



Around the world in 80 CHUKKAS

A civilised afternoon of sporting pleasure, mixed with a little entertaining – Nick Hammond discovers that the only way to do business is by the side of a polo field

DARK beds of earth fly skywards in a rolling thunder of hooves. Great chunks of grass are violently ripped from the immaculate green sward. It's harsh out there – but all part of a fast and furious game, exciting enough to induce a flutter in the stomachs of hearts.

And you get to watch it with a glass of champagne in your hand.

British Polo Day, sponsored by RJI Capital, has become a popular date on the international polo calendar. A celebration of the craft and heritage

of the sport, more than 50 events have been held in 15 countries since 2009. Today, its global series encapsulates ten annual fixtures that combine sporting prowess on the pitch, with networking opportunities on the sidelines.

It's a masterclass in high-end relationship building: multinational CEOs, luxury brands, aristocrats and entrepreneurs mingle freely in a convivial atmosphere. I find myself at this year's 'home fixture' in Henley-on-Thames and am blessed with the

company of the Cristiano Ronaldo of polo – the darkly mysterious Adolfo Cambiaso. The Argentinian player flew in his family for a run in the Oxfordshire sunshine (along with a few of his favourite horses), and he cuts quite a dash.

"All I ever wanted to do is play polo," Cambiaso shrugs laconically when we meet. He is perhaps the finest professional player ever to pick up a stick; was awarded a tera-goal handicap at 19 (of only two dozen in the world to do so), earns millions a

BRITISH POLO DAY IN JUNE



NINA CLARKIN AND ADOLFO CAMBIASO

year as world number one, owns horse farming enterprises, and is delightfully handsome to boot.

"My children learned to ride as soon as they could walk. It was never going to be any different. I love to ride with them." What does their mother think about this equine obsession? "She has no choice," he laughs.

So Adolfo, son Poroto and daughter Mia are here today, nonchalantly thundering across the ground in terrifying fashion. Dad looks on proudly – and occasionally demonstrates why he's regarded as a living legend. To watch him charge past at great speed, horse loosely reined in one hand, while playing keepy uppy with the ball and polo stick with the other, is to surely see one of the most exhilarating sights in world sport.

Despite his country's dominance of the game, there's still something eccentric and somehow something very British about polo. True, we didn't invent it, but we have the social side down to a fine art.

We dine at Henley under flowing canopies, with British Polo Day managing director and partner Ben Vestey. He runs the impressive franchise alongside chairman Tom Hudson. The pair's military background is evident in the fact that the entire day breezes past in delightful fashion without a hitch. While there are plenty of women among the spectators, it's refreshing to find a sport displaying equality when it comes to on-field matters, too.

"We witnessed things get better and better for women as my career has progressed," says Nina Clarkin, the British women's number one player who is at Henley to hit the ball alongside Cambiaso in a charity game. "Now there is a defined path to a professional career."

Finding your way in polo isn't without its hurdles, but as Clarkin readily admits, it does help to be married to a professional polo player from New Zealand who can lend you a horse when emergencies arise (John Clarkin). They now have a young child to consider, but this is another family hooked on the adrenaline rush that polo provides.

"I'm not sure how I'd feel if my children wanted to do it," she says. "It can be very dangerous if you're not fully matched on, but if you start to worry about what could go wrong, you couldn't possibly play the game properly."

While Clarkin and Cambiaso both assure me that these exhibition games are half as fast as a professional fixture, it all seems hazardous in the extreme to me: the jostling of sticks and hooves, great swings of the arms, sudden changes of direction and thunderous cavalcading up and down the length of the pitch. Horses are changed several times during the exhausting eight chukkas but the riders



RULES OF PLAY

The aim of the game – originally a training exercise for the king's guard – is to get a ball into the opposing team's goal using the side of a long-handled mallet head.

A polo match is either four or eight chukkas – a chukka being a period of seven minutes; the interval between each is three minutes. There are four players in a team, playing on a grass field up to 270m by 150m, with one or two umpires.

Riders may make contact and push each other off the line of the ball, as long as elbows are not involved.

Any time the ball crosses the line between the goalposts, it is considered a goal regardless of who knocks it through, including the pony itself.



FIXTURE LIST

- China: September 2017
- Sumba Island, Indonesia: October 2017
- Jaipur: December 2017
- Jodhpur: December 2017
- Abu Dhabi: March 2018
- Dubai: March 2018
- Great Britain: June 2018

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FEATURE



A BRITISH ARMY CAPTAIN AND HORSE IN JODHPUR.
ALL PHOTOGRAPHY SAM CHURCHILL



British Polo Day is
the ideal way to do
business – once your
champagne is topped
up, of course

► sweat on, utterly absorbed in the ferocious contest.

Nothing illustrates the sport's popularity better than British Polo Day. Once the last reveller from tonight's afterparty is finally persuaded to leave and the stands, marquees, statues, drinks vehicles, caterers, staff, horse boxes and players have left the field, this travelling roadshow begins work on the next event – its 62nd – in China in September.

Sponsors, patrons, business partners and invited guests will later return in harness, so to speak, in places as evocative as India, Morocco, Thailand, Mexico and Russia to name but a few. A British afternoon at the polo – in far-flung, exotic locations.

It sounds like the ideal way to do business to me. Once my champagne glass is topped up, of course. ■

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