



L-R: PoloAfrica coach Tshidiso Meshake takes a swing; play on ground one; coach Japie Tsoetsi. As well as being proven teachers, both excel in competitive play



Where local skills shine

Englishwoman **Catherine Cairns** (above) explains why she's giving black South Africans a leg-up into polo via an enterprising development programme

POLO HERE HASN'T moved with the times as other sports have," declares Catherine. "There are hardly any black South African players, of whom none would be able to play without sponsorship. Part of PoloAfrica's mission is to change the perception and reality of the sport, to allow it to grow. Everyone on Uitgedacht farm is proud of our growing reputation as the home of black polo in South Africa.

"We have three objectives. First, to encourage previously disadvantaged people of talent to do well in polo and to become true 'professionals' by developing horse management skills, schooling ponies and coaching players. The latter requires confidence and authority – a considerable social challenge for black South Africans given the closed nature of the sport here.

"Times are, however, changing. Already PoloAfrica has experienced black coaches, Tshidiso Meshake and Japie Tsoetsi, both of whom have proven track records in coaching foreign guests. Tshidiso, Japie and the team are guided by Matthew Pohl, one of the country's top polo pros who is a visiting coach and club member.

"PoloAfrica's second objective is to make polo more accessible to non-whites. Wealthy black South Africans need to see black players in to challenge the assumption the sport is only white.

To achieve this PoloAfrica sponsors black players to hone their skills and play tournaments. Harold Awush Darko, a leading Ghanaian player and supporter of PoloAfrica, formed a team with three South African black players and they won the Africa Cup at Inanda in 2008.

"This was the first time a black team had ever reached a tournament final here, much less won. Sbu Duma won MVP and went on to play with Harold in the Accra Open in Ghana, where he

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won MVP and one of his ponies, Coravich, from PoloAfrica, won Golden Pony. Last August, the Free State Invitation side played in the curtain-raiser at the BMW International Test Series at Inanda – the first time an all-black side has played at such a fixture.

"PoloAfrica's third objective is to use polo and ponies to encourage children from underprivileged backgrounds to work hard at school. We provide practical and financial support for school attendance and teach children about

horsemanship and polo, working with the Valley Education Fund run by Franshoek Farm (the VEF takes care of the school side with funding from PoloAfrica, and the children come to Uitgedacht Farm for polo). This year the programme has sponsorship from the SA Polo Association.

"The children play only if they do well at school and show discipline and enthusiasm for the ponies and the sport. The point is not to create future players (although that is happening) but to foster academic upliftment

and a sense of responsibility. Four girls and four boys are in the programme for 2010.

"The two older boys, who have enjoyed polo in their holidays and weekends for two years, won the junior section at Free State Champs, and the older boy, Thapelo Motjioa, won the B section at Sparta. The four girls had previously dropped out of school, and because of PoloAfrica registered again. One, Mamaseko Sithule, won MVP at a Franshoek tournament. **E**

Leah Ludlow asks Catherine Cairns how she transformed Uitgedacht Farm in the Free State into a thriving polo centre

How did you get involved in polo in South Africa?

When I was in Johannesburg on business a friend persuaded me to try riding his polo ponies, which sparked my interest in polo. I stayed at Franshoek [a neighbour of Uitgedacht Farm] eight years ago and fell in love with the extraordinary beauty of the area, and the fact that polo is a way of life for the local farming community. I hunted a lot in the UK and polo in the Eastern Free State reminded me of the charm of rural packs. I love the way of life, and the love of the game. This isn't "posh polo".

How did you set up the club?

I bought the farm in 2002. The minute I first drove up the tree-lined farm road I knew it was what I wanted! The farmhouse had been derelict for 25 years and I renovated it, added buildings, restored the infrastructure, built the arena and planted the first polo field – a full-size, boarded field. We have a second field under construction, as well as an irrigation system, a clubhouse and more guest cottages. I want two of the best fields in the country!

What do you offer now at PoloAfrica?

We are a thriving club – farmers play

chukkas and tournaments, we run the PoloAfrica development programme and we cater for visiting players of up to two goals. We offer tuition, such as wooden horse and stick and ball exercises, as well as pony schooling and "polo riding" lessons, then chukkas. We can instruct on horse care and tack too. Our arena helps with schooling young horses and building the confidence of newer riders. We have over 70 horses, comprising a small breeding herd, green youngsters and seasoned polo ponies. Most of our ponies we make good from the track.

What are the charges?

All inclusive, for accommodation, chukkas and tuition and a minimum of four horses per day, is R2,800 (approximately £225) per person per day.

What tips do you have for anyone setting up a club abroad?

Be careful how you spend your money! It is all about property development anywhere you need to manage contractors with caution, add 50 per cent cost contingency to estimates and double your timescales. In general just be wary and do careful research.

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