

The following tips were written by Tom Goodspeed and originally appeared on the PoloBarn website. These tips, plus many more are included in Tom's DVD series Polo Basics. You can purchase the DVDs at the following address:

[http://www.polobarn.com/Store/books/pb\\_7101.html](http://www.polobarn.com/Store/books/pb_7101.html)

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## Tip #1: Improve Your Hitting Today - 3 Easy Steps

Many ask me to help with their hitting. When I start to watch them hit, often times it is more of a riding issue that it is a hitting one. I always say, if you want to hit better, you need to ride better. With that said, let me give you a simple exercise that will improve your hitting immediately. One way is a hitting lesson, with someone watching you. But I am going to teach you with this exercise, to be your own instructor.

When you are warming up or even coming back to throw-ins, between chukkers, try the following.

### **Step #1 –Proper Preparation**

Draw your mallet back in preparation for your swing. Now physically turn your head and look at your swing and check your shoulders. Are your shoulders turned and in line with the backbone of your horse for both the nearside and offside forehanders? Are your shoulders straight ahead for the beginning of the offside and nearside backhanders? Obviously, you only physically look when you do your warm-up swing.

### **Step #2-Rotating Your Shoulders**

Begin your stroke with emphasis on rotating your shoulders through the swing. In addition, your mallet head should clip across the grass or the surface of the arena. If you do not brush the surface or grass, you are not getting low enough. Most amateurs don't even get close on the nearside. Longer mallets and lower yourself deeper into your stirrups, but still up into your legs.

### **Step #3-Finish Your Swing**

Make certain that you are properly finishing each swing with whatever shot you are attempting. A nearside forehander should start and finish on the nearside. When you are properly finished with the swing, then draw back into your position over the horse, just give the follow-through a couple of more seconds before you rise back into the saddle. Take note of the actual position of your mallet head as you finish your swing. That is the indicator as to the direction of the ball, how the ball comes off the mallet head. Do a lot of your nearside forehanders go to the right instead of straight? Too many players spin or rotate their mallet too quickly, before the ball has left the mallet head. You may need to slow your swing down for a few weeks to work on this effectively. Remember your power comes from the horse and the rotation of your shoulders and hips.

Attention to these three simple steps will improve your hitting and better yet, keep you properly warmed up on a regular basis. Once you develop the habit, you can routinely check-in on your swing, even during a match.

## Tip #2: Proper Transitions - Huh?

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A transition in equitation is simply a change from one gait (walk-trot-canter) to the next. Walk to trot, trot to canter, etc. One of the benchmarks of an amateur developing proper riding skill is learning how to properly execute the walk to canter transition. This requires that you are able to collect your horse or have them in-hand before asking for the canter. A beginner will simply let the reins loose and start kicking. The horse will usually speed the walk, then break into the trot, and then finally into the canter. Now on my lazy days, I still have beginner moments. But the better way is a clean walk-canter-transition.

At a walk, I first take a slight hold of the reins and begin to add pressure with both of my lower legs. I want a lively walk without the horse breaking into a trot. The horse will pick their head up a bit and should take a shorter but livelier step. The horse is now prepared for you to ask for whichever lead at the canter. If you want the right lead, you add pressure with your outside (meaning outside of the circle you intend to go in)-left leg and pull the horse's nose into the right just a tad. These are the cues to let the horse know you want the right lead. The horse should raise up just a little and basically step into the canter without any trotting strides. It is a balance of how much leg to add while you are still steadying the reins. You only begin to release your hand when the horse begins the canter. Now if you and the horse pull off a nice transition, but get the wrong lead, just come back to a trot and ask again. If you do not get a nice transition, come back to a walk and try again. Keep the corrections separate so that the horse does not get confused.

And by all means, be patient. Remember to drive with your legs and guide with your hands. In other words, you can always increase pressure with your leg, but be very careful with your hands.

And what does this have to do with polo you might ask? Knowing transitions is knowing how to collect a horse. Knowing how to collect a horse is what helps get the horse around quicker and safer. That defines itself as more plays for more years. Other than that, I can't think of anything. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #3: Right Lead? What is that?

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Fortunately for us, most horses will choose the correct lead when asked to turn at speed on the playing field-. However, knowing how to set a horse up properly for the proper lead or a lead change is a real asset for both reasons of maneuverability and your own safety.

A proper lead is just that when you are cantering or galloping a horse is on a specific lead. When turning to the right, the horse should be on the right lead which means both the right front and rear legs of the horse are moving further forward than their lefts. The proper lead makes it easier for the horse to turn into that direction.

To get the correct lead, you need to think inside rein outside leg. So when going to the left, you should have the nose of your horse into the circle to the left and apply your outside or right leg. Outside simply means the outside of the circle. Applying leg can mean anything from a simple squeeze with your lower leg to several sharp kicks on a less responsive horse.

You should build up a little momentum with your horse before you ask for the canter. Don't throw your horse away, keep them in hand, slight hold of the reins, and then add leg. This will cause the horse to pick up the canter from a controlled position or collected position as opposed to allowing them to just speed up and fall into the canter so to speak. Collecting the horse is very important. It is merely shortening the length of their stride while maintaining the gait. You slow the gallop, but you do not break to a trot. This is accomplished by pulling and releasing on the reins while you add your legs. You are in effect asking them to speed up and slow at the same time. If you did this at a stand-still-the horse would back-up. That is what you are trying to do at speed, to set the horse more back on their haunches, allowing them to be lighter on their front legs, which makes it easier for them to turn or change leads.

Collecting and then proper signals with rein and leg before you change leads on the run is how you let the horse know you are preparing for a lead change.

Being familiar with leads will help you get to plays quicker and safer. Throwing a horse in a new direction without the proper direction will increase the possibility of a horse stumbling or losing balance. As you can imagine-that is a bad thing. So remember, leads, inside rein, outside leg. Collection is just shortening their stride and being able to better prepare them for a new direction. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #4: Proper Stirrup Length

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The old polo seat had the player sitting deep in the saddle with long stirrup leathers, without any bend to the rider's leg. This was also the older traditional hunt seat. Now it is a great skill to be able to ride deep in the saddle and develop a naturally balanced seat, but the current style has evolved to shorter stirrups, in the show world as well. This allows the player a little more stability at speed and the ability to raise up into your leg to achieve and maintain the proper hitting position. If you find yourself having some difficulty in finding your stirrups at speed, you may be riding a little too long. What feels right at the walk, trot, canter, is a different world from when you are full out. You want to be better balanced when you are riding full out in the sport of polo. If you are just out for a trail ride or relaxing, the longer stirrups are a little more comfortable.

My suggestion is that when you are standing in your stirrups, you need to let your weight sink as low into your heels as possible. Make certain you are pivoting off your knees and there is good lower angle between your thigh and calves. Do not stand post legged or straight up in your stirrups. When you are up in your stirrups with the proper bend of your leg, your stirrup length should give you an inch or two clearance between you and the pommel (front) of the saddle. If you get too short, the stirrups will actually throw you out of balance.

Remember that the buffalo leathers are very dependable but they stretch a lot, so you may be shortening the stirrups every few weeks if you are getting into your stirrups a lot. Your stirrups should allow you to easily achieve hitting position and help balance you at speed. There are two seats in polo, one is in your leg and the other is your balance in your seat. You need to develop both seats. The proper stirrup length will help you build the strength of your hitting position, in your legs. The only way to develop a strong sitting seat, without stirrups, is a lot of time in the saddle. Happy Polo. And remember, keeping your stirrup leathers in excellent condition at all times is a really good thing!

## Tip #5: Proper Mallet Length

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There are several different views as to the subject of mallet lengths. One school is to use the appropriate length for whatever size your horse is. Another school advocates using the same size for all your horses for a better sense of hand-eye. Surface conditions will sometimes enter into the equation. If the grass is long and the ball is sitting high or the arena surface is really deep, you may want to go an inch shorter. Likewise, if the grass is really worn or the arena surface is hard, you may go an inch longer.

Personally, I have grown up using different lengths and have learned to adapt fairly quickly. I have also tried to size my mallet to be comfortable on the near-side and then stand up off the ball a tad on the off-side. As I have matured in my years, well at least physically, I find it less intimidating to be reaching too far out from the horse. My mallet lengths in my closing years were mostly 52-54 inches. I usually rode horses from around 15-2 to 16 hands. In my younger days, I used very short mallets and placed a lot more focus on the off-side forehand. I had to wait until my testosterone productions lowered before I finally realized that longer was better. Wait, did I just say that? I think something is wrong with these keys. Oh well, you get the idea. Choose the mallet size that allows you the best opportunity to make all of your shots on both sides of the horse, without placing yourself at any more risk than our wonderful sport already provides. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #6: How Thick Is The Line Of The Ball?

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The Cliff notes for those who don't like books without pictures.

Is the line of the ball like the line of the road? That would be the most logical guess. Or maybe the width of the ball?

Well, the book doesn't really say, but hopefully these words will help. Picture the most recent path of the ball or the line as the width of a center line of a road. About six inches wide just for a visual. Now walk your horse alongside of this line and stop by the ball. Now this line, the most recent path of the ball continues either all the way across or up and down the field. Reach your mallet down like you were going to hit properly. Remember, we are just pretending here. Now if you are not hitting too close or too far away from your horse, you will be taking up a lane about 3 to four feet. Assuming you are on your off-side, from the line to your left stirrup is about 3 to four feet. So this lane, not line, lane, is what the right of way is all about. It accommodates your swing and your horse.

This visual may give you a little better appreciation of the right of way alongside the line of the ball. Often times, the right of way is called the hitting lane, alongside of the line. There is a hitting lane or right of way on both sides of the line.

So the next time you are within four feet of the lane, at an angle to someone in the right of way alongside of the line, you might have a better visual that you are impeding the progress of the player in the right of way and that is a right of way violation. Often times it may be loosely referred to a line crossing violation, confusing novice players. No, you did not cross the line, but you did create a right of way violation.

The other haunting problem for us to understand is that often we began our swing or hook in our own right of way, but then we crossed over the line and into the other right of way during or immediately after our shot. A good way to test your sober line cantering ability is to put either a line of balls or a line of chalk with a few balls on that line. Take a few consecutive off-side or near-side shots on that line. Are you still on the same side of the line that you started on after your hit, or is your horse stepping over or even across the line as you hit. This can be a rather humbling exercise and may give you some clarity as to why you may be being picked on by some of the what you thought to be "visually challenged" people that wear black and white shirts and carry whistles. Actually, it is a great drill and all you need is a half a dozen balls, a horse, a field, and some integrity. You know, like when you fill out your own scorecard on the course. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #7: Playing the Number One Position

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### **Position Number One-Greatest Attributes: Discipline, Quickness, Accuracy**

The "Attack Position", the Number One needs to be a disciplined player who can anticipate his team breaking to offense and get into a reasonable position to be able to accept a passing shot coming from teammates. It is important to continually work at getting into a position that makes it possible for your teammates to get the ball to you. This is where discipline is mandatory. Your team is only going to be able to get the ball to you some percentage of the time. You will have to hustle and work hard throughout the game, often times to no avail. The ball does not get to you. But it will be those plays that you lesson your effort that the ball will be fired in front of you only for the opposing back, your man, to take possession. This is a commonly voiced frustration of number ones; that the ball never gets to them. It is true that the ball will not always get to you. The key is whether you are ready when they do. That is why this position, similar to the number four, requires a great deal of discipline.

You need to be in a reasonable distance of the hitting ability of your teammates that you are playing with. Is your teammate capable of the big hit or should you be staying in closer. You need to be moving towards goal in control of your opponent. If you are being covered, you are not a realistic option for a pass. If you are at too great an angle to the movement of the ball, you are more likely to be drawn into a foul as you try to get to the pass.

On defense you need to follow your teammates down field covering and neutralizing the opposing number four and then be ready to get back into position if your team regains possession of the ball.

You should practice shots on goal from various angles and have the ability to either dribble or hit away as the situation dictates. You should be comfortable with difficult angles at speed and at the same time have the ability to slow the play, get position on your man, possession of the ball, and turn the ball from the corners of the field and bring the ball into goal.

For the lesser experienced mallet, it becomes more important that you effectively contain and neutralize any efforts of the opposing number four. That will leave your other team members in possession of the ball and maintain the offensive attack by your team. It is better to leave a difficult shot for your following teammate, while clearing your opponent from the play. That is what all other sports call an assist. In polo, too many feel that all the glory is the stroke through the goal. Anyone well versed in sports know how equally important is the efforts by teammates to set the stage for the score.

## Tip #8: A tail shot? What kind of alcohol do you use for that?

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One of the most difficult shots to learn in polo is the tail shot, especially on the near-side. If you have been handicapped with short arms and long backed horses, a tail shot may not even exist in your inventory. There is no question that gorilla arms and short backed horses are two assets in executing tail shots effectively. But for those of you with ancestors that took to two feet several millennium ago, there is a technique to still accomplish the near impossible.

The main trick of a tail shot is four-fold:

1. You need to start your swing early, like the forehanders, so that you make contact just ahead of your stirrup. Too many people teach the novice to hit the ball behind their stirrup. The problem with doing so is that you lose the power of your horse and your own body rotation in the stroke.
2. You need to turn your mallet head across the ball as you are actually making contact. To get the ball to travel at an angle that extends behind the horse from either side, you will need to roll the mallet head towards your horse's hindquarters at the very instant of contact. This will place a spin on the ball that will be turning counter-clockwise on your nearside tail and clockwise on your offside tail.
3. It is very important that you keep your horse moving through the ball, so that there will be a space for your ball to pass clear of the hind legs of the horse. The stride of the horse will also give you more power in your swing.
4. Focus on finishing your follow thru. You will discover that you will be able to follow thru with your upper body a little better if you actually bend forward toward the neck of your horse as you rotate your shoulders.

These difficult angle shots beg for a longer mallet. If there is no one riding alongside of you, you also have the option of just turning toward the rear of the horse and taking a half swing in the path of the desired angle of your tail shot. You literally stick your mallet back to the rear and the desired side and take a half swing in the direction you are hitting. Some players find this a little easier to accomplish angle. You will not get as much power, but if your teammate is relatively close, a short angled shot is all you need. However, if an opponent is alongside of you on the side you are attempting a swing, your swing must remain parallel to your horse.

As the under-the-neck stroke, the tail shots are tricky and should be practiced conservatively until you achieve enough competence to start swinging with more force. The tail shots are an excellent way to hit your horse by accident. A good reason to outfit your horse with protective boots and bandages, front and rear.

One last word of caution when practicing tail shots. Do not get your mallet stuck underneath your horse's tail or any other horse's tail for that matter. Horses do not like a mallet under the tail. And, most horses will retaliate if you do so. Generally, a horse will clamp their tail down tight with your mallet cane between their tail and their hindquarters. This may sound somewhat comical and it is if you are the one watching someone else having the problem. But if it happens to you, it won't be quite as humorous. The best way out of this problem situation is to quickly push your mallet down, do not pull it back towards you, push it down and hope it releases. Letting go of it doesn't always work very well. If the horse gets really startled, you may want to consider an emergency dismount and then retrieve both your mallet and your pride and remount. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #9: Playing Position Number Four – The Back

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This player, similar to their opposing number one must be highly disciplined to proper positioning; carefully watching for any offensive drives being mounted and quickly moving into a position of advantage to defend the attack. Your goal is to get your leg up on your opponent and be able to control the play by getting the ball into possession of either your quarterback or your number two. Having the ability to feel comfortable with either turning the ball or backing the ball is a real asset. You will hear some players mandate to always back the ball. However, that can be foolish if you are not being pressed by the opposing number one, as your back shot is going into a field that is now four against three in the opponents favor. You may also want to hold the ball for a few moments to let your teammates get into better position before taking the back shot. Sometimes you will actually see a player further advance the ball downfield to their opponent's advantage, simply to allow their teammates to get into better position for a passing backshot. If you are not confident with turning or handling the ball, then I think most would agree that the backshot is your play. Most players prefer their Number Four to be better skilled at angles and ball placement than they are concerned with distance. A well-placed back shot of thirty yards at an angle favoring your teammates is a very effective play, much better than a 100-yard shot to your opponents. However, having the ability to do either is again a real asset. A Number Four that is comfortable with hitting away, angles, and ball handling is a very real threat.

As the Number Four, it is important to be able to hit consistent back shots at an angle, advantaging one of your teammates. The norm of polo is for the back to execute a solid off-side tail shot or a near-side open or away. This is the standard back shot that allows the Number Three teammate the ability to take the pass from the number four on their own off-side. However, that play, is the norm and it is the play that both teams are anticipating. A great Number Four can adjust from the norm as the play dictates, and choose whatever necessary options to turn their opponents offensive attack into their own offensive attack.

## Tip #10: Near-side Forehander

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One of the most common topics that make the desired agenda by students in my clinics is the dreaded near-side forehander. The following tips will help you make the best of the weakest shot in polo. First, why is it the weakest? The nearside forehander, when executed correctly, is more of an arm shot as opposed to a shoulder and hip rotation that is available to us in the other shots, including the near-side backhander. Our body rotation is what gives us power in the stroke combined with the stride of the horse.

However, pull up to a stop and try to launch a near-side forehander and you will quickly see that this one shot lacks power, because of our restricted body movement.

Why is it so restricted? I love to have a student stand up in front of the orientation part of my clinics. I ask them to demonstrate the body movement of a near-side forehander. They immediately drop their left hand behind their back, as they are not on a horse, and they twist their upper torso to the left fairly easily. But then I remind them about their left arm. We do not have the luxury of letting go of the reins and placing our left arm behind us. We have to guide the horse. So that means our right arm and our left arm are working against each other trying to execute the near-side forehander.

The other major factor in the difficulty of the near-side forehander is that our right arm wants to quickly return to the side that it is attached, our right shoulder, or the right side of the horse. How often does your near-side forehander go to the right? It is usually because our follow through pulls to the right. We also tend to turn our mallet head too quickly as we hit that shot, further pulling the ball to the right (from the rider's view).

We need to focus on two things.

1. We need to get our shoulders around even though our rein arm is making it difficult to do so.
2. We need to finish the near-side follow through on the near-side of the horse and pay more attention to the position of our mallethead as we finish our swing. However the mallethead is positioned as the ball leaves the mallethead will determine the direction of the ball.

Ok, sounds easy, but is it? Another couple of tips that might help. Make sure you choose your mallet size for your near-side comfort and then adjust some on your off-side. In other words, consider a longer mallet. You should also ride with a shorter stirrup, which will allow you to turn better in the saddle. Your horse will tend to drift more into your near-side forehander because we tend to lean too hard into that left stirrup. It is important to steady your horse with your hands and leg while you make the stroke so that your horse stays straight through the ball. You need to think about pushing off of your left stirrup a bit back into your right stirrup when reaching to the left. This will help you balance both yourself and the horse. This is not an easy task, but you will get more comfortable with the shot if you follow the advice I am offering to you and you start to practice at more controlled speeds initially. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #11: Turning Over Your Backhander – Good or Bad? Why?

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It is a common sight to see a player begin their back stroke and to see the horse turn into the direction of the swing before the shot is completed. Sometimes, it is a conscious decision that a player makes before he gets to the ball. They see there is no one in close vicinity, so they take the opportunity to deliberately turn the ball and their horse together to get around quickly. Great play. So if you did yours by accident, and drew a foul, just use this excuse to combat the disapproving looks you are getting from all of your teammates.

More often, turning over the backhander during the shot is simply because you are putting too much weight in that stirrup and the horse reacts to your shifting weight. They may even be anticipating that when they feel you make the move for a backshot, it is time to turn, because that is what happens everytime you back it. Horses learn by repetition. If you always turn into your shot, guess what ?

If you let your horse turn into your backshot there are two serious issues.

One, it is dangerous because of players coming up behind you in pursuit.

Two, you lose a lot of the strength in your swing.

Going straight through the shot gives you the full force of the horse's stride to benefit from.

How do we straighten this problem or rather horse out ?

You need to better balance yourself in your stirrups. If you are leaning in hard on your near-side, into your left stirrup, you need to push off a little from your left stirrup back to your right stirrup. If so many pounds of your upper body are going up over the ball, it is important to compensate by shifting your hips a little to the off-side. A younger player may elect to throw all of their weight into one stirrup, but remember, their bones still have some flexion in them. A lot of us are past that stage. You must also steady your horse with your reins and leg. If you are hitting that near-side, you need to hold the horse to the right with your hands and apply pressure with your lower left leg. Try not to raise too tall into your stirrups and throw too much of your upper body over the ball, away from the horse. Instead, lower yourself in your stirrups, closer to the horse, as you put your shoulder over the ball. Players often need to check their mallet size as well. Adjust the size of your mallet so that you are comfortable on your near-side. This will help you and your horse stay better balanced.

In closing, sometimes I hear people being taught to always turn away from your backhanders with respect to the line of the ball. I strongly suggest you continue straight, look, and then your decision should be obvious and your shots will be more powerful. If your horse is a little sour as we call it and they are turning before you even swing, you may need to school the horse a few times. Better yet, have your instructor or pro help you out with this. You may have to practice just riding past the ball straight a few times without even swinging to help get your horse going straight. Lessening the power or force of your swing may also be of help.

Keep it straight. More power in your shots, less whistles and most importantly, collision free insurance.  
Happy Polo !!

## Tip #12: Changing Leads

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Ok, I know how to shift gears on this thing, but how do I change leads? By the way, what are leads?

As a quick review, while you are cantering or galloping, your horse is on one lead or the other. If they have both of their legs on the right side of their body going further forward than their left ones, they are on the right lead which is better for them and you when they are turning right. They get better traction so to speak when they are on the proper lead for the direction they are turning.

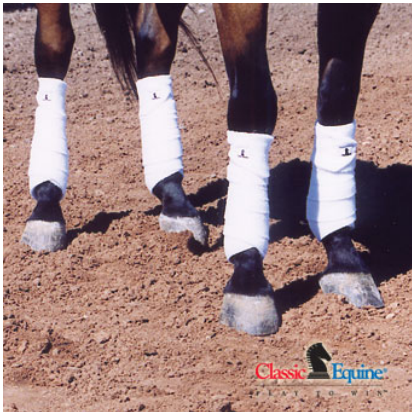
What about the straight away? Which lead? To the horse, it doesn't much matter, but some players feel that the right lead is the better lead to hit off of on their off-side. I think your main focus is to be aware of which lead you want, just prior to turning. A lot of horses will switch to the correct lead at speed, making it easier for us. To learn how to do lead changes, start with what we call simple changes. Map out a figure 8 in your ring or on the field. You pick up a right lead with the circle to the right. Then as you come around to the middle or diagonal line of your figure eight, you straighten your horse out, pull back to a trot, change the frame of the horse slightly to the left while you stay on the straight line. You then ask with your right leg (squeeze or kick if necessary) and a little tug on your left or inside rein. The horse should then pick up the left lead. You continue this drill, learning how to collect or slow your horse, change the horse's frame slightly so that they are bent into the new direction just prior to asking for the lead change. Once you get fairly comfortable with the simple changes, you can begin to work on flying changes. This is changing leads at a canter. To do this is pretty much the same procedure, except for that you slow or collect the horse just a little but not down into a trot. You put some pressure on your inside rein and your outside leg. You have to focus on a single stride to ask for the change. If you sit deep, use a pretty firm leg and shift your upper body just a little, the horse should make the change fairly easy. Some horses are much easier to do the changes on. You should not throw your upper body too much, as you may throw the horse off balance and only get the change in the front legs and not in the rear. That is why you sit deep and use leg, to signal the rear legs as well as the front. This is a little complicated and may require that you get with an instructor or player that can help you with the changes. If your horse is not willing to pick up a particular lead, be careful. It might be a sign that they are a little sore or lame on that side. Be aware if your horse usually does them easily and one day begins to refuse one side. Some horses are just one-sided or one-leaded and will change at speed when necessary, but seem indifferent to doing changes at any other time. So avoid getting into a battle with your horse trying to get a lead change. If the above instructions are not helping, get someone to help you. Happy Polo!!

## Tip #13: Polo Bandages, Pro Choice, Boots?

Recently, there were some great questions posted in the PoloBARN.com message board on the subject of polo wraps. The first comment I will make is that you are always well advised to check in with your veterinarian as to the best strategy for your horses. I say this because there are various options depending on your horse's present physical condition and previous history. Your vet will be the one you call when you are having leg problems, so why not get some advice before you have to place the call. With that said, I will share my experience in the sea of polo bandaging.

You first need to realize that we are trying to do two things with a polo wrap/boot. One, we want to offer extra support for the horse while galloping around and darting left and right. The polo wrap helps support the more delicate length of ligaments and tendons that run from the knee and hocks down to and across the horse's ankles. Two, we are trying to protect that more sensitive area from direct blows. Now you may immediately think mallets, but the greater concern is their own hooves as well as the hooves of others. Like horses do in the wild, polo often has horses running in close quarters with one another. At speed, they are more likely to hit their own legs as well as each other's. When a horse bangs against another leg, we are now dealing with hooves that have metal shoes on them, so you can imagine that can be an incredible blow, much more so than what would result from an accidental hit by a mallet. And let's not forget outdoor polo balls whizzing around at some pretty incredible speeds. So it is not as simple as you may think to address both issues of support and protection with a single solution.

### POLO BANDAGES



The straight-ahead practice-Polo wraps, all four legs. Polo wraps, preceded by their ancestor the sand down polo wraps are the most popular. The old sand down was half fleece and half smooth wrap. Their fabric was stronger and there were two strings sewn on the end to secure the wrap.

The present day polo bandages come with Velcro and in every color imaginable. The material isn't as strong, but more flexible. That means a little less protection, but it flexes better with the movement of the leg and it tends to tear apart easier if it unravels while a horse is galloping. That is good as it means the horse is less apt to fall by tripping on the unraveled wrap as in my observations, it tears apart as soon as they step on it. However, it is still best practice to stop as quickly as possible if a wrap starts to come off. And you are far less likely to experience unraveling wraps if you make a minor investment in either masking or vinyl tape. Tape in my opinion is a "no brainer" (that means even us polo pros get it). I still believe polo bandages are a great start as long as they are clean and in good condition. Once they lose their elasticity, replace them. There is a proper technique required in putting wraps on and if not put on correctly, can in fact cause damage. It is also recommended to remove them as soon as you are finished exercising or

playing. They tend to get pretty wet when playing, so you need to get those off promptly afterwards. It is not good practice to leave them on after polo and use them for shipping protection. It is better to take them off and put on dry shipping wraps prior to the trip home. However a dry polo wrap and a bell boot is a suitable option if you do not have shipping boots. A standing wrap and bell boots may be a better option. I have these great fleece lined shipping boots with Velcro fasteners and are easy on and off and then I put on the overnight standing wraps at home. The difference in shipping wraps is you are focused on both the tendons and down around the upper part of the hoof to fully protect them from stepping on each other or themselves.

### **PRO CHOICE BOOTS**

Pro Choice boots are a heavier material that only requires one to be able to read left or right stamped on the inside, and be able to attach the Velcro and go. The boots offer the best protection by far. Some question whether the boot gets the horse's leg too hot when applied directly against the leg. That is a legitimate question. We used pro choice for many seasons in the Pro Polo in LA, which was an intense level of play (18-24 goal polo) with a great deal of contact. Some used to refer to it as Polo's version of a cross between roller ball and hockey. So that was pretty solid testing that the product passed all concerns with flying colors. Pro Choice is also a great product for any polo school situations offering the best protection from learning players. All you have to do is an at home self test. Wrap your left arm with a polo bandage. Now wrap your right arm with a pro-choice boot. Now have your spouse or significant other wack you with a polo mallet in both arms. One, you will get the point very quickly, two, your spouse or significant other will have a ton of fun. Just kidding !!!!! But you get my point, there is no way a polo bandage will supply the proper protection from a blow from a horse's galloping hoof striking them or from an accidental mallet or ball.



### **COMBINATION BANDAGE & BOOTS**

One of the popular solutions out there is a combination of a turn out boot and the polo wrap. The turn out boot is a little easier to put on than a pro-choice boot over a polo bandage. The turn out boot gives both extra tendon and ankle protection, but does leave the front of the ankle and cannon bone exposed. The pro-choice boot over the polo wrap offers full protection. Personally, I like both of these options. I think the polo wrap teamed up with either a pro-choice boot or a turn out boot is a great defense against potential injury.

### **REAR LEGS**

Many players only use the extra boot protection on the front legs and not the rear. It is your decision along with your vet, but I like the extra protection on all four. It is true that there is much more pressure on the front legs of a horse because of their natural way of moving, but the rear legs of a horse are just as exposed to the blows from galloping legs, balls, and mallets that we have been discussing. Now there are also what they call skid boots for horses that really get underneath themselves, which basically means they

stop incredibly well at speed. The back of their rear ankles and lower tendons of their rear legs will actually slide on the grass or surface and need extra protection, voila, skid boots. (I have no idea as how to spell voila-but just try to sound it out and give me a break) And for most of us who have trouble stopping our horses at speed, the good thing, is that we won't need skid boots. So when your eyes are watering, your hands and arms are cramping up, you spend your whole time trying to stop, and very little time at the ball, think of all the money you saved both by not wasting it on good horses and the extra perk of not having to buy skid boots.

### **UNDERNEATH IT ALL-VETWRAP & ACE WRAPS**

Another subject that comes up is additional elastic support underneath the polo bandage by way of vet wrap, ace bandages, or even a jell cast. These practices are usually used because the horse has had previous injuries that requires a little additional support. I have used a figure eight support around the lower front ankles on many horses through the years with great success. The vetwrap and jell cast may also be a helpful tool in giving some extra support to an old tendon. The caution here is how these materials are applied and when. The vetwrap and ace bandages should not be left on for extended periods. They should go on immediately before the game and come off as soon as the horse is finished. These materials also require trained hands. This is not something to experiment with. Have your trainer, pro, or vet help show you the proper methods. I do not see jell casts very often any more as I think some feel they did not give the proper flexion required when a horse is in work. Again, your veterinarian is your best counsel.

### **BELL BOOTS**



Because of a legitimate concern for some reduction in the flexion of the ankle due to the bell boot rubbing up against the bandage or tendon boots, some players are going without the extra protection offered for the pastern and coronet band at the top of the hoof. But I still think bell boots should be given serious consideration for most players if they fit properly. Pro Choice is the clear stand out in bell boots that should come factory installed on every front hoof in polo, in my opinion. The reason is that horses' in work will often overstep onto themselves, which the bell boot will protect, in addition to being stepped on by other horses, and an accidental mallet or ball. I have run into a few horses that had a very short pastern and were not able to have a bell boot on, as the boot would hang too low and cause them to trip. Make sure you put your bell boots on as high as possible and snug. You do not want them dragging on the grass. They are purposed to protect the pastern and the coronet band around the top of the hoof. The bell boots are usually not used on rear legs, except in maybe a polo school situation.

## **SUMMARY**

So there is a lot to consider for a relatively small area of the horse, but at the same time, most would agree the most important parts. Those four parts, their legs, are supporting close to 250 pounds on each leg, as well as your weight and the additional force that is created by the speeds horses are able to achieve. These parts are subjected to a great deal of contact due to the nature of the activity, so it most certainly warrants your concern. So goes the legs, so goes your polo. I will close as I opened, check with your local Vet on their suggestions as to your best strategy for leg care. Maybe if you listen to them some more up front, you won't have to pay them so much later. Happy Polo !!!

## Tip #14: Playing the Number Two Position

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### **Position Number Two, Greatest Attributes: Effort, Horses, Finesse**

Considered the Workhorse of the team, as they need to mark the opposing number three. Usually this player has to either be the best mounted or very skillful at getting the most from their horses. This is because their responsibility is to neutralize the player who often times is the most experienced player on the opponents team, the number three, literally the opposing quarterback. The number two supports the attack when on offense and works closely with their own number three player when on defense. Often times the number two player can account for the majority of the field goals as the number one player opens up opportunities for the number two to score on. You will hear a lot said about dribbling versus hitting away at goal in the game of polo. The decision is really dictated by the play situation and defensive player positioning. It is my experience that a player who can do either is a complete player. The Number Two player plays optimistically, which simply means taking more chances at trying to create opportunities. This is in contrast with the Number Four player, who would be more defensively oriented. The greatest strength of a Number Two is if they can effectively disarm the opposing Number Three's efforts to direct the offense of the opponents. A great Number Two does this by better anticipation to the play, combined with the ability to handle the ball successfully. A Good Number Two is one who is able to shut down any offensive or defensive efforts by the opposing Number three. At the least, a Number Two should be able to control the opposing Number Three on their offensive drives.

## Tip #15: Emergency Dismount Off a Moving Horse

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Simply put, eject without a parachute. Bail. Get off quickly. This is the second thing that should be taught to everyone on horseback, right after learning how to get on one. I have saved a situation many a time with a simple dismount. You need to be comfortable with the quickest way off a horse and how to land in a manner to minimize the potential for injury.

**Step 1** - Shorten your reins.

**Step 2** - Kick your feet out of both stirrups (being dragged is not a good thing).

**Step 3** - Discard any whip or mallet.

**Step 4** - Pick which side is better to get off. Practice both sides.

**Step 5** - Press against the horse's neck with one or both hands.

**Step 6** - Kick your leg over the horse in a vaulting motion. It is important to clear the rump of your horse.

**Step 7** - Land off to the side of the horse, with your legs bent to absorb shock. You should be facing the side of the horse as you land onto your feet.

**Step 8** - If you are at speed, be prepared to roll when you hit the ground.

If you ever watch snowboarders when they fall, they usually roll right back onto their board. It is sudden stops that will increase the impact. Strangely enough, when we are going fast, we are usually thrown into a roll naturally. Then we go down slowly, we put out a hand, or lock our knees and the result is a more serious injury.

**Step 9** - Try to hold onto your horse if you land on your feet

**Step 10** - If you are on the ground, be aware of additional traffic and clear out of the way if possible.

Use safety girths (overgirths), keep your tack in good repair, and always use large stirrup irons, thick stirrup leathers (buffalo leathers are very popular). Practice your emergency dismounts at a stand still initially and then maybe at a moving walk or trot with professional supervision. The better you are at it, the more familiar it will be when the time calls for reacting as opposed to thinking.

## Tip #16: Hooking Mallets

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Hooking is the second best alternative in the list of defensive plays. If we place our self in position properly as soon as the play turns, we should be able to get advantage on our opponent with a ride-off and have the ball on our free side to hit. However, many players will try to race to the ball as we all have at least one of the fastest horses in polo. If we all have at least one of the fastest, often times more than one, that means there are a lot of "fastest horses in polo".

No wonder we are often hooked by others when we don't take the man first.

Hooking is usually the next best option when you have missed your man, as you have the best chance to stop the hit on the ball. Riding a man off on the far side from the side that they are hitting is not always very effective. Hooking is. When you go to hook a mallet, you need to be prepared to hook several times on the same play if you are up against a skilled player. We use the term hooking, but you are not really hooking the mallet, you are actually hitting their cane to deflect it from being able to get to the ball. If you do get hooked and stuck together, try to untangle the mallets quickly. If you are riding away from each other and your mallets are hooked, remember that dropping your mallet hurts a lot less than falling off!!

Hook from alongside and in between your two horses. Don't try to hook from under your horse's neck. You can not see the play and it is easy to let your horse run into their swing which will result in a whistle on you. I will admit that coming in at an angle or from behind an opponent to hook and stealing the ball can be very effective if you have the skill and field awareness. Without the skill and awareness, it could be your last play in polo.

The proper technique for Hooking:

- 1) Get into position, your horse's head at about the opponents saddle. If you are right alongside-go for the ball, or push the ball underneath your opponents' horse. If you are too far back, forget reaching, get your horse up to the next play. When you are in the act of hooking, keep a leg on your horse so that your horse does not slow down while you are reaching for the hook.

- 2) Don't put your mallet out too early and start a hook with your mallet down so you don't get called for slashing.
- 3) Swing slightly into the swing of your opponent so that you can counteract the momentum of their swing.
- 4) You want to actually hit their cane of their mallet about a foot or two above the head of their mallet.
- 5) You want to actually hook their mallet about halfway between the horse's rump and the ball in arena polo. Outdoors, just below the player's shoulder. The sooner you get the hook, the better chance you have of getting the hook and the ball if you are quick enough.
- 6) When you are hooking their offside, you want to hook with the heel of your mallet or your mallet wrist up. On their nearside, most people hook with the toe of their mallet with your wrist facing up. Sometimes, when you are close alongside, some find it easier to hook their nearside with the heel of your mallet, which has your wrist facing down.

When you are coming up from behind a player going to the ball, come up on their strong side-the off-side. Even if they have a stronger horse and take you out prior to the ball, at least make them hit it on the nearside. Practice your hooks at slower controlled gaits before trying to execute them at speed. Happy Hooking-uh-in polo !!

*Photo by: Lisa McDonald*

## Tip #17: Player Number Three

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### **Player Number Three, Greatest Attributes: Playmaker. Field Leader.**

In the highest levels of polo, you have four ten goal players who are each able to dedicate their talents to the positions that they are playing on the field. For the rest of us, there is usually a considerable mix of talents within a team. The result is that the more experienced players on the team usually fall in the Number Two and Three slots. The Number Four and Number One Positions are traditionally reserved for the developing amateurs. In almost any level of play, the Number Three position is often the most experienced player on the team, and sometimes of greater ability. This player has the gift of being able to see the field and adjust to the never-ending changes of the play situations and player positionings. This player, while on the run through a melee, or diving in to get possession of the ball, is simultaneously viewing the "field" and formulating a strategy for the next offensive attack, or even making adjustments in the current offensive attack. They know their teammates, their opponents, the horses, and the abilities. They combine all of that information with the current layout and positioning of the field and formulate a strategy, often times, literally, while they are on the run. This player is also usually highly skilled at taking penalty shots, specifically number fours and number fives. The greatest skill behind a penalty shot is to be able to loft the ball accurately. Two of the greatest Penalty hitters in the game of polo were Bennie Guitierrez and Roy Barry. Both of those players could consistently add six or seven goals, each game, on penalty shots alone. The top quarterback in polo have the ability to hit the long high ball accurately, making them very effective with the number four penalties and allowing them great placement for their number five penalties. They may also hit the open goal penalties, but some times you will see a different player on the team take the open goal penalties. A number three who has a high percentage of conversion on penalty shots will most often also have a high percentage of wins.

## Tip #18: Open and Away Shots

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Open and away do not mean the same thing, do they?

Further evidence to the madness of our wonderful sport, these two terms do mean exactly the same when referencing cutting the ball at angles away from the horse's body for backhanders. When hitting away or open on forehanders, the more correct term is cutting the ball on either side. "Open" is actually referencing the position of the mallethead whereas "Away" is that the shot will travel away from the horse.

Like the tail shots, this technique calls for opening the head of the mallet as you stroke through the ball. So on a nearside backhander open, you swing down at the ball with the heel of your mallet leading at a slight angle. This will cause the ball to rebound off away from your mallethead at that angle. As with the tail shots, you can also spin your mallet head clockwise on the nearside backhander open as you are making contact. This will put additional spin on the ball gaining you even more angle away from the horse.

A little trick in hitting better away or open angles on your backshots is to move your horse's head a little away from the side you are swinging. This will let you arc the beginning of your swing closer to where their head would have been, making it even easier to get more angle. Again, these shots are complicated and should be practiced at controlled speeds with careful swings. As your competence increases, so should the force in your swing.

The trick behind cutting the ball on your forehands away from your horse is mainly two-fold:

- 1) Opening the face of your mallethead as you make contact with the ball in the direction of the angle that you want.
- 2) Making certain to finish your follow thru with whichever side you are swinging. If you are trying to cut a near-side forehander away from you, you turn the mallet clockwise a tad from the near-side forehander position and follow thru a little to the left of the horse. Now if someone is alongside, you are more limited. You can turn your mallet head, but you cannot swing into their horse.

I think the two most difficult shots in polo at speed are the nearside forehander cut shot or away shot and the nearside tail. But as I type this, under-the-neck shots are pretty challenging as well.

If you are having trouble with hitting angle, do what I used to. Try to hit it straight, then you will probably get the angle you didn't want. The reason for that often times is when we hit the ball, we don't always hit at the sweet spot, where the cane comes into the head. If you do not hit in that sweet spot, the tremendous impact of ball against mallethead will cause your mallethead to spin around the ball. If you hit with the toe, the mallet will spin to an open position. If you hit to far to the heel, your mallet will close quickly, pulling the shot towards your horse. (A little trick to getting better at the sweet spot is sawing the toe and heel of a practice mallet off.)

So isn't it just like life. We try to hit straight, we get angle. We try to get angle, it goes straight. Sometimes it doesn't even go anywhere at all. But remember, at the very least, we are galloping across the field on the back of a horse. It reminds me of my surfing. I hardly ever caught any waves, but it was fun to be out on the board. Well, except for that jaws theme playing in my head.

Here's to angle when you want it.

## Tip #19: The Break Away

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**The Break Away** - Well, every once in a while, we all miss our man. Missing a man often times results in the development of a breakaway. Now how do we handle this opportunity that each team will be given a limited number of times in every match.

A great deal of the time, a breakaway results in missed opportunity as opposed to another tally on the scoreboard.

The best thing to keep in mind is trying to hit controlled shots to your own advantage. If opponents are chasing from the left, hit up at slight angles to the right and vice-versa. Think about your approaching shot to goal. It is more important to place the ball in scoring position than it is to hit a crowd-pleasing bomb well wide of goal.

Keep a watch on your pursuing opponents. No need to run if they aren't pushing. They may be playing you for a miss and if you go full throttle, you are increasing their odds, not yours.

Now the complete player could probably either run taking a couple of powerful shots or even run down field dribbling the ball in the air the entire way and then belting it into the next zip code through the uprights. That is right about the time I wake up from my nap. In other words, make the decision based on your capabilities as to what is your highest percentage in handling a breakaway is.

It is more important to carry the ball, to focus on making contact, then it is to hit the long ball. If you try to kill it, you may hit over the ball altogether. Then again, surface conditions can become a factor. If the field is looking like someone just roto-tilled it, you may want to hit away and forget trying to place the ball, especially if you have a great lie. If the ball is in a divot, you better slow down if you expect to maintain possession.

If your opponents are overtaking you, you will have to decide whether you need to mark them first and then return to your next shot with the ball on your free side.

Often times a great breakaway and scoring opportunity ends with a hook in the mouth of the goal, simply because the player carrying the ball opted to try a full swing on the last shot as opposed to getting forward and taking a half-shot with very little back swing to avoid the upcoming hook.

Happy Polo and I wish you many successful breakaways.

## Tip #20: Field Awareness

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“Field Awareness”, next to horsemanship, is probably the most important factor when it comes to your own safety as well as the ability to make better play decisions. “Field Awareness” is knowing the positioning of all the players and umpires on the field of play, along with the current line of the ball and associated right of-way to the line. The line of the ball and the associated right of way probably always have three dimensions: The current line of the ball, the previous line of the ball, and the next line of the ball. This may seem somewhat complicated and it probably is. However, remembering where the play came from, where it is now, and where it may be going is what experienced players are considering as they move around the field. The player positions and the line of the ball are always in a state of change, and it is to your advantage to be aware of the developing play when plotting your new course.

It is sound policy to never change speed or direction without full “Field Awareness” of all of the players and umpires on the field. Keeping track of all traffic will allow you both the ability to make better play decisions and to avoid any possibility of field collisions.

A word that might be confused with field awareness would be focus. If your focus is on field awareness, than you are seeing the complete picture. However, if your focus is entirely on your horse, a shot, or a single opponent, than you can quickly lose field awareness. It is certainly important to focus on riding, your hitting, and making a play against your opponent, but not at the expense of “Field Awareness”. “Field Awareness” is your passport to improved play and safer travel. Happy Polo!!

## Tip #21: Proper Field Terminology – No? I thought you said Go!

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How often have we heard that wonderful line after a whistle? One teammate exclaiming to another, "No"?????, I thought you said, "Go". And vice-versa. These two rhyming words have been the root of countless whistles and missed opportunities.

A polo field is the perfect setting for us polo players to practice our somewhat dysfunctional, yet colorful vocabularies. The terms on the field are supposed to offer direction and clarification. Unfortunately, at times, the direction may be accompanied by some inappropriate references to family heritage. In fact, sometimes the message is absent of any productive content whatsoever.

In the USA, often times it is an advantage for an umpire to not have any comprehension of a foreign language. What you can't understand will never hurt you. But at times, a translation would provide immediate ejection from the remainder of the game. Have you ever noticed that swearing in Spanish or French seems to be absent of the hard edges of the same words pronounced in English? I guess that may be one of the reasons they are called the romance languages. Even swearing in those languages seems to carry a less offensive musical tone.

However, back to the subject at hand. What are the effective and ineffective commands for the field of play? In the beginning and novice stages, a great deal of field talk is imperative and extremely helpful. In the more advanced levels of play, the verbal direction is replaced by non-verbal anticipation. The teams operating at optimum levels seem to be plugged into some mysterious level of telepathy amongst the teammates. Any announcement of directives at this level can often be viewed as unproductive as the opponents are in attendance and receiving the same information. Pretty much like inviting the competition to your staff meetings. Sometimes, higher levels will use team talk as a deception. A teammate yells tail and draws a couple of defenders, which allows the teammate backing the ball to turn the ball into a less congested area. Four players on offense is usually better than three. A respected player once told me that any directive uttered from his lips was merely an option. He understood that sometimes the player in possession may see a better play, or the ball may be in a divot, not allowing for a strong pass down field.

But I will focus on the more novice level of play.

Here are the common directives:

### **Self Defining**

Turn-it - Turn the ball

Hook - Your opponent

Center - Hit to the center

Hit it out - Hit over the boards/sidelines when your team is poorly positioned

Hurry

Take your time

Follow me - Come along in line behind your teammate with the ball to cover

Leave it - Don't hit the ball-if a teammate has a better play

Stay up - Don't turn back

Stay Back - Stay on defense

Left/right/under you -Locating the ball for a teammate

### **Productive**

Open/Away-Hitting away from the horse from either side of the horse on backhanders

Tail-Hitting towards the horse and around behind from either side on backhanders

Boards-Hit towards the closest boards/sidelines

Hard/Clear-Hit hard

Hold it-Maintain possession of the ball until a teammate is open.

Take it with you/or Keep it-Keep it yourself

Take the man/man-that dreaded phrase everyone hates/keep your opponent from the ball

Go Back/Get Back-Get to defense

Go Up-usually means offense/go for a pass

Cover Goal-Try to block an upcoming shot on goal

Get around/Rotate-Turn back or rotate in behind the players going to the ball

Go to goal-may mean either for a pass or with the ball

Man coming-opponent coming from behind

Through-usually yelled if ball goes through the throw-in

### **Questionable**

Hit it-That would seem obvious and certainly not much direction

You are all alone-can sometimes create tension as opposed to eliminating the same

Leave it-I put it here as well, as this directive can be very much abused

Look out/Get out of the way-both of these are better than running over someone

I will close with the final comment that you must be able to clearly project your information on an outdoor field on a windy day or in an arena with an enthusiastic crowd. A raised voice should be productive and positive, but the polo field is no place for softly spoken directives. Some people are sensitive to volume, but volume is necessary for someone to hear running around a polo field. However, because of the volume, your words should be either informative or positive. Public embarrassment and/or verbal abuse are two characteristics that have no place in any environment.

Happy Polo.

## Tip #22: Playing as a Team

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Some define team play as combining individual energy to strengthen the team. Some see it as a chance to get together with friends and build camaraderie. Maybe the game offers both. I was gifted with the experience of Intercollegiate Polo and then again the High Goal Professional Arena Leagues in Los Angeles. In both cases, I was able to experience staying with the same team for four years.

It is pretty exciting to work with the same teammates over a period of time to develop team strength. By team strength I mean the extra handicap goals of the team that are in excess of the sum of the individual handicaps. The paper might have shown our three handicaps totaling 23 goals in LA, but we were easily playing as a 26-goal team.

Why? We played together, supported each other, but most importantly, we were very clear on each other's strengths and weaknesses and had learned to adapt our individual styles to benefit the characteristics of the team.

Knowing each other as family. Does it surprise you that some of the most successful teams in polo history have been comprised of four brothers or close relatives? You are able to anticipate the play making of your teammates because you have put in the time practicing and playing with each other. You are clear to the strategies that will be applied to the team that you will be up against next. You watch videos of both your team and your opponents. You communicate with each other as to how you will coordinate your horses. You are in sync with the strategies that are most effective for the team. You identify both individual and team weaknesses and work on improving them. You play to your individual and team strengths.

The team members are dedicated to the responsibilities of their respective positions and dedicate the necessary individual effort to carry their weight for the benefit of the team.

Having a qualified coach is a welcomed luxury. That person takes the heat off of individual players trying to resolve issues. That person brings a different perspective to the field. The players are a mix of talent, intensity, and discipline. The coach should be all discipline, even though they may be an emotional wreck inside, they have the emotional strength to calmly direct their players on the outside. The coach needs to monitor the game and make any minor adjustments from chukker to chukker. Major adjustments are usually made between games and often between tournaments. A coach's responsibility is to try to help their team stay on track and focused. To note any holes in the team's performance that can be corrected. To note any weaknesses of the opponents that can be capitalized on. The team as an Indy racecar, has the players as the engines. The field captain is often the car's driver, while the coach is the car's mechanic, making certain that the car is running at optimal performance for existing and changing conditions. In some cases more of the responsibilities of the driver are also placed in the lap of the coach, depending on the strengths of the field captain. In Professional football, some quarterbacks have the ability and authority to make and change plays as they wish. Others rely solely on the guidance from field-side. Polo is no different. You do what works best for the team.

In a great deal of the tournament polo played, we only come together for a tournament or a league and then we are on to the next team. Again, the teams that arrive a few weeks or a few months early, focused on team preparation, will have the clear advantage over team arriving the first week of tournament.

In what could be the majority of polo played, the team is more of a group of friends or fellow member joining up with or without a pro to play the sport that they love. They want to win, but they are not as drawn into the professional approach of preparation. Their focus is a blend of camaraderie and competition with the emphasis often times being on the former. They replace the prior evening's team meeting with a

post game party or night out together. They may spend some percentage of time involved with some of the components necessary for better preparation, but their underlying motivation is to have a good time. It is some number of chukkers of getting away from the frustrations of life. They are usually not interested in the game being an additional source of similar frustrations. Polo offers a wonderful opportunity of handling and adapting to the dynamics of mixing professional and amateur players on the same field. How many other sports have our mix of the two, outside of various celebrity or fundraising events?

I have heard some amateurs say, like Madonna and Sheryl Crow, that they just want to have some fun, but often times, they also want to win. That in itself can be a confusing and conflicting message. The discipline required for winning is seldom fun, until you are winning. If you are able to enjoy our awesome sport with little regard to the scoreboard, you possess a quality that I admire.

Bottom line, we should all realize that the opportunity to play this game on top of a horse is the gift. A game that attracts so many different personalities from so many different places. A game that crosses the demographic and geographic borders of our planet. We are all so fortunate. I have always been a slow learner, but I think I finally understand how fortunate.

Happy Polo !!

## Tip #23: Under-The-Neck Shots

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Ok, you want me to hit the ball in front of my horse's galloping front legs? I thought you said we weren't supposed to hit the horse's legs? Make up your mind, which is it?

Hitting a successful neck shot, or rather hitting the ball as opposed to the legs of your horse requires three things:

- 1) Preparation & Timing
- 2) Starting your swing up front from the side of your horse's head
- 3) A little more commitment up onto your horse's neck
- 4) Sinking deeper into your heels as you move further up the horse's neck.

You want to be making contact with the ball well forward of the horse's chest, about underneath or just to the side of the horse's head. That means you need to prepare early and begin your swing well before you arrive at the ball.

The most common problem players have is they begin their swing like they are taking an off-side forehand, starting the mallet from either behind them or from their hip. You have to force yourself to put your arm to the front of your saddle, just alongside the horse's head and neck and slightly to the side to whichever side you will be swinging.

You need to get a little help from your horse's neck with a little shorter rein and lean a little more forward.

However, you need to sink a little deeper in your leg so that you do not lose your balance. This is a swing that you should swing a little easier on until you get more confident for the safety of both you and your horse.

Finally, you need to be careful with your follow-through. You do not want to hit another player or their horse accidentally. This shot is a good one to develop at a walk and trot initially, and then move to your faster speeds.

## Tip #24: Playing Smart – Recognize a Lost Play and Ride to the Next Play

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You are running after someone carrying the ball down the field. They are almost at the ball and you are trailing ten or more yards behind. Consider trying to anticipate which direction they will try to hit and plot a better course to that next play as opposed to following the footprints of the player you are pursuing. Be careful to look around in all directions before you take to your new course and be aware of new angles that may come into play as you progress down the field. Once you learn to cut corners so to speak, you may vary some from the existing line of the ball. You may get into better position more often, but you may also be somewhat off the line of the ball, and will have to re-adjust to whatever the current line and associated right of ways.

## Tip #19: Playing Smart – Meeting the Play

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Ride in the Direction of the Pack/Meeting the Play.

You will see some of the awesome magicians of our sport run into a melee, opposite of the direction of others and emerge from the pack with the ball and continue down to goal. It is always wonderful to watch, but not quite as easy to execute. I would advise for the most part, that players learn to turn with the direction of the flow of horses, so that you are in better position to defend the attacking players. When you see the pack beginning to turn, begin to slow your horse and prepare to turn, but first, yep, field awareness-never check or turn without checking in on the position of all of the players around you. Meeting players at speed can be very dangerous. In most cases, you try to meet a player in possession, you do not get the ball, and then you have left your back to the game and it is almost impossible to get back into position.

## Tip #26: Playing Smart – Higher Percentage Shots

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Play Your Higher Percentage Shots/Plays. You should know the shots you are most comfortable with in making from your stick and balling. Those are the ones you should depend on in competitive play. In addition, you should always try to practice the more difficult shots as much as possible, so that when the play situation calls for that particular stroke, you have some familiarity with it.

If you are able to stick and ball regularly, you need to start to imagine play situations to help you become more effective on the field of play. For example, practicing a tail shot to the middle from the end line, as opposed to an impossible neck shot. Or even a short back shot from the end line to a teammate behind you, so that the ball does not roll over the end line, setting the other team up for a knock-in. There are times when it would be better to let that ball roll over the back line, depending on the positioning of the two teams, but having the ability to execute a short back shot to a teammate is a good thing to practice. Many teams get the ball down field, but are unable to successfully navigate the ball to goal, as most shots are wide of goal. Often times the player may have been able to get off a higher percentage shot if they were able to think a little more about ball placement, speed, and shot selection as they were approaching goal. These are things you can practice or simulate while stick and balling, instead of running around for thirty minutes hitting offside forehanders as hard as you can. However, I will admit that running around just hitting offside forehanders can be pretty good therapy on certain days.

## Tip #27: Playing Smart - Safety

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Play Within Realistic Perimeters of Your Present Competence.

You are running down the field, you alone are aware of what you are comfortable with and what you are not comfortable with, respective of speed, contact, and hitting. You need to take care of yourself, regardless of what you may be being instructed to do by a well meaning teammate. You should properly communicate any concerns or limitations that you might have to your teammates, so that you can come up with a more effective strategy for both you and your team. For example, you have been assigned an opponent that you are not physically able to stay with due to either horsepower or variance in riding skills. It is better to communicate that and try to adjust the strategy. It is true that you need to push yourself some to improve, but that should always be done carefully. Better to challenge yourself to more speed on the track and in higher goal practice matches, than throwing yourself into a competitive match, well over your head.

I have witnessed overly enthusiastic teammates encouraging a player to go to plays at speeds that they have no business attempting at their present level of competence. I have seen way too many players on horses that are not well suited to them over the years. It is true that we need to challenge ourselves to progress, but do it carefully. Polo is so much more fun when you are able to play the game for a long time. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #28: Playing Level

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What level should you play? Play at your Proper Level of Play.

What level is that? Some present that high goal is better supervision of incoming players; others feel that the more traditional “walk before you run” approach is better in lower goal. Which way is right? They both are, depending on your resources, riding skills, and mental attitude. However, it is true, that in lower levels of play, you are going to run into personalities playing well over their heads, pros coming up the ladder trying to show their stuff, and some pretty challenging horses. If you are financially able, and you have the ability to take direction, maintain your calm in chaos, and put in the time as to your riding skills, high goal is great. Obviously, your level of participation is going to be slightly different than all those other ten-goal players running around you, but you are learning from the best the game has to offer, and it is a real thrill ride. It does take a great deal of riding skill to ride at the high goal level, so make certain to get in your riding time. For an amateur playing amongst the professional ranks, field awareness and riding ability should be your cornerstones. It takes years sometimes decades to hone your hitting skills at those speeds, but riding skills and field awareness are the more important factors to focus on.

It took me a while (40 years) to remember what I really love about the sport of polo. Galloping on the back of a horse. That is what I loved my first ten years of playing when I seldom hit a ball and that is what I still love today. So maybe you make ten plays in a game, or almost all of them, it is galloping around on a horse, which in my opinion is a blast. Now, throw in an occasional shot sailing through the goal posts, while galloping down field, and now you get addiction, Your right, I didn't say passion, passion is galloping on the back of a horse, I said addiction, that is the greatest game on this planet, polo. I think polo at any level, is wonderful. My personal suggestion as to levels is play both, if you are able. You learn more skills at the high goal level; you get the chance to execute them more in lower goal polo. The most important thing is to have good supervision at either level and to remember to watch out for yourself, to play in an environment that you are comfortable with.

## Tip #29: Belly Shots – Don't They Do Those in Mexico?

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This shot used to be called the millionaire's shot. Because swinging into the legs of the horse would usually require getting new horses to replace the ones you lamed up. Well, thankfully, in today's polo, our intent is to hit the ball, not the legs.

So how can one pull off a belly shot and why would one even want to.

The second part of the question is a good one as belly shots are a low percentage shot. It is like that between the legs tennis return that looks cool, but falls in the low percentage category.

A neck shot or tail shot would both be higher percentage. Even if you execute a belly shot correctly, there are lots of moving parts for that ball to pass through. However, there are times when a belly shot may just come in handy if you need it. Kind of like that sand wedge in your golf bag. You don't use it that often, but it sure comes in handy when you need it. I myself tend to struggle in the sand traps. You think I would feel at home in a sand trap after all my years of arena polo. The only similarity that I saw in my arena polo and the sand trap, is that a tractor and drag would be more suitable for cleaning up the sand trap, then that dumb little rake they give you.

Anyway, back to the belly shot. The first rule, is do not swing under the horse. You swing down at the ball and hit the ground and the ball at the same time, chipping the ball, but stopping your follow thru. On my offside, my toe of my mallet is forward. On my nearside, the toe of my mallet is facing the rear. I have done belly shots on my nearside with the toe forward as well. I also had a lot more luck by angling the ball slightly from back to front as I passed the ball underneath the horse. The belly shot is a clever way to drag the ball to your free side away from the opponent in certain play situations. I will say that having the option for the belly shot helped me maintain possession many a time and even get some pretty cool goals over the years, but there is no question that the shot is low percentage, period.

## Tip #30: Playing Smart – Overmounted or Improperly Mounted

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If you are uncomfortable with a horse, Get Off.

Most of you know that the game of polo is all about the horse. If you don't, you will. The most important factor is being comfortable on your horse, at whatever level of play. If you and a horse are not a match, that is as simple as it gets. It does not matter how fast the horse is, how pretty they are, and whether or not anybody else likes it. The important part is that you feel secure and safe. Your requirements for certain characteristics of a horse's playing performance are going to continually change due to your changing riding abilities and levels of play. If you are comfortable on a horse that can jump inside out, do 360's faster than a spinning top, reach full speed in a couple of strides, great. If you have to be to work on Monday morning and have others to provide for, you might want a more solid, slightly less responsive model. One that doesn't flip over on you just because you held onto them a little too tight, or at least that is what your trainer is telling you as you are looking at them with a glaze over your eyes, with a thousand pounds of horse now on top of you. Not only are you unclear as to who that trainer is, you are wondering why this stranger in an emt outfit is asking you what day it is and what your name is. I can not tell you how often I have avoided serious incidents in my forty years of playing, with a very simple dismount.

## Tip #31: Proper Timing

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Ok, I've worked on my riding, my swinging form is ok, why am I having trouble hitting?

Answer-Three reasons-1) Timing 2) Timing 3) Timing

We are running towards the ball at speed, when we get to the ball, our mind (clue is our mind) tells us-ok, now, swing, hurry, NOW !! We swing and guess what? Way to late. When we swing late, which most of us are pretty darn good at doing, we hurry our swing and catch the ball on our downward portion of our swing. All that does is drive the ball down into the ground or at best, our mallet rolls across the top of the ball and produces what we affectionately call the worm burner (for you worm lovers, that is slang for a grounder). That shot makes a louder noise and is tougher on the arm as you are hitting the ball against the ground as well as forward due to the late swing.

How do we convince our (note the word our) brain to swing earlier, say, like maybe Memo's, Adam's or Adolpho's brains? The main difference between their brains and ours, aside from thousands of hours of practice, is that their brain is trained to tell them to start their swing earlier.

Here is a visual drill to help you out. Place four balls in a line about ten feet apart from each other. As you canter down the line, focus on hitting the last ball. Now the other three balls are markers so to speak as to when you should start your swing depending on your gait. The third ball is when you would start at a trot, the second ball at a gallop, and the first ball at a flat out run,

If you watch someone doing this from the side, it becomes very obvious, very quickly, that most of us start our swing at the fourth ball-the one you are hitting.

The markers spaced at 10 feet each may be a little off, but it will give you a better feel for training your mind to start your swing sooner. This is something that does not come factory installed. It is an art that has to be practiced and developed. Timing is an issue that will challenge most of us our entire playing career. So in other words, you are not alone. Maybe we should consider starting a recover group. Late Hitters Anonymous (LHA). Ok, maybe not. But, start your swing sooner than you think you should. If you keep doing it the way that you have always done it, you will keep getting the same results. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #32: The “Master Factor”

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Most of you are probably familiar with names considered to be the masters of sport. Michael Jordan, Bret Favre, and Tiger Woods would certainly be topping the list, (and I am certain there are many others, representing both women and men). I don't think it would come as any surprise that these “Masters” all have put in the time to fully develop their athletic skill. What I would like to focus on is the factor that puts them a notch above their equally talented peers who have put in the same amount of hours. I want to present what I will coin as the “Master Factor”.

The “Master Factor” is nothing less than the proper attitude. They have the ability to channel all their athletic skill through a very positive and determined attitude, most, if not all of the time. They seldom seem flustered by occurrences in a game that would emotionally ignite most of the remainder of the populations of the planet, fueling post game shows for weeks to follow. However those same incidents that send us into debate mode, seem to slide from their focus before we even get to the instant replay. How do they do that?

Take our wonderful sport of polo. What if we, like they, would be able to accept the simple fact that every (note that I did underline every) polo game comes packaged with elements that are completely outside of our control, regardless of how much we have prepared, how much we have paid, or how good our horses may be. Each polo game will have a “package” of the ball bouncing one way versus another off a divot, a few missed penalties, some badly called or missed fouls, maybe even a goal counted or not counted incorrectly.

Those situations can and do make many a player's blood come to boil (like me, for one example). I sometimes found myself looking backwards on what had happened. The Masters do not look backwards, they look forward. They are able to place their entire focus on the remaining minutes of the game. They do not waste a single ounce of emotional energy on what has already passed. It simply does not matter if a foul was called correctly or not, or if a mistake is made by a teammate, or if an opponent is allowed to get away with something not noticed by the officials. That “stuff” is all a very real part of the “package”. The Masters know that in addition to outplaying their opponents, they must also be able to beat the “package”. Sometimes they call them insurance goals. You can often stroll up to the defeated team following a match and hear discussions about their losing a game because of a few bad or missed calls. It's funny that you seldom hear Michael, Bret, or Tiger making those statements in post-game interviews following a loss. More often they talked about the weaknesses of their play, or that the other team just simply played better. I need those of you that find yourselves often complaining about bad calls either in or after the game (like I did), to re-read the previous two paragraphs starting with “Take our wonderful sport.....”, maybe a couple of times. Even better, clip it out and tape it to the underside of the brim of your helmet.

Ok.....lets pause for a moment so that everyone re-reading the previous paragraphs have the opportunity to catch up.....wait a minute.....why aren't you re-reading the paragraphs?

The Masters of sport get it, when it comes right down to it, so do the masters of life.....get it. They accept life's curve balls by adapting their swing. They don't complain about the curve ball, they adapt to the new situation. They take the experiences of the past and formulate more effective strategies for the future.

Now they may lose a game now and then, but it is not because they lost their focus.

They understand and are in command of the "Master Factor". If there were a single element that I would encourage younger players/people to focus on, it would be developing the Master Factor, right along with their riding and playing skills. Don't think that I haven't realized that the initials for "Master Factor" could also be applied to another all too common phrase, (oddly enough, same number of letters as well), but then you would be kind of missing the whole point of the pitch here.....wouldn't you?

Now if the material in this article seems like a no-brainer, you are either already a Master or perhaps a Master of Denial. This article is wasted on both of those categories. This article is to help people, like me, that would like to learn to do it better. Not just polo, pretty much all of life, better. Unfortunately, I started working on this kind of late, about 5 years ago. I'm hoping you give it a try a tad sooner. That's why I wrote this, hoping that you get it, sooner.

## Tip #33: You Hit Like a Girl

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This is what I would say when I wanted to elevate both the boiling point and the intensity of my daughter's swing when she played junior polo. I have worked with a lot of children through my career that started at ages before they could even muster up enough strength to get the mallet into a full revolution. In fact, I could easily embarrass a number of present day pros with their earlier swings. The swing consisted of a pendulum type of effort to barely swat at the ball.

Initially, this pendulum exercise is pretty good for teaching control and a feel for swinging parallel to the horse. Eventually though, if the full or half swing, starting from up is not introduced, the proper swing will never develop. I see many an amateur who runs towards the ball, then they drop their mallet down and then bring their mallet back from the down or hanging position and then try to swing forward at the ball with a dribble type of a swing. This is a result from not making the switch from our early pendulum method to starting from up or a full swing which starts down but begins by raising the mallet up, not dragging it back in the down position.

When I help women, sometimes there is a strength issue that has to be addressed. They may have to dedicate some time, just like guys, to developing their wrist or forearm a little more with some weight training.

However, most women are far better dancers than the average guy and that gives them an edge in the body rotation necessary in the swing. Some guys can sit in the saddle and get away with powering the ball with just their arm.

However, in most cases, women are a smaller frame and they have to get up in the saddle, into their legs, and take full advantage of their body rotation to get power into their swings. Rotating both the shoulders and the hips through the swing.

I have played with and against many women in my time. I still hold chairs and open doors, but I was taught long ago not to cut them any slack on the polo field if you want to try to get to the ball. I played with Sunny Hale in one of my US Arena Open Championship efforts some years back. She, as a lot of other talented women in this game, could hit a lot better than the majority of guys in the game.

The secret is two fold. Some additional weight training and getting out of the saddle and using your body in the swing.

When I think of all the wonderfully talented women players in the game today, I think I want to be able to hit like a girl. Happy Polo!!

## Tip #34: Field Positioning - Anticipation

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The polo field is an incredibly large area of play in the world of sport. An outdoor field is ten acres, which defines itself as nine football fields. That is more than an acre for each mounted person in the game. It is easy to see how we can do a lot of running without a great deal of progress. It is only because the goals are literally as wide as the side of some barns with no height limitations that we can boast the scores that we have. Picture a soccer goal, a hockey goal, or a basketball net.

There is many a day when I am certain we all would rather play by the rules of football and just try to get the ball over an end line.

In the arena, the playing area is greatly reduced, but there is a fifteen-foot height limitation and a narrower goal to shoot at.

Outdoors calls for more utilization of positions as the arena allows for complete rotation amongst the three players. The expanse of outdoors demands that we be a little more aware of how we use our horse through the chukker. In low goal and very important higher goal events, a horse may be seeing a couple of chukkers of action. But generally, a full chukker is more than enough duty for a horse in a given day. Some players will even split that chukker up in to two half chukkers. Outdoors calls for team play and supporting each other in moving the ball up and down the field. Running the entire field on every play is not a very healthy or productive use of your horse.

That is where play anticipation becomes such a valuable tool. Play anticipation could be best defined by play recognition and then making the necessary adjustments in your present course to maximize the efforts of your movement. The great players are looking ahead of the present play and are more focused on the field layout of opponents and teammates and assessing various options depending on how the present play is developing.

There are many additional factors than just player positioning. You have to consider player abilities, quality of horses, wind, playing surface, conditioning of horses, and time remaining. The great minds of polo are assimilating all of this information on the run, literally.

A partial list of some things you can do as an amateur to be more aware of play development and how to better anticipate:

- 1) Identify who is hitting-their ability to hit
- 2) Know the positioning of your closest opponent to you
- 3) Know the positioning of teammates & opponents
- 4) Keep one eye on the developing play and the current line of the ball and your other eye on the field layout all of the time.
- 5) Remember defense is usually to the boards and they have to come to the center on offense
- 6) Try to position yourself on their stick side or offside when coming from behind of your opponent or when waiting up ahead for them to get to you.

- 7) Avoid meeting the play unless you are certain to get to the ball first, you are correctly meeting one opponent, and you have back-up
- 8) Try to guess where each shot is going to be hit by others
- 9) Move into position for a pass before the ball is actually hit
- 10) Get to your opponent quickly so that you are marked up before you come to the ball or before the ball comes to you.
- 11) Sometimes it is best to recognize a lost play and try to get to the area of the next play.
- 12) Communicate with your teammates
- 13) On knock-ins and throw-ins get into position quickly
- 14) When you are following the play, get in line behind the players on the ball. Too many players ride off to the side of the play.
- 15) Try to position yourself in a realistic position to accept a pass from a teammate based on their hitting ability.
- 16) A call for a pass is only an option depending on the lay of the ball and your comfort with the shot.

A great drill is to practice identifying where specific players are in relation to the ball during play. This will begin to develop your ability to make a better decision as to where to hit the ball to your team's best advantage. There is a lot to this sport. One of my favorite quotations was from teaching great Rege Ludwig. Rege was "comparing polo to a kaleidoscope". Every small twist of the tube is a complete change of the design. So it is with polo. One stroke of the ball can and usually is a complete change of all the variables that were in place only a moment ago.

So anticipation in its simplest definition is awareness. It is simply looking at the field and being familiar with the resulting possibilities from that present layout. I used the words simplest and simply, but there is certainly nothing simple about our wonderful game, except for the fact that it is simply a blast to play. Happy Polo !!!

## Tip #35: Hit it! Anywhere! Just Hit It!...NOT THERE!

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These were actual words gifted to me as I ran full out across the Number one field in Santa Barbara during the Pacific Coast Open some years back. Isn't it fun to listen to words uttered (uttered with more volume sounds like yelling) from frustration that don't have a prayer of making it into any collection of inspirational quotes? As I have been guilty of offering similar useless directives, I just did my best and tried to just hit that ball. I did hit it to the one place my frustrated teammate had obviously not considered when he yelled anywhere.

It is true that sometimes just hitting that ball seems to be a noteworthy accomplishment. However, for effective play in any sport, ball placement and ball possession is what it all comes down to. There have been many an armchair quarterback on the sidelines of polo fields that feels the only acceptable shot is a long one with plenty of loft, you know, the crowd pleaser. Unfortunately, often times that crowd pleaser is more like the "hail mary" football heave down field, that is up for grabs for whoever can get to it first. It looks great, but either team can get to it, lowering the probability of your team getting possession, lowering your number of shots on goal.

The most effective way to hit the ball is to place it either to the advantage of one of your teammates or yourself. There has been much debate as to whether one should just hit it or play with it. The "play with it" category is one who is capable of handling the ball in dribble strokes at any speed, much to the frustration of the opponents and often times to teammates.

So somewhere between launching the big one and playing with it lies the complete player. In my observations, the polo greats have been the players who can do it all. They can hit away accurately, they can dribble at any speed, and they can even hit the ball out of the air with seemingly little effort. They have all the various clubs that one carries around the golf course in one single mallet. They select the correct "club" depending on the current play situation. They assess the layout of the teams and the present lie of the ball and based on that information take the shot that is to their team's best advantage. One hit may be launching it to an uncovered number one out front. The next time may be dribbling the ball through a pack as all teammates are covered.

Dribbling has always been very controversial to the ranks that preach a more traditional game of big hits. I would imagine that comes from the fact that everyone is hoping to get a few hits and are not very impressed when a teammate hogs the ball. In basketball, we used to call them a ball hongo. Now if that hongo turns out to be Alan Iverson or Kobe Bryant, you may be in pretty good shape as far as a win/loss record.

But even in basketball, as proved in numerous titles, it is the complete teams with complete players who are as strong in their assist statistics as they are in their scoring that are winning National Titles. They can shoot three pointers and bring it to the basket. The same applies to our sport. There are time when the dribble is the most effective play and times when the pass or hitting away is the proper selection. The complete polo player and the complete polo teams are able to do either.

When you are passing to a teammate you should lead them to their advantage. You try to hit the ball to an area that makes it easy for them to progress to. For example, if they have an opponent riding them on their left, you hit at an angle to the right of your teammate, preferably allowing them at least several strides before they reach the ball. Likewise, if you are carrying the ball and being ridden or pursued, you hit to your advantage, not to your opponents'. This may seem obvious as we review it on paper, but it is not always so obvious when we are on horseback thundering down the field.

Most players would agree that a shorter pass is preferable to a teammate when they are working against opponents. Longer passes are effective in situations where your teammate clearly has their opponents beat. But as you get closer to goal, shorter passes are again preferable. How often have we seen that long driving pass cross the back line before your teammate can get to it to correct its course? We need to think about our approach shot to goal more like laying the ball up on the green in golf. There are times depending on the opponents' position that a strong shot on goal is far more effective than shorter lay-up or dribble strokes. And there are times where the shorter lay-up shot and dribbling the ball is your higher percentage shot. Some players are more confident with the strong drives, others with dribbling. Remember, the really tough players to defend are those who can do either. Often times the field is the deciding factor. If the turf is like a putting green, ball handling is a more realistic option. If the field is rough and the ball is on a good lie, now might be your best shot, whereas if the ball is skipping from divot to divot, you may just want to slow your swing and make sure to just hit it. There really is no right or wrong method. It more depends on the situation, the field, and the abilities of the players at any given time. Most importantly, in closing, the next time someone yells for you to just hit it-anywhere, I hope that you are able to hit it somewhere. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #36: Proper Lower Leg Angle

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Probably the key to a great polo seat. The old hunt/polo seat saw a much longer stirrup and a straight leg that resulted in what they call a deep seat. The riders were usually more to the rear of the saddle. Those polo players of yesteryear even used to turn their mallet a quarter revolution clockwise in their hands to make up for the fact that they weren't getting up in a hitting position and turning their shoulders as we do now, well, at least some of us, ahem.

Now we are actually rising up in our leg, out of our seat, very similar to the two-point position that riders use when jumping fences. We are not standing in our stirrups, we are up in our leg so to speak. If you were to first stand in your stirrups, you would then sink as low in your heels as possible, and then lower yourself through your leg to as close as you can get to the saddle without sitting. To do this, you must let your lower leg angle go back some. If you straighten your lower leg, you will fall back into your seat. If you bring your lower leg back further, you should be able to stay up in your hitting position with relative ease. You will see some players who do not have a good lower leg angle (thigh to calf) will bend the upper body more forward at the hip. If you do not get a good lower leg angle, the only other way is to bend further forward and produce a similar angle with your upper body. Instead of the thigh/calf angle, a rider may duplicate a similar angle with their thigh and upper body through their hip. The problem with too much upper body angle is that you are not in a good hitting position and you are not very well balanced, as you are too forward. Unless you enjoy executing multiple "bug on the windshield" kind of dismounts, I suggest you put more focus on lower leg angle and less on your upper body angle.

Now being up in your leg will not feel very secure until you practice some, but once you develop your lower leg, you will have found the key to riding and hitting. To review a former article, your weight is driven past your ball of your foot into your heels. You then turn your sole of your entire foot out to the side which will also draw your knee in tighter to the saddle. This is more effective than telling a rider to squeeze with their knees. Try it yourself. If you squeeze with your knees your weight comes out of the stirrups, not a good thing. If you pressure first into your heels and then turn the soul of your foot out, your knees will automatically come against the saddle. However, your weight is also down into your heels, that is a good thing. Your lower leg should drop back to where the back side of your thigh and calf produce an angle somewhere close to a 90 degree angle. Your upper body should be fairly erect with just a slight angle forward. You are right to the front of the saddle. This position is the secured position that you need to feel more comfortable at speed both in your riding and your hitting. You should practice controlling and directing your horse while remaining up in the hitting position for as long as you are able to tolerate it. Once you build yourself up to a point where you can remain in that hitting position through your lower leg angle for extended periods of time, you will have found that "one thing" that Curly references in the movie "City Slickers". Of course, they were talking about life, whereas we are talking polo. But if we had a life, would we be playing polo ?? So until you find that one thing in your life ( and I hope you have or do), the "one thing" in polo is lower leg angle. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #37: Reining Techniques – Direct and Indirect Reining

No, we are not talking about the stuff that falls from the sky and cancels polo, we are talking about the four pieces of leather you hold in your left hand. Who cares about severe draughts anyway when there is polo that needs to be played ??

So, turning a horse? Oh that's easy. There is an old Indian saying "Put hand left-horse go left-put hand right-horse go right". (I'm kidding on the old Indian saying, as they were the masters of riding a horse through their legs). So reining may seem like pretty simple stuff initially.....but there is a lot more to it.

The beginner rider starts out pretty much all hand, while more advanced riding is all about the combination of seat, legs, eyes, voice, hands, and position. Hands or reining is only a piece of the puzzle, but certainly an important one.

There are two ways to hold your reins. What we call argentine style and English style. There are players representing both styles who have achieved the ten goal handicap, so the choice on how to hold them is really personal preference. The argentine style has your two snaffle reins running on top of your index finger and the two curb reins running underneath between the index and your middle finger. The English style is left to right starting inside of your hand and then inbetween each set of finger. The rein on the far right should be between your middle and index fingers. You start with your left snaffle rein through the heel of your hand and then out between index and thumb, then left curb rein through your little finger and the third finger, then right curb rein, then right snaffle rein. Your snaffle reins are the higher reins coming from the bit. All of the slack of your rein with the English style, should come out between your index finger and thumb. The English style is better suited for taking advantage of various reining techniques that may help you in slower polo and those of you that may be somewhat limited in the level of horse that you can afford. The great amateur horses pretty much do it for us. In the show world, that horse is called a great "packer". In polo they are called "sponsor horses". You probably know them better as the best horses in your string or strand depending on your budget. Polo with pretty much any horse is fun, but the great horses are what make polo the ultimate high.

There are many less than great horse out there that may require a little more direction or encouragement to get to the play. That is where a little more knowledge on the basics may help. The basic neck reining we do would be referred to as indirect reining with the method of two handing. That is laying the rein across their neck and hoping that they turn away from that pressure. That is one of the reasons four reins are better than two as you have more leather against their neck for direction. You should hold your hand down close to the horse's neck as that will allow you to take better advantage of the horse's neck as the majority of your reins will be on the neck. If you raise your hand, you will get the narrower portion of the horse's upper neck, which is not the desired area.

When holding your reins in two hands, the most basic rein aid is your direct rein. You pull on the right reins to go right and the left reins to turn left. If you are turning right, your right reins are your direct reins and your left reins are your indirect or neck reining reins. If you were to use two hands, you would use both your direct rein, which is pulling back slightly on the right reins to turn right. And you would support them with your left reins or indirect reins across your horse's left side of the neck. The reason that this is important to know, is that when you are holding all four reins in your left hand, you should learn how to utilize both the direct reins and the indirect reins while neck reining. Why? Because you are giving added signals to the horse which will produce better results. The easiest way to explain how is to remind you to pull up your reins evenly on both sides. Then if you are going to turn right, move your rein hand right, holding the two right reins steady and letting the left reins slide out a little looser. You will get to the point

that you will have both your direct reins and your indirect reins working together. Once you come out of your right turn, you will need to re-adjust all four reins so that they are even lengths on both sides.

The easiest way to shorten your reins is to use your fingers off your mallet hand and grab the slack of your reins directly behind your left hand, and then slide your left hand forward. Learn to shorten and lengthen your reins turning both directions.

If you choose to hole argentine style, it is a little trickier to work right and left reins independently of each other. You need to use your fingers from your mallet hand to pull the desired reins shorter.

You always support the request with your hands with pressure from your "outside leg". When turning right you either squeeze or kick with your left leg to drive the horse's body into the turn. You should also be turning your upper torso into the direction of your turn. All of these things working together is what helps the horse into the turn correctly.

There are also a few tricks to using your reins for better lateral movement, but we will leave that to another article, such as indirect reins over the withers. That is the reining technique that will help you in ride-offs and getting your horse closer to the boards in the arena.

In the meantime, start working on the combination of your direct and indirect reins. But easy with your hands. Our motto should always be "guide with your hands, drive with your legs". Happy Polo !!

## Tip #38: The Throw-in

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I struggle to think (I could end the sentence right here) of another sport that brings everyone together following a score and has the umpire throwing the ball in to the entire group. Kind of like throwing bread to seagulls and expecting a proper formation (mine-mine-mine for you Finding Nemo fans). Football may come close, but there are specified players to return the kick-offs or punts. Hockey and lacrosse both have two players facing off. But polo allows the possibility of any of the players to come up with the ball.

Polo also resumes play with a throw-in after every out of bounds and some whistles where no foul is the determination. Some infractions of procedure also are resolved with a throw-in, so it is rather obvious that throw-ins are a key factor in the play of the game. At the very least, it is a necessary evil.

1) The first piece of advice is to get to your position in the throw-in quickly. This may sound simple, but it is amazing how many times players are slow getting back to the throw-in. Save the victory celebrations for after the game, get back to the throw-in following goals. When balls go out of bounds, get to that area quickly so that you are ready. Instead of big long arcs back to the throw-in, plot a more direct course from where you are to your position in the throw-in. I know, it sounds pretty darn obvious, but.....direct line, less strides, less time, less wear and tear. One good example where less is more.

2) Get to your man in the throw-in. You may be forced to your nearside, but putting your opponent in your pocket and having a free side to stroke the ball is more effective than getting hooked. There are some cases where the abilities of the two opponents are not evenly matched, so at times, if you truly do have the quicker mallet and horse, you may choose to try to beat your opponent to the ball.

3) Watch your swings-You are not allowed full swings in close quarters, but it is usually just the more reckless ones that actually get called. Faces are down looking for the ball and players are in close quarters. A full hard swing in this situation screams potential trouble. So be aware-be very aware of your face, your opponents, and all of the horses.

Generally, the number ones are supposed to try to turn down field for a pass and at the same time hold the opposing number one from getting loose to quickly. If you do get the ball, you should probably bring it to the boards or sidelines first, get your momentum going and then either release the pass or take it yourself. A quick neck shot out of the throw-in is usually a turnover to the other team.

The number four players outdoors and the number three players in the arena usually line up a little more defensively. They sit out to the side about five to twenty feet and at a slight angle to stop any fast breaks. The angle also allows them to turn back to the ball quicker if the ball goes all the way through.

If the umpire is following the book to the letter, they will not throw-in the ball unless both teams are on their proper sides. However, there can be a lot of grey matter here. Some umpires improvise a bit and will throw the ball in quickly, catching unprepared players off balance. They may wait too long and put the teams into an endless exercise of turning back around. And when you do turn back around-big tip here-keep your eyes on the umpire while you turn around. If you need to talk to your teammate while in the throw-in, talk to them with your eyes focused on the umpire.

Some umpire may be a little slack on allowing contact before the umpire bowls it in, and in those cases, you have to try to get the advantage on your opponent before they get it on you.

4) Umpire' style. If the umpire is insisting on the lane and throwing in hard, expect more of the plays to be all the way through or out the back. If the umpire is allowing a little contact and not demanding the clearance, most of the plays will start off near the front of the throw-ins. If the throw-n is from the sidelines outdoors, you will often see players turned around facing the middle of the field so they even go with the direction of the ball on a better line to goal, whereas defensively, the better play may be back to the boards or sidelines in an effort not to give your opponents a good look at goal.

4) Strategy-You need to talk to your team to find out what your most effective strategy may be for the throw-ins for your team with consideration to who you are up against. Some teams insist their number ones to move out of the throw-ins. Some teams don't want the number one player to do anything but hold the opposing #1, others just want you to get down field for a pass. Some teams mandate that their team members not turn back defensively if the ball bounces to your defensive side, allowing for your three to get to the ball and then they will decide whether to get a pass to the offense or go the other end to the #4.

5) A quick jump to the ball out of the throw-in can often result in a costly fouls shot. One second your opponents are 150 yards from goal and the next second, with an anxious play and the sound of a whistle, they are only 60 yards away. And they didn't even have to hit the ball. Your enthusiasm just hit it for them, 90 yards, not a bad shot. Just the wrong direction.

The line changes quickly in the throw-in as it is deflecting off of horses and mallets. The other challenging factor is that at center field, the line may be from sideline to sideline, but we want to go end line to end line. If the opponent is near, you only have one option, and that is to follow the line of the ball. It may be a more difficult shot, but it is the only shot they have. Even if you can't make it, at least make them hit the ball those 90 yards, don't do it for them.

I think one of the most complicating issues of throw-ins is that you are not properly aligned with the man you are covering on the field. Outdoors you are lined up against the opposing #1, yet your proper opponent is their #4 player. This often times makes it a little confusing for amateur players. You are almost doomed from the start.

But if you think of polo in the more traditional sense of the number one and two players breaking out of the throw-in and the opposing Number three and four players jumping out to pick them up, the line up makes sense. However, there are a lot of times when there is a good deal of contact in the throw-in and no one is jumping out away from anyone and the twosomes in the throw-in wind up paired up until a time when you have the option of getting back to your opponent and your position.

I have had teams actually place our number one player against their #4 right in the throw-in. It may be a little unorthodox, but when you think about it, it makes a lot of sense to just line up against the players you are marking as opposed to the normal throw-in assembly. Remember, we once were convinced that the world was flat. In the world of polo fields, we wish it were.

## Tip #39: Leg Yielding

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Is that a sport in the Olympics ? Well, now that you ask, it is a big part of the equestrian competitions. Another easier way to say it is applying your leg to get the horse to move laterally away from your leg pressure

So even though you are moving forward, you are adjusting the horse laterally at the same time. So why do you need to know anything about leg yielding when all you want to know is how to go fast, turn, and stop?

Being able to adjust a horse a few inches or a few feet from one side to the other is what allows the better riders to adjust to a bouncing outdoor ball, to win more ride-offs, and to get their horse closer to the boards in the arena than you seem to be able to do. Not to mention getting a better balanced frame on your horse while moving around the field.

Frame is referencing your horse's positioning. Are they aligned straight down through their neck and back as they should be when moving straight, or is there some arc or curvature to that same neck and back line as it would be if you were bending to the right or to the left while you circle for example.

It gets a little more complicated when the curve of that frame is actually bent in an arc to seemingly be going to the right, but in fact you are asking for the horse to move their body to the left. Hmmmmm?? What is this guy talking about and why is this taking up the space of a decent tip on polo ?? Ok, fair question, but stay with me, it is a very good tip.

If you pull your right rein just a tad or shorten them when holding all your reins in one hand, but you apply strong right leg pressure at the same time, your horse should move or yield to your leg and actually move to the left as you are moving forward. This is exactly what you can use to aid in your ride-offs, moving off the ball a tad, or getting closer to the wall. With the opposite cues, the horse would move to the right as they move forward.

A good drill to teach your horse to respond better to your leg, is the turn on the forehand. You stand alongside the arena wall or out in the open will work. You try to keep your horse's front legs relatively still, as you ask for your horse to turn their haunches around in a circle by squeezing or kicking with your appropriate lower leg. So if you want their haunches or rear quarters to turn to the left, you use your right leg. You must be patient and carefully hold and release with your hands, while you ask with your leg. You want the front legs to stay in a fairly small circle, while the hindquarters move around. This is the opposite of the rollback. A rollback is when the horse pivots on their hindquarters and turns into a new direction. A turn on the forehand is used for training purposes at a standstill. To teach your horse to yield or move away from your leg pressure.

If you are having a lot of trouble, you can assist your horse by turning a little with your hands, but keep using a lot of leg. Eventually, they should just move off your leg without asking them to turn with your hand. But BE PATIENT !!

So as you are hitting the ball and your horse drifts either a little too far away or too close, guess what will allow you to make that adjustment, if you and your horse have been working on leg yielding or lateral movement.

You are trying to win that ride-off. What do you think is more effective? Using your hands only and steering towards your opponent, or using your hands and outside leg together to get your horse's body into that ride-off.

When you and your horses are communicating well through the combination of your hands and legs, you are able to get to many more plays, more effectively.

You are turning to the right and your horse is leaning too much into the turn and too close to the ball. You steady with your reins and squeeze with your right leg and the horse adjusts their frame more around your leg and off the ball a tad. That allows a safer more balanced turn and a better opportunity to make a play on the ball.

I will admit, we have entered the world of brussel sprouts and tedious detail when we go deeper into equitation like this, but it is what separates those that move around the field as part of their horse to those who ride around simply on top of their horse.

And there is nothing wrong with riding on top of a horse, you are not alone, or rather, they are not alone. However, you must also accept the fact that simply riding on top of one's horse increases your odds of winding up underneath your horse more often. There are other factors at work, such as gravity, but that is another subject that you can find additional info on if you just do a google search-type in Sir Isaac Newton.

Happy Polo !!

# Tip #40: Undefined Penalites

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## Undefined Outdoor Penalties #2 (30 yards) & #3 (40 yards)

Ok, what could one possibly talk about? Undefined. Just take the shot. Hit it through, score and throw-in. Miss, knock-in. Short, knock-in from that spot. Defense, none, nada. As I type, there is discussion to again allow a defense to the open goal outdoor. For those of you new to the game, they use to allow defenders to jump over the back line and race across the front of the goal just as the shot was taken. The ongoing debate about bringing it back is all about safety. No defense, no chance of anyone getting hurt. The other side of the debate is that the whole game is a chance of getting hit, so why is it all of a sudden an issue on penalties?

Well, while the polo world continues the debate, this article will go with the present ruling, no defense.

### So tip #1-Defense

If you are defending, stand both behind the end line and well wide of the goal posts. You are not allowed to stand between the goal posts, and why would you? Do you like being drilled by a hard plastic ball being fired at you? And if your answer is yes to the previous question, at least think of the horse. I always turned my horse away from the shot being attempted, to protect the horse's head from the attempted shot. There is absolutely no reason to be anywhere near the goal posts. So stay behind the line and well to the side in case someone hits a hard shot wide of goal. If you do not stay behind the goal line and at least 30 yards from where they set the ball, you will wind up giving the hitting team another shot if they miss. So if they award a spot hit from 2 yards out, you are suppose to be 28 yards behind the back line.

Sometimes a team or team member that has committed the foul will canter back to the throw-in with the feeling that the penalty is a given. In my years, I have seen some shots missed from inches, not yards, inches away from goal. I certainly cant remember doing so myself, and if I did, I would have surely blocked that experience from memory, (please, no write ins). So if the goal is important to the outcome of the game, stay behind the goal line, you just never know.

### Tip #2-Offense

The open goal allows us to focus on hitting straight. We are not forced to hit hard due to someone rushing out, trying to defend. So don't hurry yourself. You are only allowed one approach, so start back a ways so you can get a good line to the ball. Some canter, some walk. Do whatever you are most comfortable with. Some horses will not steady at the walk, some won't steady at the canter. You should take a full, steady swing with your focus on following through straight. Too many players shorten their swing and wind up getting tight, which usually winds up in a missed opportunity. Don't swing hard, just swing through the ball and keep your focus on your mallet head facing the goal as you finish your swing. As you only get one pass outdoors, sometimes your horse may take a funny step just about when you are ready to hit. Try to maintain calm and adjust your swing to make the best of what you are left with. You should practice taking shots on the wrong lead, at a trot, and at various angles, so that at least you are familiar with hitting under various conditions. It would be wonderful to always get that great approach, but not very realistic. It's not always all about a great shot, sometimes it is just the shot that works. You get a goal if the ball rolls through or if it sails through, so with no defense, straight is our focus. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #41: Runaways

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What does circling have to do with "lions, and tigers and....butterflies?..oh my"

Circling is also a great way to calm a nervous horse. You let them trot or canter in a circle. They will begin to settle as they realize they are not really going anywhere, but there are at least able to move. If you are heading across an open field....it is a whole different story, as the horse sees the option of taking off. Rarely, a horse will break into runaway mode. This is not normally applicable to a school horse, but under the right conditions, any horse is capable. Especially when a horse or group of horses come flying by you. Why? They are herd bound. They...by their very nature....run with the pack. So it is not so much that they are willfully disobeying you, if they tend to run with others, it is they are obeying what is built into them instinctively. Their prehistoric mode is what has helped them to survive until this modern day. That mode is "fright and flight". They are not fighters unless cornered. They run from their perception of danger.

I'm not so sure why their fear of danger for some horses may be something as terrifying as a monarch butterfly launching off a leaf on a nearby bush, but maybe to them, that may be a possible signal of more to follow. You know...like birds flushing out of the trees right before the lion attacks. Of course...I don't think these horses have seen any lions in these parts...ever....but they say..... old habits die hard.

Another potential problem is heading back to the barn. Always a sound idea to go back at a controlled pace. If you are a weak rider and they are strong willed (and possibly really hungry) you may not want to gallop towards the barns...they may plot a new fight plan without any consideration to the passenger....you.

In any event, horses are very perceptive and some of them are very skittish and nervous. Those kind of horses are not considered good trail riding kind of horses. Good trail horses are those who are pretty indifferent to what dangerous creatures may be lurking on the other side of those fences and hedgerows. The kind of horse that makes you want to start whistling zippety do dah....you know....like in splash mountain at Disneyland...but without the 60 foot drop. One of the reasons that some places are not crazy about loose dogs out on the trails is when fido starts to dart in and out of the bushes. Those horses that are a tad skiddish with a monarch butterfly could have major heart failure with fido. We had a guy once who always took his trusted fido. One day, fido jumped out in front of his horse and he fell off and broke his arm. I know there is a lesson in there somewhere.

If your horse were to take off unexpectedly and you are not able to stop them, circling is a great way of gaining leverage and therefore re-establishing control by turning them into smaller and smaller circles until they stop. If you happen to be on one of those rare runaways, you want to separate into two hands and begin to pull the horse's head into one direction. In my forty years, I have had only one horse that kept running straight with its head pulled all the way to the right. If that happens....do what I did....pray.....except I'm not sure oh sh\_t is amongst the verses of scripture....but it was going across the ticker tape of my mind on that day.

I wish you safe passage through the forests of dangerous butterflies !!!!!

## Tip #42: Taking the Danger Out of “Taking Your Man”

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When I think of all my great experiences in our awesome game of polo, there is one area that I believe we need to focus our attention on for the improved safety of both rider and horse: The Ride-off.

This one aspect of the game seems to come up as the common denominator in most of the accidents involving serious injury.

I realize that there is an acceptable level of risk to be associated with anything that provides the motion thrills similar to polo. However, when you step on a roller-coaster, you are pretty well assured that you will remain on the tracks throughout the ride and no one is going to ride up alongside of you and purposely try to toss you off your cart. I believe that we can make some important adjustments that will significantly reduce the incidence of serious injury, without lessening the caliber of play. In fact, I think the results of these changes will promote the characteristics of the game that are far more representative of true skill on the part of the players. It is the lesser skilled players that are always assigned the task of eliminating a higher rated mallet from the opposition.

If you read the rule that deals with the ride-off, you will already see that the USPA has put a lot of thought behind the correct procedure for riding-off. And there is quite a list of factors that the umpires are supposed to be considering, including size of the mounts, awareness, and fatigue of the horse.

I encourage you to consider these suggestions:

I feel we need to re-address the rule associated with riding-off another player and put in even stronger language. I suggest an International campaign to address this very serious problem of misjudgment of the factors involved in riding another player off. It is to the safety of our membership that we might consider replacing some of the oos and ahhhsss on the sidelines with more whistles on the field of play.

*The seven thoughts to ride by, while riding-off.*

- 1) First you must come parallel to another player *prior* to the ride-off or any contact !
- 2) You *must adjust your speed* to the player you attend to make contact with.
- 3) Then the angle is determined by the speed. If you are at a full run, very little angle is necessary. If you are at slower speeds, a greater angle is acceptable.
- 4) You can not be any more than six inches in front or behind the opponents' leg when you actually make contact.
- 5) Once you make contact, you must continue to match the speed of the opponents' horse.
- 6) If you choose to disengage from the opponent, you should *move away laterally*, and then continue forward. Or if you are losing the ride-off-*pull away laterally* from the other mount as they accelerate.
- 7) Any bump that even causes a horse to lose their balance, even for a single stride should be strictly penalized. If a bad bump is not penalized, what would stop a player from possibly putting on even a little more angle on the next attempt?

*Simply stated, I am suggesting reducing the angle at top speeds to just a few degrees.*

I would encourage more responsibility on the rider in front to take care of the rider behind if you disengage or pull away.

In teaching and coaching polo most of us have stressed the importance of taking the man defensively, perhaps more so than any other single aspect of the game.

There is one factor that is far more important than taking a man, and that is a player's safety. So I offer "Field Awareness" as the primary focus, as our daily mantra. Another common coached tidbit of misinformation is "turn away from your back-shots". I would suggest looking first before we turn in any direction is a far healthier and more productive option. Sometimes it is a better play to continue in the same direction after a back-hander, or possibly even turning over the line....if no one is coming from behind. Once we focus on any single aspect of the game, we lose focus of the field, of our Field Awareness. Losing focus of the field has and will continue to cause serious accidents. Some of the worst wrecks have been between teammates going to the same play!! Their focus was the ball as opposed to the field.

Badly timed bumps (horses legs getting tangled) and bumps with too much angle have been responsible for a number of serious injuries and one death that I am personally aware of.

Field Awareness is no different from Driving Defensively. The good drivers are aware of all of the traffic around them and ahead of them. They stay alert to unexpected and sometimes even illegal moves of the other cars around them. They drive, leaving themselves an "out" if there were another collision close to their own proximity. We are taught to drive with "Field Awareness". Anytime we place full focus on cell phones, pda's, i-pods, friends, or kids in the back-seat, we lose our field awareness on the freeway. Some states have outlawed the use of hand held phones altogether. When you are on the polo field, and your entire focus is on riding off a player, you might as well be on your cell phone looking up a name in your contact file. I am calling for a higher level of field awareness in each moment of every chukker. I believe that every player can benefit from this information, even if there are no rule adjustments to address the problem. If you ride with this information, you might possibly lose a play here and there, but you may just save a life, perhaps your own. Here's wishing you many decades of the greatest game on this planet !!

## Tip #43: So, You Say You Can't Get It Up?

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To get the ball in the air, you have to have the proper follow through. Here are Steps 4 & 5 to add to 1-2-3 from article #1. Follow through determines loft and accuracy....two pretty important aspects of our shots.

My very first weekly tip on PoloBARN was an article about a simple exercise of 1-2-3 to tune up your swing. Quick review:

1 is proper preparation with your shoulders

2 is rotating your hips and shoulders through your swing while brushing the playing surface with the head of your mallet, low in your leg.

3 is finishing with your mallet head in the direction you want your shot to go

In polo and tennis, you need to be able to angle your shots from any position to any position if you are a top ranked player, whereas in golf, you are normally allowed to re-position your feet in the direction you would like to have the ball go. If....we allow our mallet head to always close immediately after we make contact with the ball on the forehanders, the ball will pull left on our off-side and pull right on our nearside. Same result with the backhanders. That is because we are actually allowing the mallet head to turn counter clockwise on the offside fore and clockwise on our nearside-fore as the ball leaves the mallet. There are some who say that this natural hand rotation is a good thing. My position is that if you do this too early, while your mallet and ball are still in contact with each other, the direction of the ball will be determined by the rotation of your hand. I have had a good deal of success in my own accuracy, as well as helping many others by keeping the focus on the mallet head being properly positioned at the finish of the swing.

I now offer you steps #4 & #5.

#4-Keep your head down and make certain your eyes follow the cane

As in tennis and golf, we need to keep our head, and therefore our shoulders down as we finish our swing. Your eyes must follow the cane/shaft through the swing. The majority of players in polo finish their swings with their head and eyes up above their follow-through and high in the saddle. Interestingly enough, the majority of players are also handicapped at 2 and lower. For years, I had very good backhanders and average forehanders on a professional level. I had pretty good accuracy with my forehanders but lacked the distance. So my #3 was ok, but #4 was weak.

The reason. On my backhanders, my eyes followed the cane. I dropped my shoulders forward as I turned them through my shot, and my head was below the cane on my follow-through. Not so on my forehanders. It was not until very late in my career that a friend noticed I was not doing so on my forehanders. When I placed my focus on dropping my head more and following the cane, bingo. The loft and distance were now in place. A very famous gentleman by the name of Daniel Gonzalez (former 10 goaler and father of Mariano Gonzalez) had helped me one season in Santa Barbara with my knock-ins. I was able to get a long ball on the knock-n after his guidance, but still struggled at speed. Why? At speed I reverted back to what felt right to me, my well-established old habits. So 4, just as in golf, is huge...no wait a minute...HUGE !!

#5-Now...here comes the dangerous part

To get good snap through the ball, we need to do two things. One...we rotate our shoulders and hip through the ball. Two...and here's the dangerous part...we have to speed up our swing a tad by putting some pressure on the grip with our hand as we swing towards the ball. This will speed up the swing just a tad so that the mallet will snap through the ball just ahead of our arm and shoulders. This snap is why we like mallets to have a little whip down low in the cane. This snap will accelerate the head and give more power and lift in your shots.

So why is everyone telling me I swing too hard or fast? Because most of us do. We swing hard with our arm...way too hard...and have very little body rotation, which along with the horse is the real source of the power. So even the mere mention of #5, to speed up your swing is very dangerous to share. There is the great possibility that your swing may revert right back to what you were doing wrong in the first place. If speeding up your swing causes you to come up with your head and shoulders, then you are not yet ready for #5. #5 is only for those who are now disciplined with steps 1-2-3-and 4. If 5 cause 3 & 4 to disappear, then forget 5 for now. 3 & 4 are way more important.

It would be of great help to have your swings on video. Just have someone video your swings during stick and ball and in a game. (often our stick and ball swing are two different swings. Why? Two words: speed and speed. Well, sometimes there is that nervous thing...so maybe three words. We need to start earlier than we think we need to start at speed....but that is another article (but start earlier at speed...sounds pretty darn simple doesn't it...faster...earlier).



Off-side follow through.



Off-side back follow through



Nearside back follow through



Nearside fore follow through.

As you review your swings, are all the steps in place 1-2-3-4-5.

- 1) Preparation
- 2) Rotation of your body through the swing and down low enough in your leg to be under the ball.
- 3) Follow-through and finish with whichever stroke you are executing

Position of mallethead on the follow-through

- 4) Head and eyes following cane
- 5) Speed up mallet head a tad as you begin swing

I put 5 last as 1-4 need to be in place first.

I wish you greater distance, loft, and accuracy, with far less effort. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #44: Turning the Ball

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All players should know how to properly turn the ball, even if only to better understand what the opponents may be capable of doing. You may not be comfortable with turning the ball yourself at this point in time, but you should practice turning the ball when you are stick and balling. If you are unfamiliar with the term, "stick & balling"...just back the ball. Being able to turn the ball if there is no opponent pushing you on a back shot can be a very effective play. To turn the ball properly you must consider the following:

- The current line of the ball
- Location of opponents and their proximity to the right of way
- The handling ability of your horse
- Field conditions
- Your ability
- Where do you want to be heading as you complete the turn.

So you know you are not being pushed. You decide you are going to turn the ball, normally on your offside to the right. However, with a good deal of practice, turning the ball left while on your off-side is a very effective way to get back into an offensive direction with your offside protected from a hook. However, turning left with the ball on your offside is very challenging. You will also see the better players able to turn the ball on their nearside, normally to their left. If they have an opponent riding them on their offside, they may remain on their nearside as they turn, but usually they are hoping to start on their nearside while turning left and eventually get back to the ball on their offside. So it is the goal of a complete player to be able to turn in both directions from both sides, but it is best to start to the right, with the ball on your offside. It is important to turn the ball as quickly as possible. A long series of shots at slight angles across the field increases the probability of losing the ball to an opponent or just missing it altogether. In addition, you are making very little, if any progress back up field, and you are using up a lot of your horse's energy going across field.

To turn the ball effectively, it is best to start at a trot or slow canter on the practice field. Learn to address the ball on the line of the ball, either cut the ball away from you with a short offside forehander, or flip the ball away with a short "reverse" under-the neck-shot with the toe of the mallet forward. Once you turn the direction of the ball, you then turn the direction of your horse onto the new line. Too many players turn their horse first and then the ball...which is usually followed by either the sound of a whistle, and/or players screaming "look out", or both. By the way...how does one scream "look out" in Spanish? I think it is something like "Cuidado !!". I'm not positive what the sometimes attached phrase of "gringo boludo" is all about, but the high-pitched Latin screaming part should be enough of a warning. Remember that you are normally only going to use this play if no one is pushing you. If players are running up behind you, the novice-intermediate players should just back the ball. If you turn the ball with players following hard behind you, you could learn why not to the way I did...you know...the hard way...the way I like to learn most things. Instead of following the wise guidance offered to me as a younger player by the local sage, now being offered to you in this article, I had to be run over by two horses behind me at a full gallop. Three horses and three players all playing "leap frog" at speed, resulting in summersaults and rolls across the turf, miraculously, no ponies or people were hurt. Even though it was a highly effective lesson for me at that time, I wouldn't advise trying it at home.....away.....or anywhere else on this planet.

Get familiar with handling the ball right and left on the practice field at slower speeds, before you ever consider trying it in a scrimmage or match. You will find that when you turn the ball right on your offside, your horse leans into the right so you stay a little farther from the ball, same on your nearside turning left. However, when you turn left with the ball on your right, your horse is leaning away from the ball, so you must stay closer to the ball. Normally, you dribble the ball with the ball ahead of your stirrup, alongside the neck of your horse. As you lean out to dribble, you will have to hold your horse a tad with the reins and counterbalance in your stirrups, because if you lean too hard into one stirrup, your horse will move into that direction and wind up going over the top of the ball. The more advanced players learn to dribble the ball almost anywhere, to be able to avoid their opponents, but if you dribble at your stirrup or behind your stirrup, you are more apt to lose the ball. If you are able to dribble effectively, you can be a hero. If you tend to lose the ball more than you hit the ball, you may be best to focus more on back shots. But to always back the ball to no one, isn't any better than someone who turns it when they should have backed it. The complete player can do either and more importantly, knows when to do which. Sometimes a player will turn the ball in order to allow their teammates to get into better position, and then drive the ball downfield. And as I stated earlier, you may not yet know how to turn the ball, but at the very least, you should be aware of the play to better mark your opponent on the field. In any event, when in doubt, just back that little round thing. And then, don't turn away from your back shot...go straight as you back it, then.... look....look....look...and then you will know whether you need to turn away...or maybe even stay right where you are...depending on the evolving play. If you don't look before you turn, you may want to start practicing your summersaults with your kids, in the safety of one of the carpeted rooms in your house, without the horses. I guess you could also get some practice time in the jump toy at the local Chucky Cheeses, even though I think there is an age limit. Happy Polo !!

## Tip #45: “Steady Hold” vs. “Pull And Release”

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Where are the brakes on this thing and do I apply steady pressure or tap on the pedal.....uhhh...stirrup ? The few of us left that pre-date the ABS breaking systems will remember our dads and moms coaching us to tap on the brakes so that we didn't lock them up and go into a skid. The new ABS system now allows us to just apply pressure and hopefully the computers do the rest for us. Unfortunately, most horses have not been equipped with that ABS system and tend to be more responsive to the give and take method of checking or pulling to slow or stop.

It is true that some softer mouth horses will tolerate an easy steady pull when checking or stopping, but even they will still respond well to the pull and release system. The challenge is that there are a great number of horses that will not respond well to a steady pull. There are several problem categories as to horse types with a steady pull approach.

- 1) The horse that very sensitive, shakes their head some, and may even have a tendency to leap. A steady pull on this type may result in serious injury to you. Horses of this category will not take kindly to a steady pull, as they are overly sensitive. A steady pull will either exacerbate the head shaking or leaping...or worse still, may even move into rearing, flipping over, or bolting.
- 2) This horse feels a steady pull and will match your bet and raise the ante. If you haven't already figured this out, their steady pull is far greater than ours. Not even daily trips to the gym for weight training will even put you in contention for winning a tug of war with that 900 pounds of horse below you. Not even our friend “Rocky Balboa” was able to go 15 rounds with a polo pony.
- 3) This horse has responded to the steady pull technique by learning to over-flex. Simple stated, they bury their chin into their neck and have now successfully learned a new trick to get away from any direction from you. Often times, it is said that draw reins and gags, due to their leverage pulley system will promote over-flexion as opposed to pelhams and straight reins. There is some truth to this statement, but I feel the larger culprits are the hands that are holding the reins in the first place.

I support the give and take position due to both my direct experience and observation of many great riders in a number of different disciplines. I have always used the analogy of a relationship. A steady pull or all take and no give is usually a recipe of disaster. They say that to balance the old checkbook, we need to make deposits as well as withdrawals. Well, in the horse world, giving some rein is normally considered a reward to the horse, which defines itself as a deposit. Now giving rein doesn't necessarily mean loosening your reins or riding with longer reins. It means to move your hands forward and back with the action of the horse's natural head movement.

Another good analogy is fishing. When you get the big one on the line, you need to understand the art of when to give out line, and when to draw in. To date, my “big fishing experience” is a two pound tuna off the coast of Hawaii....ok maybe one pound...but that is another story that I do not care to share at this time. And I am not embarrassed that everyone else was catching 6-8 foot marlins. I kind of like tuna fish....sandwiches. Try to fit a six-foot marlin in-between a couple of slices of sourdough. In any event, if you give a little rein, the horse tends to relax a tad and allows you a better opportunity to take back again. If you understand the natural movement of the canter and gallop, it is a rocking type of motion as to where the horse drives from the back and pushes to the front. As they gather their legs underneath them for the next stride, their head will come back up slightly. This is the perfect time to ask them to check, as they are already in the part of the stride where they are getting underneath themselves. If you pull in the extension part of the cycle, you are pulling against their power that they are using to transfer their weight from their hindquarters to their forequarters. Now...a good soft mouthed horse will probably respond well to your rein

pressure in either the collection or extended portion of their stride. I am just presenting at what point of the stride is too our advantage, which is especially important on more difficult horses. You probably already know that horses are pretty much priced at their stopping and handling ability at speed and how long they are able to continue to perform well through the seven or even possibly fourteen-minute duration. Most higher goal horses are not used for more than a chukker a game unless it is a very important tournament. Some horses only go a few minutes at any one time, depending on a multitude of variables.

Now some riders, as I have already presented in other articles, require a horse that is tolerant of somewhat of a steady pull, as they are looking for a little of their own support from the horse's mouth. Now....that is not a good thing. We are supposed to find our balance from our seat and legs, not our hands. However, realistically, newer riders are going to look for some additional support from the reins and should be equipped with horses that tolerate that. This is one of the very clear examples where a green rider and a highly tuned horse is a very bad color combination. I will insert the original color clash of a green rider and a green horse. It works in clothing, but never in riding. I know some of us want to play the part of the horse whisperer, but take it from me, first hand, Robert Redford, as charismatic and incredibly talented as he is, is an actor, not a horse whisperer. Learning this game of polo is both incredibly fun, as well as a monster challenge. So choose the realistic level of horse for your present ability. It is better to go slow and reach the finish line together, than for your horse to finish first....without you.

So I wish you give and take relationships with your horses...and more importantly...with all of those around you. Happy Polo!!

## Tip #46: The Strong Side of the Field

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Is there such a thing?.....Is that where the grass is thicker??

Granted that for beginning, novice, and intermediate levels of play, just being able to carry the ball any number of consecutive hits on either side of the field is a real plus. However, when we move into more competitive levels, we need to understand that the right side of the field as we head to the goal we are trying to score at is considered the strong side on offense.

Simply because we can often get to the right and leave our opponents to the left of us, allowing us a "protected offside shot" as we continue to goal.

Accordingly, the defense of this play is to be to the stick side, or the offside of the attacking team. It is surprising the number of players do not realize that it is better to come up on the offside of an opponent when they are either approaching from behind or following teammates already on the ball. This will give you either a hook, a play on the ball, or at the very least, force them to the nearside.

The left side of the field while attacking is weaker in that your opponents can get to your mallet easier as you turn towards goal. In addition, if you are forced to your nearside, you are left with more difficult options coming in from the left and on your nearside.

On defense, the tables turn. We like the left side of goal or the left side of the field as we head in the direction that the opponents are trying to score. That is because either a nearside open or an offside tail gets us to our strong side on offense.

Most teammates are going to expect that offside tail or nearside open backhander when you are anywhere on the left or center field. If you are well to the right and nearing the goal they are trying to score at, you may elect to back the board to the right or in the opposite direction so as not to place the ball in front of the goal with a weak backhander to the left side.

If the opponents are out of position, it is sometimes favorable to go to the weak side on either offense or defense.

We should all practice hitting the ball at angles away from us as we carry the ball downfield as if there was an opponent trying to ride you off on the far side. If you can cut the ball slightly away from you on your offside or nearside, your chances of retaining possession are much greater. Unfortunately, often times we tend to hit the ball in towards the horse or straight which will make it much easier for the opponent to either get the ball or ride you over it. I have talked about our tendency to let our mallethead turn too quickly towards the horse on our follow thru. We need to learn to keep the mallethead facing the direction we would like the ball to go as we finish our stroke.

In outdoor polo, getting more to center on offense gives us the better option for a clear shot on goal, whereas in the arena, the corner walls are often a viable option to get to goal. The wall in the arena is an entirely different dynamic. Keep in mind that in outdoors, if you have the caliber of horse, getting to the ball and then turning in to goal with it is far more effective than a very difficult angle towards the uprights...unless of course, your specialty is hitting from the far outside corner with a small percentage of the goal available. And there are many higher goal players with that very ability.

On defense, outdoors and in the arena, our best course of action is a clearing shot at an angle to the boards or walls, preferably to our strong side. It is usually not advisable to hit across your own goal, the one you are defending unless you have the horse and the ability, for the simple reason that if you lose it or miss-hit it, the opponents have a great shot on goal,

In any event, even if you cannot control the ball at this stage of your game, you have a better idea of what the better players are up to and may possibly be able to get into a better position to defend the play.

I wish you many trips down the strong side of the field. Happy Polo!!

## Tip #47: Horse Playing Age

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So...you like playing horses half your age?????? Well, if you are in your forties or later, that may be somewhat of a concern...unless you are just getting started and looking for that "experienced" horse.

First off, horses have a life span of about 30-35 years. Their years of productivity are usually from around 3 yrs of age to late 20's. The following ranges is a general guide:

### **Age in years Use/Level**

- 3-6 Usually green (new to polo) and just getting started
- 3-10 If they make the grade, these are usually their peak years
- 8-15 Normally considered best age for amateur players
- 16 & up May still be very useful in lower levels of play

Now...don't write in with all kinds of stories about your 32 year old horse that is still in the top of your string. I am well aware that some 4 year olds have the perfect demeanor for an amateur and plenty of us have had that older pony that just wont quit. The above chart is just about averages....there are always the exceptions.

So horses have about a 3 to 1 ratio with us as opposed to the 7 to 1 for our canine friends. For every calendar year, they age about 3 years to convert their age to ours. So a 20 year old horse is like a 60 year old person. Now just like people, some horses at that age are in very good physical condition, many are not due to previous injuries and the effects of natural aging.

There are many variables to the proper age to be considering. Very young horses are not always well suited for amateur riders simply because they are not as experienced. They may have a great attitude and ability, but they just haven't been around the block enough times for a lesser experienced rider. i.e. Younger horses may not try quite as hard to stay up on all four when they stumble, until they experience falling. They may spook at many different things in their younger years and then come to accept them as they mature.

The older horses have been around the block numerous times, maybe, too many times, which usually translates into more physical wear and tear. We refer to them as having more "jewelry". This is a somewhat comical reference, but jewelry on a horse can not be listed on the asset portion of your net worth. "jewelry" with horses are old leg injuries or developing arthritis. Jewelry on a horse does not hold its value, it is the very reason the value of the pony depreciates.

With that said, there are many younger playing horses that have injuries as well as the older ones. If they are a top playing horse, they may even still hold their value with some injuries. Sometimes a horse's playing value far exceeds their true physical value.

There are even time when someone will not sell one of the experienced better playing horses simply because they would not be able to get fair compensation.

A horse may be at top playing form with injuries and age, but the question is how many chukkers do they have left in them? So they may still be worth buying, if you can get them at a reduced price.

If the horse is a good playing horse, they generally get used harder, more often. They flat out try harder, so that in itself causes more wear and tear. So it would probably be a little impractical on your part to think a great playing horse will come with a clean pre-purchase examination. You just need to work with your veterinarian and pro to determine what your needs are and the horse's present capabilities. Doesn't matter much what that horse has done, what they can now do for you is more relative. And I am not being disrespectful. It is truly amazing when a horse performs at the high goal levels. But because a horse won an open a few years back does not necessarily make them the perfect horse for you today. May not have been the horse for you then. Some horses are just too nervous.....excitable.....hot..... responsive.....call it what you want...for a novice or intermediate rider. However, often times, a horse that has played higher goal polo will continue for years at a lower level of play and be perfectly suited for those lower levels.

If your skill is beginner or novice, even though you may be playing in higher goal levels of play, you will want a steadier, forgiving horse. A horse that will be more tolerant of mistakes that you will make. It is not important if they are the fastest horse on the field. What is important is that they are well suited for your present abilities. You can buy a race car, but they are outfitted with all the necessary latest safety features and you could still get in a lot of trouble if you went out as an inexperienced driver. The same is true for top performance horses. You need a few years with training wheels, then lesser responsive models, before you start stepping onto that "indy" horse.

Another caution is that a "green" rider and a "green" horse is a horrible color combination in the horse world. Green means inexperienced. A "green" or unschooled horse may be a decent price and be very attractive to the horse whisperer inside of you, but don't do it. You have now been properly warned.

Another variable is your usage requirements. Are you very demanding? Do you run the entire field at full speed? Do you stick and ball on all the off days? How many chukkers do you have to play this horse a week? How many months/year. If you are a high goal player, you expect a great deal out of your horse, where a lower goal player in high goal would not be demanding as much as their pro. If you are an amateur in low goal, and you want to play six chukkers/week for 12 months of the year, you don't need a horse, you need a "hummer". Not many horses will hold up for long with that kind of use unless you are in a slower level of play. Generally, the top horses play about three chukkers a week. They may play more in more important games and are often used just for portions of chukkers as you will see the players racing over to the side-lines to change horses. In the lower goal polo, you often see a horse get double chukkered up to 3 times/week. That is a lot to expect, unless you are very laid back in your style of play.

If all one did was walk and trot, they might be able to play an endless amount of chukkers every week, as is the case for some school horses.

Most horses get up to four months of rest each year, either by way of pasture...or just sometimes, a break from playing polo, but the exercising continues. Pasture is a great physical and mental break for the horse, but it is not without its own risks. Many good horses have been injured during turn-out, but that is another article.

The last subject would be how do we really know how old the horse actually is. The natural method of aging a horse is by looking at their teeth. For the first 14-16 years, you can get a pretty accurate read on a horse by looking at their teeth. Certain teeth come in at certain ages along with the wear of their teeth are pretty good indicators of age. Registered horses will have a birth date. Horses that have been run on the racetrack usually have a tattoo on the inside of their upper lip. The letter on the tattoo will allow a vet or trainer to determine their year of birth. It is not uncommon to have a horse represented a year or two younger than they actually are and it is not necessarily anything devious. It can be an honest mistake . . . you know . . . like how time seems to stand still for women that are 29 and guys in their late forties. And unless you have

a registered birth date of your equine friend, it can be difficult to accurately age horses over 15. Best to get the assistance of your veterinarian or horse dentist.

So you thought there were simple answers to how old of a horse you should consider and how often you can play them? Silly you....you're old enough to know better.

I wish you many chukkers on great horses that are well suited to you...whatever that age may be.

Tom Goodspeed

## Tip #48: Does Size Matter? Of Course It Does, The Smaller The Better!

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The smaller compact horse tends to be the horse of choice for most. The reason is pretty straightforward. Less horse to control, normally better handling due to their shorter coupling and generally easier to hit off of. However, if you come up against a bigger horse, that handles and bumps equally as well, the bigger horse will dominate.

The larger horse is usually, not always, longer strided. That often translates into greater speed on the 300 yard dash. But when you get to the end of the field, how quick is your horse to get back around. An enormous amount of speed won't help much if you aren't able to carry and score consistently. You will be the one off the end of the field making rather large crop circles while the rest are back in the game. Most would probably be better with more handle as opposed to more speed.

But back to how tall these guys are. How big is that brown one over there?

5'10", 5'11"??

Actually, the bay horse over there is 15.1 hands...What? What country uses "hands" as their measuring system. Actually, pretty much all countries when it comes to horse size. A hand is pretty much the width of the average human hand, about four inches. So a 15.1 hand horse is  $15 * 4 = 60$  inches plus one inch, so 61 inches and if you need to go to feet, 5 feet, one inch. Now the average polo pony is just over five feet tall, so why do most of us look up to them? Because they are measured from the top of their withers to the ground. The withers is that bone at the top of their shoulder, just at the front of the saddle. Now some horses have very large withers. Great for keeping the saddle centered, but not great for bareback riding for guys. I learned that one the hard way.....you know...that mickey mouse voice that come from deep down in us guys when a horse stops a little too quick.

Anyway, a horse with no withers is a challenge to keep the saddle from slipping, so as with everything in life, somewhere in the middle is optimal for withers. Why do they measure from the withers instead of the head, like us? This is only a guess..... because it was more practical to count hand over hand from the ground to the withers??

If anyone knows the real answer, write-ins are welcome !!

So 15.1-15.2 hands are often quoted as the ideal height for the reasons already listed. However, if you are a larger person by way of height or width, so should your horse be by height or width. If you are buying a car and need to carry more luggage, you look for a suburban, or an excursion, or a hummer. More to pack, bigger pack horse.

I think 16.1 will normally be the largest on the average. Once you get over 16.1, you are pretty high up for effective malletwork and normally have a little trouble with handling at speed. If 15.2 is desired and is normally your 51 inch mallet, 16.2 means you would need a mallet four inches longer. When it comes to mallet length, shorter is easier to handle, so that pretty well coincides with the horse size as well. The information I offer is general, as some players have much longer arms, and you may have a fairly small horse that just measures big because of large withers.

In any event, now that you have all this swirling around in your head, we're back to the simple fact..... that size does matter.

Some players try to clone their string by selecting similar type horses. Once you have been at it for a while, you will realize it is not easy to adapt from a large bulky horse to a small narrow type. So some players look for the frame they find most comfortable. Some of the top players and sponsors have brought in the science of embryo transplanting to pretty much dictate the body type of off-spring. Others of us are just lucky to get whatever comes down the polo sales conveyor belt. In any event, this game is a ton of fun on whatever sized horse one might happen to be aboard. So, I wish you four inch hands and a steady horse to measure!!

## Tip #49: Back It or Turn It?

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Turn the ball and lose it to the other team, when you had a teammate open and waiting for a pass.....and then the opponents score. Ouch!! Time to hang your head as you canter back to the throw-in amongst pairs of disapproving eyes, some of which have their associated mouths uttering or possibly even clearly projecting their disapproval of your recently flawed decision.

However, backing the ball into a pack of players, when no one is pushing you and leaving your team a player down due to the fact that you are out of the play...and the opponents come up with the play is equally ineffective, you just aren't as easily identified as the guilty party.

Most of us have become familiar with the term "tail it" when attempting a back shot to a teammate. Tail it means hit from right to left on your offside back shot, which is the same as "open" or "away" on your nearside backshot. This angle allows your teammate to turn up to the pass with the ball on their offside, heading at an angle, normally to the right side of the field. This is suppose to protect the off-side of your teammate you are tailing the ball to, leaving the defender on the nearside of the line, limiting them to a ride-off attempt. If your teammate is astute and positioning for the play before you even begin your shot, they are already moving to the angle of the developing play. If you pull off the proper angle, you both look somewhat telepathic as your teammate is already en route as the developing play unfolds...unless...ahem...you miss the tail shot, turn over the play....your teammate is out of the play only because of their anticipative ability...and the opponents turn down to the ball and split down the middle of both of you and head for another score. Once again, time to canter back to the throw-in with heads hung a tad lower than after you successfully pull off a score.

So you might be now asking.....where is this going? (Funny...I was just thinking that myself.)

I am just suggesting, that under the right conditions, any of the play situations attempted above, could just as well develop into turning your defensive position into a very successful attack. It is not a matter of whether turning it or backing it is good or bad, it is just choosing your best option at the moment, based on abilities and positioning.

The trick is that favorite old phrase of mine, "field awareness". Oh nooooo...not that again. Oh yeaaaaaaa. The simple ability, well...not so simple ability of knowing where all the players are positioned in the developing play and what is it that you are going to do with the ball. First is your ability or lack thereof of executing a back shot or turning the ball. That information is packaged with the developing field layout. You should then be able to compute the best choice for that moment.

If you are unable to turn the ball, you have a much easier task...and so do your opponents. If they are not pushing you to your back shots, the best scenario would be to quickly turn the ball and face up field along with your teammates, unless you had an open teammate capable (note the word capable) of carrying the ball to goal...or.....an employer whose name appears on the bottom of your pay checks that has clearly identified certain job requirements in your contract or term letter, for example....hit them the ball.

If you are handicapped much higher or maybe even just worth five or more goals than anyone else on the field..... annnnd are very well mounted, you can do pretty much anything you want to. If you are like most of the rest of us, and you are being pushed on your back-shot, even better, doubled teamed, look for your "should be open" teammate. If you aren't being pushed.... turn it...unless a teammate is open and has a real opportunity for a fast break to goal. If you do not have the ability or possibly even the right horse to be able to turn it...at least take your time....look...and just try to make the most effective pass, which may be even out of bounds if all of your teammates are closely covered. If you are a football fan...you know what happens when a quarterback is given too much time on a passing play. So when you are galloping for a back-shot, and no one is pushing you, take your time.

When you are trying to tail or open the ball on your backshots, make certain that after your attempted shot, you are defensively positioned so if the tailshot is unsuccessful, you are still positioned properly. It is far more important to have good angle than a lot of power. But good angle along with a powerful shot is a very

effective weapon. But as amateurs, at least do some lesson time to learn how to hit some angle. Your pro or team mates should be aware of your ability and possible limitations. They should come in closer to you before turning for the pass, so that you are not pressured to execute a shot that isn't yet in your bag of tricks. A ten or fifteen yard angled back shot to a positioned teammate is more effective than a fifty yard back shot straight back into waiting opponents.

In any event.....I wish you a lot of those parading type of returns back to the throw-in. You know...after a goal by your team. You sit a little higher in your saddle, you're not letting on...but you are hoping everyone on the sidelines just saw you score. You maybe even be smiling just a tad...of course....acting like its not really that big a deal...because.....of course..... you do it all the time. And I hope you do. What an awesome feeling.....awesome !

Sure beats that hanging your head thing after the opponents score, with your teammates nipping at you like a pack of pit bull terriers, and you happen to be the poodle.

Happy Polo !!!

## Tip #50: Backing Up...In Polo?

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The good riders are doing it all the time, while they are going forward. What....?? Backing a horse properly is the same as properly collecting a horse, even at a gallop. "We need to go back to the basics", as a very famous football coach once said " This is a football" That is what Vince Lombardi said to what would become the national champions, the Green Bay Packers.

Well...that little round white thing that has taken control of our lives is a polo ball. And to get to that little round thing more times than your opponent, you have to be quicker on your four feet...er...hooves.

To be quicker...you need to know all about extension and collection. Most of you...if you are playing, know the running part. However, if you do not know how to properly collect a horse at any speed, you will not be as quick to the ball. So lets start with backing up from a standstill.

To properly back a horse, you need to first gather up your reins...not pull...just gather them up, (they really already should be). Next you squeeze with both legs as you lean back a little with your shoulders...a more sensitive sided horse should only need a slight touch of your heels or lower calves. They will then start to step forward. You keep an even pressure against the reins and as they step forward, they will go up against the bit. When they feel your leg combined with your hand and seat, they will take the next route away from pressure and should start to step backwards. Now as they start to back....you need to keep them straight by guiding them with your legs. If they turn their hindquarters to the right, you add right leg. Now horses are not always real good at backing...so do this carefully at first. You pull and release with your hand as you continue to ask with your legs. When you back a horse, it should be down carefully, and only take a few steps at a time, until you or your horse become more at ease with backing. There should be only one gait while backing, the walk. If things get quicker than a walk, ease up on the reins and encourage your horse back forward. Going backwards faster than a walk, is not a good thing.

If you have a horse that is very stubborn...you may want to dismount and back them up from the ground with a similar rein action and possibly even voice command. If a horse freezes...they will not back up. Be careful...if you become too aggressive, you could cause the horse to rear up or even over....again....not a good thing.

So you have now learned to gather or collect a horse. These same commands are used at every gait to collect the horse or shorten their stride. You may not necessarily want to slow down, you may just want a shorter stride and get them more onto their hindquarters to prepare for a more balance turn. If a horse is fully extended in their gait, they tend to be less agile. Of course...there are some exceptions. In high goal polo, many horses are trained to turn at speed without a lot of collection....but they are in the "don't try this at home" category for many amateurs.

If you want to collect a horse at a gallop, you start to pull and release on the reins as you add leg. This tells the horse you still want to gallop, just at a higher rpm and less mph. In other words...shorter strides, just more of them in any given distance.

This really helps you to properly balance a horse before quick turns, switching leads, and preparing for a rollback or a tight circle. It tells your horse to prepare for a change...without catching them off guard. Making a fast move without properly communicating with your horse can reduce the effectiveness of your movement and can also be hazardous to your health. Throwing a thousand pound horse off balance at speed is not an advisable move. Most horses are incredibly talented at making up for our lack of balance, but we only make it easier and safer by being in balance with our four legged teammate. So who says you can't back up in polo, most of us are doing it a lot of the time. Happy Polo !!!

## Tip #51: Circling And Rollbacks

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Funny how many sports seem to fall into one of two main categories. Those that go up and down the field and those that go around in circles. Polo seems to combine both. So sometimes stopping and rolling back into the opposite direction is the desired move and other times a little collection and then circling into the new direction is the quicker method.

### **Circles**

So the fastest way back down field if you are at speed, is to first collect and slow just a little, begin your circle, and after the mid-point of your circle, begin to accelerate back out. It is very much like taking a curve at speed in a car. You brake a tad before the turn and then accelerate as you come back out of the turn.

To turn your horse, make sure you turn your eyes and upper body into the direction you wish to turn along with your reining and outside leg (left leg when turning right). If you use your upper body along with your hand and leg, the horse will come around much sooner. This technique is especially good for when you are trying to turn in small circles and maintain pace.

Take care not to try to pull too sharp a circle when the surface conditions are slick. Wet fields, hard fields, and fields with thick turf. Horses do much better stopping on a straight line in slippery conditions. Actually horses will adjust very well to different conditions if the entire field is the same. The real problem is if most of the field is dry and there are a few wet spots...or most of the field is soft and there are a few hard spots. A lot of outdoor fields have a good deal of vehicle traffic on the sidelines or end lines. Those areas will be more compact and more slick as well.

### **Rollbacks**

Rollbacks are a ton of fun if you have a horse that is well schooled to do them and you are well versed in the proper aids for asking. Just don't over-do the roll-backs. Just like sprints for us, roll-backs are a lot tougher on the horse, as they almost come to a complete stop and then have to come back up to speed.

Rollbacks are more when your speed is down and you want to get back a short distance in a hurry. Rollbacks are much more common in arena polo. However, they are excellent training and tuning for horses in any level of polo as you are teaching the horse to collect and use their hindquarters.

To get a roll back, you gather your reins and begin to lean your shoulders back some. It is best to do it along a wall or fence if one is available. You decide which way you are going to turn and shorten those reins just a tad...before you start your roll back. You then pull and release a couple of times while letting your legs go forward to brace for the action of the horse stopping. If your horse is green or untrained, you may want to use your leg to ask the horse to engage their hindquarters (that means they tend to transfer more of their weight on to their hindquarters by shortening their stride and becoming lighter in front).

As the horse begins to stop, you wait until they get balanced on their hindquarters and right before they stop altogether, you turn your upper body into the direction you are turning and let your lower legs start to swing back behind the girth so you are able to push off your lower legs as the horse pivots, spins, and accelerates out of the rollback. You should be coming out of the turn on the same tracks you went in. A good horse will pivot right around on their hind legs with their fore legs slightly off the ground.

If you are new to this...start at a walk and then a trot. At a walk or trot, bring the horse to a halt, take one step back and then turn into the new direction. This engages the horse's hindquarters at a slower gait. At the canter, you turn just before the complete stop, as you need the horse to have that remaining bit of energy for the spin or pivot. If you are not sure...get a lesson so someone can help watch you. If you cued the horse with your reins prior to the turn and use your outside leg when pivoting around, the horse should come out on the correct lead. There have been a few horses that I have come across in my time that turn well...but turn on their front end...and pretty much refuse to turn on their hindquarters. This is acceptable...but they are much harder on their own front legs and have a tendency to break down. It is also a little challenging for some riders as that type of horse really throws you forward when they stop. But I will take a horse that stops on their front end before a horse that doesn't stop at all !

I wish you the fastest and safest way back to the ball !

## Tip #54: Soft Hands and Active Legs

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Soft Hands and Active Legs....and a volume or so more.

If you do not know your horse, you should always assume they have both a very sensitive mouth and sides. You don't want to find out the hard way by yanking or kicking too hard right off the bat and send the horse into outer space, minus one pilot....you.

If you are fortunate, you have a horse that needs very little pressure from your hands to stop and just a slight squeeze of the leg to go. However, if you are a rank beginner, or maybe even a novice, this may be way too responsive of a horse for you to be on at this stage in your polo career.

The good starter horses are pretty much like a wooden horse with training wheels. You can hang on them a little for balance and you can make some mistakes without it costing you your health. These horses may not be real quick or real fast, they are just really dependable. An experienced, older, forgiving horse is a great horse to learn the game and maybe even how to ride if you are trying to do both simultaneously.

Looks and speed are not characteristics you should be concerned with in choosing the starter horse, but that is another article.

When we first start out, a lot of us think you hold the reins for balance....actually, we may or may not think that, but we tend to do that. Heck...there isn't any horn to hold onto with an English saddle, so we need something....don't we?

Well....that something will be our balance between our upper and lower body. We will learn to be able to maintain a lot of pressure in our lower leg and maintaining balance in the saddle by keeping our upper body centered. That isn't quite how it feels at first. Without the ability to steady on those reins, we may initially feel that we are destined for many involuntary dismounts. And if you don't work on your lower leg, your prediction may be a valid one.

As teachers and instructors, we need to try to find those dependable school and starter horses that will tolerate our early mistakes. It is important to have a couple of horses that will allow someone to hold on with the reins without flipping out or over.

A lot of us guys start out with the motorcycle approach. We yank left for left, right for right and back for whoa. Then we slap them with the reins like we saw in the movies and holler at them to go.

Well...if you are one of those...you will have to work on your technique...a lot. In reality, your reins are just to guide the horse in turns and alert them to your wanting to check or stop. The reins are used in combination with your seat, your body, your voice, and your legs. Everything working together is very much like an orchestra. One at a time, as they begin to warm-up, the music sounds dis-jointed, but when the conductor pulls everything together, it is truly symphonic, as will your riding be.....once you pull it all together.

It is actually our body, our seat, and our legs that have more to do with directing and driving the horse. In the beginning, it is our hands that call the shots. As you advance, your hands will slowly begin to blend in with all the elements of the rest of the aids you will learn to use, to properly direct your horse around the field of play.

Beginning players who have grown up with horses have a real head start as the game is sooooo much about riding. However, many adults take up polo and riding together. For those of you, it is highly recommended to supplement your polo lessons with riding lessons. So goes your horsemanship, so goes your polo. Very similar to hockey. If you can't skate, you are not going to be much of a threat to anyone out on the ice in a hockey game....besides yourself. The game of polo is a ton of fun. The catch is that to become a better player, you need to face the required level of discipline that comes packaged in the term "Horsemanship". That one word represents volumes of information. Just like everything else in life, all it requires is a little passion and a whole lot of work.

Happy Polo.....or rather...Happy Horsemanship.

## Tip #55: The Stick Side

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“Stick-side”

Talk about a confusing term....what the “you know what” does stick-side mean...and more importantly can it be used in scrabble? Polo sticks are round...they don't even have a side...do they?

Some of us more fortunate in our playing abilities and horses, can gallop ahead of most of the rest of the field carrying the ball with a few powerful lofting drives with the last one sailing high over the center of the goal posts.

The rest of us chasing them from behind, hopefully have the option and enough horse to try to come up and get a hook. So when you are chasing from behind....are you coming up on what is considered the strong side, the offside. This may sound simple....but many a player will gallop up on the nearside and only have an option for a ride-off, whereas if they had just angled right instead of left....earlier....they would be coming up on the offside.....which is the strong side....which is also sometimes called the...stick-side!

Granted, that player may move over and ride you off and go to their nearside...but that is a much more difficult side to carry the ball, even in high goal. So you are doing well to at least force them to their nearside.

Now here is a trick question. When you see someone ahead with someone forcing them to their nearside, or in the arena, they are heading down the wall with the ball against the boards on their nearside....which is the stick-side now?

If you answered nearside you were correct....unfortunately you don't win anything today....but you will be winning more plays on the field.

So when you have the option come up on the stick-side, whichever side that may be, you have the opportunity to play the ball side and get a hook or a chance at the ball. If the opponent already is being ridden by a teammate, and you come up to hook them on their nearside, you have to realize that opponent has drawn two of you to the play. You may get the hook, but the next player to the ball may be the player you were supposed to be marking. So if you do double-team an opponent, you should be pretty confident you can get ball possession and not just a hook. Better yet, if the second teammate can get to the ball first and back it to the teammate now peeling away from that opponent, you have turned a defensive effort into an offensive drive.

If you are ahead of a single player and they are coming up from behind you with the ball, if I gave you two choices as to which side of the field to be..... we all should know that directly in front of them is not a good option....because of that whistle thing....not to mention the getting run over thing.

So do you want to wind up on their . . .

a) nearside or left-side of field

or

b) strong-side, offside, stick-side or right-side (there is a clue in right-side)

If you answered a, please kindly begin rereading from the start of this article. If you answered b...congratulations...you are ready to advance to the next article...or at least to a few more plays....and I wish you many of those. I look forward to seeing you..... stickside! Happy Polo.

## Tip #56: Posting The Trot

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Posting versus Bouncing to the Trot...ok....who is going to want to read an article about trotting on a horse when the game of polo is played at a gallop. I know...I know....big morning yawn. I can't help it, it's on my list of subjects under horsemanship. I put it off as long as I could, but it has to be included.

Now even though some players don't even allow their horses to trot when they are being ridden, as they don't want the horse to even consider the gait in the game, I think all of us are or should be aware of the trot as a great exercise in muscle conditioning when horses are first being brought back up into work.

It is also traditionally a great warm up gait when loosening the horse and preparing them for the work of the day. Do athletes take off at a sprint? Or do they stretch some, then do some jogging in preparation. It is the second option for any of you couch potatoes. Walking and trotting your horse before cantering and galloping is just plain old warming up and stretching for the horse.

The problem with the trot gait is that it is good for the horse and hard on us. Due to the nature of the movement of the horse, two legs at a time...it is a bouncier, rougher gait especially with a little pace or speed.

That is where the posting thing comes in. You may have heard the recital of the 1-2 beat with the lyrics up-down-up-down-up-down somewhere along the way. Those of us that grew up with riding lessons may even have night terrors in memory of our nazi instructors barking out abusive directives. Im sorry, is nazi not politically correct? Lets use drill sergeants instead.

The reason you post "up and down" is so that you stay in rhythm of the gait of the horse. So instead of being bounced around like a monkey tied on the back of a horse, you actually stand and lower in your stirrups in synchronization with the movement of the horse's shoulder that is going forward and back as they trot. That takes the bounce out of the bounce.

Learning to post seems like an insurmountable task at first, but usually after a few minutes or a couple of rides, you just seem to get it. This may not apply to any of you that were unable to take the training wheels off your bicycle. You learn to let that bounce of the horse's stride assist you in rising back out of the saddle along with the action of rising and lowering into the saddle with your leg.

Now I'm saying up/down and raise and lower, because I am continuing the tradition of error that has been passed thru the centuries. In fact...it is more forward-back-forward-back with your hips when done correctly as opposed to up and down like some polka dancer (sorry polka fans, it's the Midwest in me). The correct motion is bringing your hips and pelvis forward and then back into your saddle.

Posting is easier on the horse's back and your....umm...back side. Now it is a good thing to learn to sit the trot as well. The trick is to keep your shoulders upright, stay centered and try to press into the horse with your pelvis and seat to the rhythm of the gait. I think I may have just taken this article from a PG rating to an R with these last two paragraphs.

Now...once you have the posting thing down, there is the posting on the correct diagonal thing. I know..You have already double clicked and my words are now lost in cyberspace...but just in case you come back.....posting on the correct diagonal is just making certain you are up or forward when the outside shoulder of the horse is forward. This applies to when you are traveling in circles. If you are on a straight line, you can go on either diagonal. But if you circle to the left, you should be rising or going forward when

the horse's outside shoulder/in this case, their right shoulder is forward. To be on the correct diagonal, you raise or go forward with the outside shoulder of whatever direction you are traveling in. The reason you want the correct diagonal is because it is easier on the horse. You will feel this yourself with some experience. If you look at your horse's shoulder and you are rising at the wrong time, then you just sit a bounce and then raise back up onto the correct shoulder. I know it sounds a little complicated if you are new to this, but a little practice will get you a long way in a hurry.

So for a quick review. . .

Trotting is a two beat gait that is good warm-up for the horse.

Posting is the up/down or forward/back motion with your hips to stay in rhythm with the trotting gait.

Diagonals are raising up/forward with the outside shoulder (when you circle right, the horse's left shoulder) of the horse going forward when you are going in a circle.

## Tip #57: Bucking with the letter B and Rearing like Roy

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Now if you belong to any rodeo associations, the words bucking and rearing probably don't bother you much. If you are just one of the rest of us on horseback, buck and rear are in fact.... four letter words.

It may only be a few feet from the ground, but few of us, if any, are into being launched by our four-legged friends. We will do most anything to avoid any unintended dismounts. If you are in the 20 and under category, falling off is not such a big deal. You're flexible and you usually pop right back up before anyone hardly notices.

If you are in your later decades (the so called golden years), falling off is just the precursor to dialing 911.

So what can we do to avoid the "dreaded ejection"?

Well...I have some bad news...it is probably going to happen. It is usually not a question of if, but rather when. I can give you some tips to avoid the problems.

1) Make sure your horse is always warmed up properly before you start swinging a mallet. A few minutes of trotting and some cantering. After a few minutes of work, add a little more leg pressure while steadying with your hands to see if they are acting a little giddy. Be conservative with leaning way out for a shot in the early minutes of a chukker, especially on those windier, colder days.

2) You can turn your horse out or lunge them before you ride, especially good in the colder months. Even older quieter horses can act like youngsters in 30-40 degree weather.

3) Always be prepared on your horse. Have your reins from the time you mount until the time you dismount. Ride defensively. Just like driving, expect the unexpected. Be aware of that door that flings open, some blowing plastic, some ice sliding off the roof above you, a loose horse storming by, an engine back-firing. and the multitude of other unexpected things that you can expect will happen.

4) Don't give more than a handful of grain if any to horses in light work, especially in those colder environments.

5) Buy horses that are quiet and well suited for amateurs.

6) If your horse tries to pull their head down, pull them back up with one of your two hands. You have more leverage against a horse if you pull their head either right or left as opposed to straight back with both hands.

7) If your horse begins to rear, move your hands forward to the horse's neck and squeeze and kick to encourage the horse forward. Rearing up is cool when Zorro or Roy does it, but it can be deadly if a horse rears over backwards onto you...so it is not something to try at home or anywhere else.

8) If another horse gets loose or starts to play, stop and steady your horse.

9) If there is a runaway horse coming anywhere near your vicinity, again, stop and steady your horse and prepare to circle.

10) If your horse is feeling playful, circle them at a trot for a while before you ask for a canter or gallop.

11) If you are in the throw-in or chukker, stay in the back of the throw-in or follow the play.

12) In the early part of the season or after being off for a while, let a pro/trainer play your horse some chukkers, maybe even the first couple of weeks. Horses will normally settle after the first couple of weeks of polo...but the early few weeks of the season are always packed with horses propping, bucking, and pulling back off the trailers.

Now if you do get tossed...try to stay loose...and try to let your joints flex....the old tuck and roll. Wear your helmet. Avoid the sudden stop thing or sticking your arms out in the locked position. Unfortunately, this is not an easy thing to practice. You can pick some soft grass and try to start with a somersault or two. Wee did that kind of thing as children....I know it sounds crazy....but there is a reason for all the exercise and stretching that accompanies sports. The reason ?..... simple, to be more pliable and to reduce injury. How much stretching have you done lately?

So if you are faced with a horse that is bucking or rearing, it is best to get professional assistance. If you are hearing that it is nothing, just get back on and quit your whining, you may be dealing with the "old school" approach to learning how to deal with difficult horses. Most of us were told that you aren't a rider until you've been off at least three times. And there is some truth to that, but if you have a job and family members that need you, you may want to take a little more conservative approach than the "old school" methods may have offered. Adults come with bones that are a tad more brittle, you may want to avoid the horses that may teach you how to be a better bronc rider....If you like getting tossed off.....you may want to consider the rodeo circuit. You only have to stay on seven seconds and you may win some prize money...of course you may also get killed...but that's.....r o d e o. I myself am more fond of the seven minute rides.... In fact six or more of those seven minute rides. And I like the view from the back of the horse. So I now look for some "steady" in the horses I choose...that didn't used to be the case...but I also used to be flexible. Happy Polo.

## Tip #58: Just What Is A Ringer? Is It A Person Or A Thing?

If you answered both, you are dead on. I will start with the thing. Happens to be a mallet thing and some of you may be walking around or rather running around with a ringer and you may not even know it. In the world of mallets, a ringer is when the portion of the mallet cane that extends into the mallet head is broken. It is hardly ever visible to the eye, but the mallet is pretty much useless. Once the cane breaks inside of the mallet head, you no longer have the stability in the mallet head to hit with accuracy, as the head of the mallet will rotate as you are hitting the ball. You may get away with a few hits, but the mallet will worsen considerably and quickly. The only way to fix the mallet is either by splicing the cane or shortening the mallet. In any event, a ringer mallet is opposite to our next subject, the ringer player.

If you are not sure how to tell whether your mallet is a ringer, it is a simple test. You reach down and hold the mallet head in your left hand and then you hold the mallet grip with your right hand and twist. If the can moves independently from the head of the mallet, you are the proud owner of a ringer.

So...moving onto to the other ringer in polo. The best way to describe a ringer player is that it is one whose skills considerably exceed their current handicap. They are usually on the other team and are constantly running down to goal and scoring. If they are on your team, it's not such a bad thing, in fact it is quite nice.

Ringers are often younger players that are improving more rapidly then the handicap committee meets. Sometimes they are foreign players that haven't been properly viewed even though every attempt is being made to reduce those occurrences. Another breeding ground of ringers is when a schooled eye can spot a young talent that just needs some better horses. It should be of no surprise that you could immediately improve one's handicap by several goals just by placing them on better horses.

It is said that if you are trying to put together that winning team, it is best to have every team member playing over their handicap...preferably...four ringers. However, the National Handicap Committee does a command job of trying to equalize the playing field, as it should be. The committee spends countless hours twice annually, working with delegates, and circuit handicap committees in properly assessing handicaps. There is also a tool that the USPA has available for their use, called the "monster rule". A reported ringer can receive a two-goal correction with a single swipe of a pen.

In any event, ringer mallets are a bad thing, actually so are ringer players, unless of course, they are on your team. I wish you a playing career that is void and at the same time, full of ringers.

## Tip #59: Rating A Horse? Do Horses Get Handicaps?

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Simply speaking, horses are very often the definition of our handicaps. However, I am speaking of the term "rating" a horse, with respect to when someone says this horse rates well.

When we say a polo pony rates well, we can compare it to the cruise control of a car. You get the desired speed and then push that little button and voila. Your car is traveling at a set speed allowing you to now use your right foot to tap to whatever beat you tap to....until you decide you want to speed up or slow down.

When a horse is said to rate well, the same is true. You move a horse into a collected canter and are traveling at 6mph. You then decide you want to leg the horse a little and get them to go 15 mph. Once they get to 15mph, you stop asking for more....and they stay at 15mph until they hear or rather feel otherwise from you.. This is a great characteristic for polo, as it makes it easier for the rider to focus on the ball and the play of the field. If the horse is constantly speeding up or slowing down at will, it is far more challenging for the rider to maintain the proper settings while engaged in hitting and positioning.

How does one get a horse that rates well? Is it factory installed? Are there after factory kits?

Horses that stop well, or turn well, or rate well, or change leads well, are generally horses that were trained well. Most horses will do all the things that we would want them to do when they are at play in the pastures.....well...except for the kicking, biting, bucking, and rearing stuff. But they do already know how to do all that we would like them to do. It is just a matter of properly communicating to the horse that we want desired actions when we apply a certain set of commands or aids. Our joysticks and controllers happen to be our reins, our legs, our seat, our upper body positioning, and our voice. If a talented horse is trained well, they usually come fully loaded. Now I say talented horse in the sense that some horses just seem to come by what we look for in a polo pony, more naturally than others. It does take a good trainer that is a combination of knowledge and patience. But I believe it also takes a special kind of horse. They are not easy to come by, even when you have a lot of money to spend. There are those operations that are out there. They have a good system, and their success percentages are high, but even they will tell you that not all the horses go to the tie lines at Palermo.

So when you are out there looking, you now know a little more on how to rate a horse as well as a horse that rates well. I wish you cruise control on all your ponies !!

## Tip #60: The Sweet Spot In Polo

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In one of my articles, I spoke of mallet head positioning at the finish of your swing being crucial to the direction of your shot. There is another element that is equally essential to the accuracy of your shots, and that is what is commonly referenced as the sweet spot.

The sweet spot is the section of the mallet head where the cane is joined with the mallet head. Pretty much the central portion of the mallet head. That is where we want to make contact with the ball. The reason being is that if you hit off center, especially at speed, the impact will more likely dictate the position of the mallet head as opposed to the other way around. We want to dictate the direction of the ball and that is best done by hitting center....or at the sweet spot. If you do hit at the toe or the heel of the mallet head, your mallet head will tend to spin around the ball as you hit, making it very challenging to dictate proper placement.

There are a couple of ways you can improve on your sweet spot. Growing up as kids, a few of my friends and I developed our sweet spot ability unknowingly, as we used to saw off broom handles and use the sticks to hit around a soft ball off a bike. Clear evidence of a very early addiction.

In any event, if you have an old mallet lying around, you could saw off both the toe and heel ends of the mallet and use the remaining mallet to stick and ball on occasion. The reduced weight of the mallet won't help in practicing your distance shots, but it will help in developing your eye and your ability to focus on the sweet spot.

Another method that the late, great Joe Barry (9 goals) used in helping me with my knock-ins was to set up two balls apart from each other at a distance just enough for the swing of the mallet head to pass between them. Then he would set the ball I was to hit in between them. My task was to hit the center ball without hitting either of the other two. Those of you out there that had the gift of watching Joe Barry hit a polo ball know that Joe didn't hit a polo ball, he launched them. Between Joe and Daniel Gonzalez, they helped teach me how to hit a knock-in a hundred yards. So give some thought and time to the sweet spot of your mallet. I promise it is worth the consideration.

Happy Sweet Spot!!

## Tip #61: Traveling True To The Ball

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Another solid trait that we look for in a polo pony is what some call traveling true. The definition of traveling true is a horse that travels in whatever line that you place them on. Once you establish the direction, the horse continues on that course almost as if they were on a set of railroad tracks. The only time they will make any lateral movement one direction or the other is if you ask them to do so with your leg and hands. This trait is very beneficial as you can place more focus on stroking the ball as opposed to just getting to the ball. If a horse doesn't travel true, they tend to drift left and right as if the sail of your boat was just flapping in the wind and your rudder was up out of the water.

A horse that doesn't travel true requires much more effort from the rider to simply just get to the ball. This type of horse, though possibly playable, can drain us of the needed energy that is required to execute our plays. A horse that travels true is also a bit more beneficial when we are making our shots, as they are better at maintaining the proper course and not turning into the side we are swinging on.

People often ask me if cutting horses or reining horses make good polo ponies. It has been my experience that you never know where the next great polo pony may come from, but with that said, sometimes the reining horses are almost too responsive for polo. If they are trained to quickly shift with a slight shift in the rider's weight, it could make it a tad challenging to play them, It seems like the solid ranch horses are often the better prospects as there are so many similarities in the nature of the two activities.

It is true that if we are better balanced on the horse, especially during our strokes, that the horse will travel more true, but it doesn't hurt if the horse is a little less responsive and a bit steadier while we are in the act of swinging. But that is a little along the lines of having our cake and eating it too.....being responsive and steady at the same time is somewhat of a polo paradox.

In any event, I wish you your cake and the ability to eat it as well.







































