessed. He brought news of the game home to the United States, and by the next year the first American polo club, based in Westchester County, New York, was founded.

Gradually polo evolved into a simple, yet physically exhausting execution that somehow combines the thrill of soccer, hockey and horse racing. It is always played on an outdoor grass field 300 yards by 160 yards. "New Orleans is perfect because, with the exception of a little rain in the spring and summer, we have the right kind of weather year round for polo," says LaPlace. Goal posts are set up at each end of the field, and a score is made by knocking the ball through one of these goals. What makes the game difficult is the intricate maneuvers that take place trying to get that blasted little ball to the end of the field.

Two teams of four people each line up parallel in the field's middle. An umpire bowls the ball between the lines of players. From here on, all hell breaks loose. The players position themselves to whack the ball, horses stop and start, raised mallets fill the air, and riders stretch and turn, never losing sight of the ball.

Polo players are, by and large, remarkably fit people who pride themselves on their muscular agility. Their horses are usually trim equestrian spectacles who



Cynthia Reeves and Safi Kaskas are but two of the growing number of polo enthusiasts that can be found competing on weekends at City Park.

PHOTO BY DAVID WAHER

live on specially formulated diets.

"The horses are healthy because it is a strenuous sport," says Reeves, who adds that she will drop practically whatever she's doing for a good game of polo. "It's the same reason so many of the players are in good shape. It requires that of you. I think that's why so many high-pressured, upper-end executives like polo. When you play it, you empty your mind of everything else. I mean, let's face it, it's hard to think of anything else when you're flying down a field at 30 or 35 miles an hour and trying to hit a little tiny ball that is no more than three-and-a-half inches across, with a mallet that is

52 inches long, while at the same time trying to control this gigantic animal as some other guy is trying to knock you off your horse."

Perhaps not surprisingly, polo has gained its greatest widespread acceptance during the Reagan years. As the country has returned to more traditional values in politics, cultural habits and even in clothing preferences, polo seems to be on its way to becoming *the* exquisite American sport.

"I think polo has all the elements of the ultimate American sport," says novelist Jerzy Kosinski, whose book *Passion Play* tells the adventures and misadven-

tures of a one-time great polo player. "There's the man on the horse, a Western-trained horse, in fact; there's the contact between the eye, the hand and the ball, as in baseball, and then there's the collision, the danger and, let's face it, the blood and possibility of death."

As polo has emerged as a major American sport, the nation's attention has turned south. Texas boasts a number of polo facilities, and Palm Beach—the essential American version of elitist living and hauteure—has become the showcase for the sport. Palm Beach has three fully equipped polo complexes with all of the essentials needed for both the rider and pony; private rooms and bars and restaurants further add to the image of a sportman's exclusive world.

Polo's international mystique is enhanced only by the invading Argentinians, who are considered to be among the world's greatest players and are now seen in abundance throughout the South. The *New York Times Magazine*, noting that there are more than twice the number of polo clubs in the United States now as there were just 10 years ago, says, "The sport appears to be catching on with a new crowd, or at least a larger one."

In Louisiana, polo clubs thrive in Baton Rouge—where Secretary of State Jim Brown is among the sport's enthusiasts—in Folsom, Covington and now in New Orleans.

All the state's facilities have a bit further to go if they ever expect seriously to compete with those available in Texas and Florida. But given the supporting climatic conditions of New Orleans and southeastern Louisiana, plus the obviously enthusiastic interest of the small but, in many cases, well-heeled, local polo enthusiasts, it may be only a matter of time until the region enters major league polo circles.

"There are a number of reasons why people in New Orleans like polo," explains Reeves. "I think a lot of people here, and in the nation, like the old rough rodeo rider. There's a high-speed exhilarating feel to it all. It may look like it appeals to the gentleman or the woman, but I think it appeals directly to our cowboy heritage."

Says Kaskas, who claims to like the atmosphere of polo more than anything else, "It's all elegance. We don't allow any foul language on the field. We don't allow people to behave in any way that would take away from the tradition of the game. We require that people wear the proper attire for the games. It's an elegant game, and I think people like and respect that."