

Polo in the Park: A Primer

By Alexandra McKay, Events Coordinator

I fully admit that I am more of a steeplechase kind of girl than a polo kind of girl. In fact, until a few years ago, all I knew about polo I learned from watching *Pretty Woman* and Ralph Lauren ads.

What I did not know was the long history of the sport and how it is so different from all other sports. As we prepare to launch Polo in the Park here at Morven Park I have done a lot of reading on the subject, and you are going to benefit from my newfound knowledge.

History

Polo was devised by the mounted nomadic peoples of Central Asia as part sport and part war training. The game made it to Persia sometime between 600 BCE and 100 CE. In Persia it became the formalized national sport, played mostly by the military and nobility. It soon spread and by the middle ages the game was used to train cavalry from Constantinople to Japan.

As with most of history, the game changed and was completely formalized into modern polo when it crossed paths with the British. Although the game was described by Sir Anthony Sherley's 1613 book *Travels to Persia*, the first polo club was not established until 1859. It was that year that Lieutenant Joe Sherer, along with some other military officers and some tea planters, established the Silchar Polo Club in Manipur, India.

In 1869 the first polo game was played on Hounslow Heath in London by British officers who had read about the game in a magazine. It was about this time that Captain John Watson of the 13th Hussars (yes, you read that name right) created the first set of rules for the game. American publisher James Gordon Bennett saw his first game on a trip to England. In early 1876 he returned to New York with mallets, balls and a copy of the Hurlingham rules (an 1874 revision of Watson's rule book).

Over the next 50 years, polo gained popularity, reaching a Golden Age of Polo in the 1930s with crowds exceeding 30,000 for international polo matches at Meadow Brook Polo Club on Long Island. Polo also briefly became an Olympic sport between 1900 and 1936.

Terms & Rules

We will be playing arena polo at Morven Park this summer, and here are some rules to remember:

- The playing arena must be 300 feet in length by 150 feet in width.
- The goal shall be 10 feet wide and 12 feet high.
- A polo ball must be between 12.5 inches and 15 inches in circumference and weigh 0.3 lbs. It must also be able to bounce between 54" and 64" on a rebound after being dropped from 9 feet.
- The mount, called a pony no matter the age or size, may be of any breed or size and are highly trained for this game. Nothing can block the pony's vision. Players will frequently change ponies during the game.
- Arena polo is designed for three players with teams using the players' handicaps to ensure evenly matched teams. A player's handicap (also called a goal) is rated on a -2 to 10 scale. It is so difficult to attain a 10 handicap that there are less than two dozen in the world with it, and anyone with over a 5-goal handicap is usually considered a professional.

- Beyond the players, the people whom you will see on the field of play are the Umpire or Referee, Timekeeper, and Scorekeeper. The Umpire, who may or may not be mounted, is responsible for enforcing the rules and maintaining control over players and teams during the game. Both the Timekeeper and Scorekeeper are subordinate to the Umpire.
- A regulation game is four periods, called chukkers, with each being 7 minutes in length. During this time the players will try to score a goal by getting the ball to hit the boards within the goal area.

Polo as a spectator sport

Polo is very much a family sport and groups of all ages are welcome at Polo In the Park. There will be general admission parking and seating. Spectators are encouraged to bring a picnic, a blanket, and beverage of their choice. Please be mindful of the guests behind you and do not bring umbrellas, tables or tents. Polo at Morven Park will feature wine from Stone Tower Winery and spirits from Catocin Creek Distillery. Food trucks will also be on site each weekend.

Guests at a polo match usually follow a smart casual dress code, meaning khakis and button downs on gentlemen and sundresses on ladies. Everyone should bring sunglasses and plenty of sunscreen. Remember that this is an outdoor event, so high heels or wedges are not recommended.

General admission car passes are available for purchase at www.MorvenParkPolo.org. Passes are \$35 when purchased in advance or \$40 cash at the gate. VIP parking, tailgating spots and boxes are available for sponsors. For more information, send an email to Polo@MorvenPark.org.