

THE GAUCHO CLUB

Where else would you see adventurous aristos, corporate carpetbaggers and gritty gauchos lining up alongside each other to risk life and limb? It could only be the exhilarating, thunderous sport of polo



**JAMES
SUENSON-
TAYLOR**

WRITES AT
SUENSONTAYLOR.
COM

I am petrified, hurtling along at breakneck speed straight at a very large and very solid-looking wooden wall. Horses don't commit suicide, do they? I grip the pony's flanks tight with my thighs in an attempt to stay in the saddle, but this just seems to make the stupid beast go even faster. In the background someone is shouting at me but in my panic and with the roar of the wind in my ears, I'm not able to take in what's being said. As certain death approaches, a fleeting thought goes through my mind: that of all the increasingly numerous maladies that are queuing up to kill me, riding polo ponies wasn't even on the list.

"Turn her! James, turn her!"

When I yank the reins to the left, Deirdre (for that is her name) goes left like she's on rails. I, on the other hand, continue straight on, and as I pull on the reins to remain mounted, Deirdre rears up and stops. I land on the ground on my back, like a blob of jelly smacking into the kitchen floor. I can report with confidence that falling off a horse hurts rather a lot. My lungs are fighting for oxygen just so that I can cry out in pain.

Injuries, however, are simply an accepted part of being a polo player. Falling off a horse is for wimps. More dangerous is being hit by a ball, squashed between two or more horses, whacked by a polo mallet or having a horse fall on top of you. James Beim, England's current best player with a handicap of





seven (ten is the best), has 'lost a few teeth, dislocated both shoulders, broken fingers' and lives with constant wrist and back problems. Lila Pearson, one of the best female polo players in the world, adds that she has 'been unconscious twice, broken my left leg in three places and torn the ligaments in my left shoulder'. But none of this quite compares to the fate of Carlos Gracida, a Mexican who in his prime was the best player in the world but died in February as a result of a fall during a game.

ADRENALIN RUSH

This prompts the obvious question: why would anyone want to play polo in the first place? Answers are varied. 'Sex!' says John Horswell, a world-renowned coach. He started playing polo as a hormone-fuelled teenager in order to meet the female members of his local pony club — proving, perhaps, that there is some truth in Jilly Cooper's bonkathon on polo after all. For others it was a way of combining a love of horses and sport — 'It's the fastest team sport in the world,' says Beim. Just imagine a large white ball travelling over 100 miles an hour, almost too fast to be seen, being pursued at full gallop by the fittest ponies, ridden by warriors intent on smashing it through their opponents' goal. There is no doubt that there is an adrenaline rush that produces a high similar to racing cars but, unlike car racing, polo players are allowed to use their one-ton ponies to barge opponents off the ball.

'I liken it to rugby on horseback,' says Alan Kent, who used to play off eight but now, as the bus pass looms, is masquerading off three. So, sex, sport and a good chance of seeing someone hurt: sounds like the modern equivalent of bread and circuses that the Roman emperors employed to entertain the masses.

Today's emperors are the polo patrons. These men are usually successful international businessmen like Lyndon Lea, Victor Vargas, Edouard Carmignac or François Decaux who, in return for a fat chequebook, buy their participation in the top echelons of the sport, enabling them to play in polo's most prestigious competitions alongside the top players in the world. 'When you've got yachts, aeroplanes and grand houses there's no monetary prize that can tempt you. What you want is a piece of history, and all the better if there's a chance of brushing with royalty in doing so,' says polo manager Robert Thame.

And polo is a sport steeped in history. Born from conquering cavalries that swaggered across Asia in the time of Genghis Khan, polo was the way these equestrian warriors and their ponies kept fit for battle. Today the descendants of these equine combatants line up on the manicured lawns of polo fields around the world, their toned and strapped bodies poised for action, noble heads bobbing in anticipation of the start of the game. These athletes are just as important to the game as their riders. The best specimens cost upwards of \$100,000 and are notable for their speed across the ground, especially over

the first ten metres, their ability to turn on a sixpence, their extraordinary levels of fitness, their courage and their satisfaction in exhaustion at the end of their shift.

'No racing driver has ever won in a Skoda,' says Beim. The horse and rider need to bond perfectly.

'A good player,' says Santiago Torreguitar, the polo manager at Santa Maria Polo Club in Sotogrande in southern Spain, 'will form a partnership with his horse so that it will move as an extension of his body.' 'Yes,' agrees Horswell, 'just like a ventriloquist's dummy.'

HORSE D'OEUVRES

In the UK, the feverish exertions on the pitch are held in sharp contrast with the ease and elegance of the spectators who turn up, often in their thousands, smartly and usually fashionably dressed in summer outfits, to mix with friends old and new while enjoying the socialising the occasion provides. Picnics spill out of cars and fill the spaces between regimentally parked vehicles. Vast quantities of quiche, smoked salmon and chicken drumsticks are washed down with Pimm's drunk from paper cups. Nearby, in lines of billowing tents, the less adventurous spectators sip champagne from plastic cups and nibble strawberries from cardboard cartons. Undoubtedly, polo is the place to be seen and a visit to Cowdray Park, hailed as the home of British polo, is the best place to do it.

While the UK may be the financial engine of the sport, in complete contrast Argentina is where it has its spiritual home. There the crowds live and breathe the sport, knowing every facet of the game, including the intricacies of the internecine rules. Watching polo in Argentina is more like watching a football match than attending an Edwardian tea party. As New Zealand is for rugby, Argentina is for polo.

Somewhere in between lies Sotogrande. Without entry fees, anyone can turn up and enjoy the spectacle of the best players in the world performing, on reputedly the best grounds. Relaxing in the sunshine in shorts and an open-necked shirt, and with a Spanish measured gin and tonic sizzling at the elbow, surrounded by beautiful, laughing girls unfazed by the sun, this is surely the place to observe polo.

Having played himself, Churchill observed: 'Polo is your passport to the world.' However, at the moment, as I pick myself gingerly off the ground while counting attached eyes, fingers and toes ('Two, ten, eleven,' according to Uncle Fester Addams), I am reminded of the polo saying that there are only two ways out of the sport: bankruptcy or death. Finding neither particularly appealing, I shall enjoy my strawberries and sip my champagne from the safety of the sidelines. Play on! *f*

“

Why would anyone want to play polo in the first place? Answers are varied. 'Sex!' says John Horswell, a renowned coach