

The Game of Polo

History

The 2500 year-old game of polo is one of the fastest, roughest, and most dangerous sports played today. It is gaining increasing popularity as a premier spectator sport and can be an easy game for the first-time spectator to enjoy. Imagine the excitement of seeing players on thoroughbred horses bumping and jostling with each other as hockey on horseback, racing at top speeds down the field while striking a small ball with the precision of an experienced golfer.

An Asiatic game, and possibly the oldest team sport, polo was probably first played on a barren campground by nomadic warriors over two thousand years ago.

Valuable for training Calvary, the game was played from Constantinople to Japan by the Middle Ages. Known in the East as the Game of Kings, Tamer Lane's polo grounds can still be seen in Samarkand. British tea planters in India witnessed the game in the early 1800's but it was not until the 1850's that the British Calvary drew up the earliest rules and by the 1869's the game was well established in England.

James Gordon Bennett, a noted American publisher; balloonist, and adventurer, was captivated by the sport and brought it to New York in 1876 where it caught on immediately. Within ten years, there were major clubs all over the east, including Newport and Long Island.

Over the next 50 years, polo achieved extraordinary popularity in the United States. By the 1930's polo was in the midst of a Golden Age - it was an Olympic sport and crowds in excess of 30,000 regularly attended international matches at Meadow Brook Polo Club on Long Island. The galloping game produced athletes who would doubtless have achieved greatness in any sport: Cecil Smith, the Texas cowboy, who held a perfect 10-goal rating for a still-record 25 years; Devereux Melbourne, instrumental in formulating modern styles of play; and Tommy Hitchcock, war hero, and the best of the best in international competition for two decades.

In the past 20 years, polo in the United States has undergone an unprecedented and remarkable expansion. At present, there are more than 275 USPA member clubs with over 3,500 players.

Polo is an international sport. During the summer season at Hurlingham, England, the fall season at Palermo in Buenos Aires, and the winter season at Palm Beach or Palm Desert 30 to 40 teams will be manned by players from the United States, Argentina, Zimbabwe, Canada, New Zealand, Pakistan, Mexico, France, Australia, South Africa, Great Britain, and a dozen other polo playing countries. For over 30 years, the Argentines have been preeminent in the sport but explosive growth in players and the availability of good horses is honing the competitive abilities of challengers from many countries, including the United States.

*History information obtained from the [United States Polo Association](#) (USPA)

The Terms of Polo

Chukka: The origins of this term, meaning the "basic period of play," are obscure, although it is thought to have come from India. There are between 4 and 6 chukkas of play (dependant on the level of polo being played) - each lasting 7 minutes, 30 seconds. A bell or horn sounds at 7 minutes to warn the players. A second bell then sounds 30 seconds later to end play. The last chukka ends at 7 minutes with no extra time.

Foul: An infraction of the rules. Most fouls govern the safe riding and the concept of the line of the ball.
Goal: A score which is tallied any time the ball travels between the goal posts, whether hit in by attacker, defender, or pony.

Handicap: The comparative rating of polo players awarded by the HPA. Handicaps are expressed in goals (to describe a player's value to the team, not the number of goals he is expected to score) and range from

the beginners' -2 to 10 goals (the best). Players' handicaps are added together to derive a team handicap that, in turn, is used to equalize competition. The difference in goals between two teams is awarded to the lower rated team before play begins.

Positions

- Number 1* The most offensive player. This is similar to the forward position in hockey or soccer. This player should be an accurate hitter, but need not necessarily hit a long ball.
- Number 2* Primarily an offensive player but also responsible for defense, interchanging with the number 3 player. The number 2 player is often the second-highest rated player on the team.
- Number 3* The quarterback and play maker. The "3" is usually the highest rated and most experienced player. This player must be able to hit a long ball accurately but be capable of close-in stick work and ball control.
- Number 4* The back. This is a defensive position. However, a good back must be able to not only hit a good backshot, but to turn the play from defensive to offensive in a flash. The number 4 player is the last line of defense.

Polo Ball: Approximately 3-1/2 inches in diameter and 4 ounces in weight, the ball is made of hard plastic. At one time it was made of wood or willow root.

Hook: One of the two defensive maneuvers (the other is the ride-off) allowed in the rules. The mallet is used to block or interfere with another player's swing at the ball, although it must be used in an approved manner. Unsafe hooking or hitting into a pony is a foul.

Hit-In: A hit-in takes place when the ball goes over the back line, wide of the goal mouth. The defending team hits the ball back into play from the back line. This gives the defending team a free hit and can often change the momentum of play.

Referee: The Referee, usually on foot at midfield, does not call fouls but is the final word in the case of a dispute between the two mounted umpires. The Referee is sometimes known as the "third man."

Line of the Ball: The imaginary line created by the ball in its sometimes capricious travels. The line of the ball may not be crossed or infringed except in special circumstances. This is the pivotal concept on which many fouls and infractions are based - the interpretation of the line of the ball is usually what the umpires are discussing after they have blown a foul whistle.

Ride-Off: Similar in concept to a body-check in hockey, a ride-off is used to break an opposing player's concentration, move him off the line of the ball, or spoil his shot. A ride-off is hard and dramatic, but executed properly, does not endanger the horses.

Mallet: The instrument used to move the ball. Although fiberglass has been used in its construction, the shaft is most often still made of bamboo. A hardwood head is used and the ball hit with the side of the head.

Safety 60: A free hit. When the ball rolls over the back line wide of the goal mouth as a result of being touched by a defending man, the attacking team is allowed to hit a safety from 60 yards out to a defended goal. The clock is stopped and the ball is placed on the 60-yard line approximately in line with the spot where the ball crossed the back line.

Near-Side: The left side of the horse

Off-Side: The right side of the horse. By the rules, there are no left-handed polo players. You play with your right hand or you don't play.

Shots

Back Shot Hitting the ball in a direction opposite to that in which the player is traveling.

Neck Shot A ball hit under the neck of a pony.

Tail Shot Hitting a ball behind the pony.

Number 4 The back. This is a defensive position. However, a good back must be able to not only hit a good backshot, but to turn the play from defensive to offensive in a flash. The number 4 player is the last line of defense.

Out of Bounds: When the ball is hit over the side-lines, it is out of bounds. The clock continues to run. Teams line up at that spot and the ball is thrown in by the umpires. Deliberately hitting the ball out in the closing seconds of a match can be an excellent strategic play.

Throw-in: The game is started with a throw-in, whereby the ball is literally thrown in between the lined up teams by the umpire.

Penalties: Infractions of the rules (fouls) result in penalties being awarded by the umpires to the offended team. The seriousness of the foul determines the degree of the penalty. Designated from 1 through 8, penalties usually involve a shot on goal from a predetermined spot with the clock stopped. The most common awarded are the 2, 3, 4, and 5. In a penalty 5, the ball is hit by the fouled team from midfield; in a 4, from the 60-yard line; in a 3, from the 40-yard line, and in a 2, from the 30-yard line.

Umpires: These are the on-field officials. Mounted on horses, the umpires wear black and white, vertically striped shirts to identify them. Most polo umpires are active players. The umpires are responsible for "enforcing the rules," and "keeping proper control over players and teams" in a sport in which tempers often run hot.

*Terms information obtained from the [Inglesham-Polo Centre](#).

The Rules of Polo

Polo is played on a 10 acre grass field, 300 yards in length by 160 yards, which is the approximate area of ten football fields. Goal posts are set eight yards apart on either end of the field. The object of the game is to move the ball down-field, hitting the ball through the goal for a score. The team with the most scores at the end of the match is deemed the winner. Teams then change direction after each goal. Two teams, made up of four players each, are designated by shirt color. The players wear high boots, knee guards, and a helmet of their own selection. By tradition, players wear white pants in tournaments. The mallet made of a bamboo shaft with a hardwood head is the instrument used to hit the polo ball, formerly wood, now plastic, about 3 to 3 ½ inches in diameter and 3 ½ to 4 ½ ounces in weight. In fact, the English word POLO is derived from the Tibetan word, "pulu" meaning ball.

The surface of a polo field requires careful and constant grounds maintenance to keep the surface in good playing condition. During half-time of a match, spectators are invited to go onto the field to participate in a polo tradition called "divot stomping", which has developed to not only help replace the mounds of earth (divots) that are torn up by the horses's hooves, but to afford spectators the opportunity to walk about and socialize.

There are six periods or "chukkers" in a match, each is seven minutes long. Play begins with a throw-in of the ball by the umpire at the opening of each chukker and after each goal; only penalties or injuries may stop play as there are no time-outs or substitutions allowed, except for tack repair. The four basic shots in polo are distinguished by the side of the pony on which strokes or shots are made. That is "near-side", left side of the mount, and "off-side" right side of the mount. This creates the near-side forward and back shot, and the off-side forward and back shot. Shots can also be made under the pony's neck, across his tail, or the difficult under the belly shot, all variations of the basic shots.

A team is made up of four players, each wearing a jersey with numbers 1 to 4, which correspond to their assigned position. Number 1 is the most offensive, concentrating on opportunities for scoring. Number 4 is the defensive player, primarily responsible for defending his/her team's goal. Usually, the most experienced and highest-rated players are at positions 2 and 3, with the pivotal player being number 3, who must serve as an effective field captain, or quarter back. The number 3 coordinates the offense, and passing the ball up field to his teammates as they press toward the enemy goal. Each player is also assigned an opponent to cover on defense and must be prepared to shift offensive and defensive modes and to make any play that will benefit his team.

Each player is assigned an individual handicap on the ascending basis of C, B, A (-2 thru 0) and 1 thru 10. This handicap reflects the player's ability and his value to the team - the higher the handicap the better the player which is just the opposite in golf. The team handicap is the combined handicaps of the four players. The team with the lesser handicap is granted the difference in goals (or points) prior to the start of the match. For that reason, a match may well have a "score" before based on team handicaps, prior to the start of the game. Player handicaps are evaluated and revised annually by the United States Polo Association. Handicapping is a subjective evaluation of the individual's horsepower, game sense, hitting ability, and overall value to a team.

The polo ponies are central to the success of any team, primarily thoroughbred, often with race track experience, and considered the most athletic of equine performers because of their requirements to sprint, stop and turn and accelerate to open speed for seven minutes in duration. A player's proficiency is predicated on the agility and athletic ability of his/her horse. Leg wraps protect the lower legs of the horse, which is referred to as a polo "pony". Players must change mounts after each chukker due to the extreme demands placed on the pony. Therefore, a team usually has a minimum of 24 horses available during the match. It is not uncommon that 90% or more of the horses played are mares. Although there are many rules to the game of polo, the primary concept to which all rules are dedicated is safety, for the player and his mount. The right-of-way is defined in accordance with a player's position relative to the direction of travel of the ball which is a line created in the direction that extends forward on an imaginary line which, if followed, will create traffic patterns which then enable the participants to not only play at top speed but to also avoid dangerous collisions. In general, play will flow backward and forward, parallel to an imaginary line extended ahead of, and behind, the ball. The line of the ball may not be crossed except under special circumstances and only in such a way as to legitimately gain control of the ball. When a player has the line of the ball on his right, he has the right-of-way. This can only be taken away by "riding off" and moving the player off the line of the ball by making shoulder-to-shoulder contact. Strategy and anticipation are two of the most important elements in polo and usually come with experience. For the spectator, keep an eye on the horses. The speed and athletic abilities of both the horse and rider are spectacular. All of these elements combined, make the fast-paced action of polo one of the most exciting and demanding sports in the world.

*Rules information obtained from the [United States Polo Association](#) (USPA)

Links to Polo

[United States Polo Association](#) (USPA)



[Federation of International Polo](#)



[Inglesham Polo Centre](#)

