



A Polo Primer

By: Alexandra McKay, Morven Park Events Coordinator

For many people, “Polo” brings to mind Ralph Lauren ads featuring a beautiful Argentine man (by the way, his name is Nacho Figueras and, yes, he really does play the sport). Or, it’s a preppy shirt that stirs debate regarding whether or not the wearer should pop the collar (the answer is no, unless you have the chutzpa of Katherine Hepburn). For some of us, however, polo is an exciting sport! If you would like to join this special group, I have put together a little primer so you will be the smartest person on the picnic blanket at [*Polo in the Park*](#).

History of Polo

The history of polo is older than history itself and is one of the world’s oldest known team sports. It started with nomads in Central Asia who used the game as a way to train horses for war, with each team having as many as 100 men. Between 600 B.C. and 100 A.D., the game came to Persia (now Iran) where it was formalized, and spread to Constantinople (now Istanbul), Tibet, China, Japan and India. The first known international game was played in 821 A.D. when Chinese ambassadors in Japan played a team fielded by the Emperor.

Modern polo originated in Manipur, India, where the game was associated mythologically with Marjing, the God of the Chenglei tribe. In 1859, in the same area of India, British military officers and tea planters founded the world’s first polo club, The Silchar Polo Club. From there, polo spread throughout Queen Victoria’s empire—Malta in 1868, England in 1869, Ireland in 1870, and Australia in 1874. Polo came to the Americas (Argentina) in 1872, and in 1876 James Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald brought the game to New York City.

Polo was an Olympic sport from 1900 to 1936. During the 1920s and ‘30s, polo was in its Golden Age in the United States, with upwards of 45,000 spectators at the 1930 Westchester Cup. In 1938, LIFE magazine noted, “They paid 50¢ each to see socialites, expensive horses, rough-riding action.”

Arena Polo 101

Unlike football, which seems to have a rule book thicker than The Complete Works of Leo Tolstoy, polo is simple—you just need to understand a few concepts and terms:

Objective: Just like in hockey and soccer, the objective in polo is to get the ball between the goal posts more often than the opposing team.

Field of Play: The field in arena polo (what we play here at Morven Park) is 300 by 150 feet, while grass polo (what you saw in *Pretty Woman*) is 300 by 160 yards.

Chukkers: A polo match lasts one to two hours and is divided into periods of 7.5 minutes called chukkers.

Arena Polo Positions: Position No. 1 plays the offensive role on the team; No. 2 assumes a quarterback’s role and is responsible for game strategy; No. 3 provides the defense.

Handicap System: Created around 1890 so teams could be more evenly matched, the handicap system provides each player with a rating reflecting skill, horsemanship, strategic ability, knowledge of polo, team play, and sportsmanship. The scale ranges from minus 2 (-2) to a 10-goal



Credit: Michael Stylianos

handicap. The rating is not an estimate of the number of goals a player might score in a game, but indicates the player's worth to his or her team. There have only been thirty 10-goal players in the history of the sport.

Mallet: The mallet is made of bamboo with a grip similar to a tennis racquet and a cloth safety strap on the end to prevent it from slipping. Mallets are 48–54” long, depending on the player and the pony.

Ball: A polo ball must be 12.5–15” in circumference and weigh 0.3 lbs. It must also be able to bounce 54–64” on a rebound after being dropped from 9 feet.

Polo Pony: All horses in polo are called ponies no matter the size. The mane of the pony is shaved off and the tail is braided and wrapped to prevent it from getting tangled with the mallet during play. Nothing can block the pony's vision. Players frequently will change ponies during a game.

Spectators: Dress, Etiquette and Tips

Guests at a polo match usually follow a smart casual dress code, meaning khakis and collars on gentlemen and sundresses and big hats on ladies. Ladies, this is great opportunity to try out that “white sneaker and dress look” that you’ve seen on Instagram. The terrain can be uneven, making heels more difficult than they have any right to be. Everyone should have sunglasses and plenty of sunscreen.

While ***Polo in the Park*** will have wine and food available, you are welcome to bring a picnic of your summertime favorites (think fruit, cheese, fried chicken, bourbon, and champagne). Just be mindful of the guests behind you and do not bring umbrellas, tables, or tents. While you socialize, try to keep an eye on the game as sometimes a flying ball can find itself out of bounds. Remember, the most important rule is to enjoy your evening at ***Polo in the Park***.



Credit: Chas Sumser Photography