

Polo's grass roots in South Africa

The game of polo, popular with the Army in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, and played along similar rules to today, reached South Africa in 1872 when two regiments of the British Army, the Gordon Highlanders and the Duke of Cornwall's Regiment, were sent from India to garrison the border towns of the Eastern Cape.

The first recorded polo match in South African history was staged in October 1875, on the parade ground at King Williams Town with these two regiments and the Cape Mounted Rifles taking part. Other regiments were sent from India at the time of the Zulu War in 1879, which helped to foster the spread of the game. The Anglo-Boer war saw the game become more widespread, due not only to the pervasive British military presence but also to the increase in British settlers after the war. The military remained a very powerful force in polo in South Africa until the First World War. However civilian polo also grew rapidly during this time, the first recorded civilian club being the Dargle Polo Club in Natal, founded in 1886.

In my adopted part of the world, the Eastern Free State on the northern Lesotho border, one of the oldest existing polo fields in the country was created by a group of British settlers. One of these, Hugh Sparrow, had a rather kind and wealthy aunt in England who delighted in sending him expensive presents. Amongst the best of these was a consignment of polo mallets and balls (allegedly accompanied by plenty of whisky), so that he and his friends could start playing the game. In the early 1900's they established a field at Mooiplaas (which means "beautiful farm" in Afrikaans), a lovely if slightly sloping field, on the top of a hill, around which they planted fir trees. An interesting feature of the field



was that a double row of trees was planted along the pony lines, providing welcome shade and making it aesthetically pleasing. Relegated to cattle, maize and beans for more than 70 years, the field will be restored to its former glory by its current owner, Sandstone Estates.

Five years ago if someone had told me that I was going to end up living on a farm in a remote part of South Africa looking after polo ponies I would not have believed them. I first came to the Eastern Free State on holiday three years ago, fell in love with the place and decided to buy a farm and turn it into a polo heaven. Not only did I find this part of the world one of the most beautiful I had ever seen, but I was enchanted by the way polo was such an integral part of the life of the farming community.

Skills of the game are handed down from father to son, hairy ponies sport bits of tack older than all the players, chat in the clubhouse is all about planting maize, the price of weaners, or how young so-and-so shows the same temper on the field as his grandfather... More than anything it reminded me of the spirit of foxhunting in rural England, a way of life for the whole community.



For a long time in this country polo was not a game handed down from father to daughter. This was not always the case – ladies used actively to play in South Africa. One polo club, Addo in the Eastern Cape, owes its foundation to a group of enthusiastic lady riders in the 1920's, hence its distinctive club colours featuring a charming shade of pink. Sadly, by the 1950s ladies polo had ceased to exist. The increasingly right wing political environment in the country ensured that for many years girls on the polo field were frowned upon. But in the last five years this has changed. Lady players are now taking up polo in South Africa and I am very proud to be

the first new playing lady member of my club, Hammonia, for over 60 years – although only the third since its foundation in 1932.

Indeed a recently introduced gem in our South African fixture list is an annual celebration of ladies polo (first event 2003). At the end of September a ladies tournament culminating in an International between Africa and England will take place. The two day run-up tournament will consist of eight teams, each with two South African lady players, one international lady player and one South African man player. The teams for the international match this year are, for Africa (5 goals), Sarah van Wyk (Captain), Sherri-Lyn Hensman, Candice Miles and Rowena Murray. For England (6 goals), Nina Vestey (Captain), Milly Scott, Lucy Taylor and Sophie West. For more information go to www.ladiespolo.com.

Over the past century South African polo has mainly been an amateur sport. This is changing as interest in polo grows and as more money is being put into the game. Nonetheless, the backbone of polo in this country remains the farmers and their country clubs. Long may country polo continue to prosper. For more information on polo in South Africa go to www.sapolo.org.za.

