

# **POLO 101**

## **The Necessary Basics of How to Play Polo**

### **THE RIDER**

**STRETCHING** – It is very important to stretch before and after you ride the horse. Otherwise, you will pull a muscle and cannot ride for several weeks. Stretch your inner legs, your back, your neck, your arms and wrists.

**4 HITTING POINTS** – There are 4 hitting points from the back of a horse. The Nearside is the Left side of the horse (the side you mount and dismount). The Offside is the Right side of the horse. The Nearside shots are more difficult, because you must twist your body more and take care not to hit the horse.

1. **Offside Forehand** – Right Forward
2. **Offside Back** – Right Backward
3. **Nearside Forehand** – Left Forward
4. **Nearside Back** – Left Back

**3 HITTING ANGLES** – In addition to the 4 Hitting Points, we have different angles for hitting. You can use these angle shots to hit to different points around the horse.

1. **Open** – away from the horse
2. **Tail** – across the back of the horse
3. **Neck** – across the front of the horse under its neck

#### **EXAMPLES**

An "offside Fore Open" will send the ball to the 1-3 o'clock position.

An "offside Neck" will send the ball to the 9-11 o'clock position.

An "offside Tail" will send the ball to the 7 o'clock position.

An "offside Back Open" will send the ball to the 4-5 o'clock position.

A "nearside Fore Open" will send the ball to the 10-11 o'clock position.

Usually a player will call to his teammate in front of him to hit an offside Back Shot either as "OPEN" or "TAIL." This way he can turn before the teammates shot and join the line of the ball before any of the opposition.

**HITTING POSITION** – It is very important to learn to hit the ball slowly. Almost everybody starts to hit too hard and then they injure their wrist and miss the ball. SWING SLOWLY. The faster you are riding, the slower you swing. Hitting the Offside Forehand, It is important to move forward and lift your seat out of the saddle to the HALF-SEAT position. TURN YOUR SHOULDERS so that they are parallel to the horse. EXTEND YOUR ARM all the way back so the elbow is straight. Put your HEAD OVER THE BALL. SQUEEZE the horse hard with your

KNEES. Swing your hand down and LOOK at a spot on the ball. Keep your eye on the spot on the ball. Hit through the ball, keep your arm straight, and then break your wrist in front of you and let the stick swing through. It is very important to have a professional guide you as you learn the swing, so that you do not learn a bad habit. You can also video yourself swinging and analyze your swing in the video. Learn to carry the stick in front of you directly vertical with the head above your hand so you do not stress your wrist, and you are ready to hit from all 4 points immediately (if you carry the stick down on the offside, it will take a long time to bring it up and over for a nearside hit). When you take the stick back, keep it near your head, so the stick remains swinging in the same plane like it is making a circle on a disk with the handle at the center and the head at the outside. If the head stays in this disk, then you will hit accurately. If you move the stick at angles to the disk, then it will twist and be uncontrollable.

### **HITTING REVIEW**

1. STICK – Stick in front of you with stick head directly above your hand.
2. HALF SEAT – Rise up and forward to the Half Seat Position.
3. SQUEEZE – Squeeze hard with your knees
4. SHOULDERS – Turn your shoulders parallel to the horse. Stick goes back.
5. ARM STRAIGHT – Put the arm straight back with stick head up in the air.
6. HEAD – Put your head over the ball.
7. SPOT – Look at a spot on the ball.
8. SLOW – Swing slowly and hit the spot on the ball.
9. FOLLOW THROUGH – Follow through with straight arm and break your wrist at end.

**STOPPING** – To stop the horse, you need to sit down and lean back a little bit. You put light pressure on the horse's mouth with the reins. This will allow the horse to collect itself and move its back legs under and prepare to stop. Then you squeeze with your legs, feet go forward, and pull the reins toward your chest. Your hands are firm yet gentle on the horse's mouth. It is also common for a rider to use two hands to help stop the horse. The horse is very strong, so you can use your stick hand to help pull the reins straight back and stop correctly. Polo professionals say that you get 10 stops per chukka in a polo horse, because the horse uses a lot of energy when stopping. Try to be conservative and not stop your horse unless you have to. Sometimes, a gentle turn can be better than a stop.

**COLLECTING BEFORE TURN** – It is very important to collect the horse (slowing down and putting back legs underneath) before turning. The horse is extended when it is running fast, and if you turn at speed, it will take a long distance to turn, and it can slip. You are much better to slow the horse down and collect it before you make the turn. This is a quicker and safer turn. When you turn, turn your head and look at the spot you are turning to, and then the horse

will turn and pivot beneath you. Don't look at your horse; the horse will look at you.

## **THE POLO HORSE**

**TYPES OF POLO HORSES** – There are several types of horses used for polo:

1. Argentina or Chilean Criolla – very sturdy, turns easily and doesn't get injured easily.
2. Thoroughbred – faster, more stamina; American, Chilean, Argentine
3. Quarter horses – very sturdy, handy and sensible

**BITS** – The Bit is the metal in the horse's mouth. There are two types of bits used for polo:

1. GAG bit – This is a circle bit on the side that pulls the horse's head up when stopping.
2. PELHAM bit – This is a lever and chain that pulls the horse's head down when stopping.

**MARTINGALE** – This is the strap that goes from the bridle to the girth. It keeps the horse from throwing its head up into the rider. It is very important to check this strap is not too tight nor too loose. It should just follow the contour under the horse's neck when at rest.

**GIRTH** – This is the strap under the horse that holds the saddle on the horse. This strap should be tight, so you can slide only two fingers inside. Always check that the girth is tight before mounting the horse.

**DRAW REINS** – These reins go from the rider's hand through the bit to the side of the saddle. They give increased leverage and control over a strong horse and help keep its head down.

**TENDONITIS** – This is acute pain in the horse's tendons in the lower leg which makes the horse lame. This can be caused by the player hitting the horse's leg with a stick, a bad polo field, improper riding, over riding the horse, improper shoeing, or putting bandages on too tight.

## **PLAYING POLO**

**LINE OF THE BALL** – When you hit the ball, there is a line from the point where you hit to ball to where it goes. This is the line of the ball and it is very

important, because you cannot cross this line. If you cross this line, you can cause a dangerous foul.

**RIGHT OF WAY** – The Right of Way is different from the Line of the Ball. When you are on the Line of the Ball, you have a Right of Way which extends in front of you. If the line of the ball changes, you still have the Right of Way on the old line, but you cannot make a play at the ball nor attempt to hit the ball. The player who has changed the line of the ball, must be careful to let players on the old line who have the Right of Way clear through.

**FOUL** – A foul occurs when a player crosses the line into the Right of Way of another player. You can also foul by riding into another players swing or by hooking above the shoulder or from the wrong side of the horse. You can also foul by standing on the ball and impeding play. Usually it is a good rule at the throw in, to take one swing (half swing only in the throw in) then move off the ball if you miss it.

**PENALTY** – In the case that a player has committed a foul, a penalty will be given to the other team. The Penalty depends on the LOCATION where the foul committed, the DIRECTION that the ball was moving and the SEVERITY of the foul. The Umpire will make the call and the decision. It is very poor sportsmanship for the player to question the Umpire's decision, and the Captain of the team is the only person who may ask the Umpire to clarify the foul.

#### **TYPES OF PENALTIES**

1. FROM THE SPOT – The player can tap or hit to goal. Opposition 30 yards away.
2. 30 Yard – The player can hit to goal. Opposition behind the goal.
3. 40 Yard – The player can hit to goal. Opposition behind the goal.
4. 60 Yard – The player can tap or hit to goal. Opposition 30 yards away and in the goal.
5. FROM CENTER – The player can hit toward goal or to players. Opposition 30 yards away (preferably on the stick side of the hitter).
6. CORNER – The player hits from 60 yards abeam where the defending team hit over the back line. Opposition 30 yards away and in goal.
7. HIT IN – The player hits in from the back line after the attacking team has hit over the back line without scoring.

**LINE – MAN – BALL** – A player must learn NOT TO CHASE THE BALL in polo. The first rule in every player's mind must be to JOIN THE LINE. After you join the line (on offside or nearside), then the player looks to take a man. After you join the line and engage a man, then you can attempt to hit the ball. It must be in the players mind at all times to think – "LINE-MAN-BALL." This is the most important rule of polo.

**TAKE A MAN** - The professionals of polo say that if you are alone on the polo field, then you don't know how to play polo. When you are on the polo field, take a man. Find an open man, and go to him. Put your horse next to him and push your rein over the neck of your horse to force your horse to close on this man. It is important to get your knee in front of his (if possible), because you then have the advantage over him. This way, you control your man and you are helping your team.

**TURN EARLY** – When you are following your teammate and he is about to hit a backhand, you should TURN BEFORE HE HITS THE BACKHAND. If you turn early, then the ball will chase you. You can look behind you, join the line, and then hit the ball. If you wait for your man to hit the backhand, then you will be too late. Everyone will pass you, and you will have missed the play. TURN EARLY. Polo is a game of anticipation. The player with the greatest anticipation is the better player.

**COMMUNICATION** – When you are behind your player and he is about to hit a backhand, you can call to him OPEN or TAIL (explained earlier). This way, your teammate knows which way you will turn and can hit to you. 90% of back hits should be TAIL, because then you can join the line with the ball on your offside (stick side), and this is better for you. When your teammate is about to hit back, yell to him "OPEN" or "TAIL" and then make sure you TURN EARLY so you can join the new line.

**LOOK BEHIND** – Never take a stride on the polo field without looking behind you. Your head should be on a swivel, and you should be looking behind you all the time. It is most important when you play as 1 or 2, because you can see where your teammate's pass is going and join the new line before the ball lands on the ground. If you are riding along without looking behind you, then you will have no idea what is going on. The ball may hit you, or you will be out of the play. Always look behind you. Don't look at the horse.

**SLOW DOWN IN FRONT OF GOAL** – When you are attacking goal, make sure you slow down in front of goal. The closer you get to the goal, the shorter your shots should be. Try to hit half shots to the goal. Every time is half the distance. This way you do not waste the chance by hitting the ball over the back line and giving it to the other team. Even if you miss the ball, one of your teammates behind you can try to hit closer to goal. The winning team is able to slow down and control the ball in front of goal to get the score.

**BACK OPEN OR TAIL** – When you back the ball, you should always try to hit OPEN or TAIL. This is very important, because if you hit straight back, then you are just giving the ball back to the attacking team. If you hit OPEN or TAIL, then you create a new line and your team can turn onto your new line and turn your

defense into offense. Your teammates behind you should help you by calling OPEN or BACK, so you know where to hit and then can TURN EARLY to join the new line.

## TACTICS

**HIT TO THE RIGHT** – It is very important to hit to the right when you are approaching a defending player. If you hit to the right, then he has to wait for you and ride you off before attempting a play at ball. You can check and wait for him to foul, or you can speed past him and hit the ball again. If you hit straight or to the left, then the opposing player can join on the nearside and hook you or back the ball.

**PLAYING DIAGONALS** – Polo is about angles. Do not run straight down the field. You should try to get open and move to the right side of the field, so your teammate can pass to you. It is usually better to move to the right, but if the left is open, the back can also pass to the left. The ball should move in a diamond pattern from one end towards the boards, then down towards the goal.

**FORM A TRAIN** – Everyone on your team should form a train with the equal distance between each player. The Number 3 can pass to the 2. The 2 can pass to the 1. If the 1 misses, then the 2 is already on the line. If the 2 misses, then the 3 is there. The 4 is at the back of the train. If you go over the ball, you have two options:

1. If you are up front, move ahead for the pass.
2. If middle or back, circle to the left and rejoin the train.

**NEVER PARALLEL** – You should never ride down the field next to your teammate. You are wasting your horse's energy; you are not helping your team, and you will cause a foul. If you find yourself parallel to your teammate, then check your horse and join the train behind your teammate.

**HALF HITS NEAR GOAL** – Remember, when you are attacking near goal, slow down and hit half hits to the goal. Don't waste your attack by hitting the ball away over the back line. Even if you miss it, there is a good chance one of your teammates on the train will hit it in for you.

**HOOK PROPERLY** – When you are riding with the ball on your nearside (left), a very good defensive play is to hook your opponent's stick when he tries to hit the ball. Bring your horse up next to your opponent, and when he goes to hit the ball, put your stick on the left side in the path of his swing to hook him. It is

important to hook BELOW THE SHOULDER. Also, never hook a player across his horse. This is a dangerous foul.

**KEEP POSSESSION** – When you have the ball, do not just hit it away. Very often, you will just give the ball to the other team. Try to keep possession of the ball by looking around you and finding a teammate to pass to. The most important tactic is to think before hitting. Professional polo players say “Arrive – Think – Hit” when they approach the ball.

**HIT IN FROM THE BACK LINE** – The team that hits in from the back line should form a diamond. The 4 will hit the ball. The rest of the team forms a diamond. The 1 is at the tip. The 2 is to the right, and the 3 is to the left. This gives the 4 the option to carry the ball, to hit to the right (to number 2), to hit to the left (to number 3). If the 4 hits to the right, then the 3 can collapse and follow behind the number 2 to form the train. It is very important for the 4 to hit away from the best player on the opposition team and all of his teammates should move to get open for the pass.

**THROW IN PLAY** – At the throw in, it is very important to line up on the Umpire as fast as you can after a goal. He will not wait for you, and you must get ready before the other team. The number 1 is closest to the Umpire throwing in. His duty is to try to hit the ball as soon as it leaves the Umpire’s hand. If he misses it, he should then attack towards goal and look back for the pass from his team. The number 2 has to take the man opposite him and not let him through. The number 3 fights for the ball and tries to join the line as the ball pops out of the throw in. The number 4 is responsible for defense and to close the back door. He has to take the first man through and try to turn the ball and pass up to the number 1. It is very important not to stand on the ball at the throw in. If the ball is hit by someone under your horse, get off the line, because you will make a foul. If you tap the ball, then you have the line. Turn your horse on the line and follow the line you have created.

**HIT AWAY FROM THE BEST PLAYER** – It is very good tactics to keep the ball away from the best player on the opposing team. Look up and know where he is. Do not hit the ball to him. If you are on attack with him defending, then hit half hits, so that you do not give the ball to him.

**HIT AWAY FROM GOAL** – On defense in front of your own goal, do not back the ball to the center, because you will give it to the opposition. You should hit the ball to the boards and the side of the field. You can do this with a neck shot or a tail or open, but get the ball away from the goal.

**THE BARRIER** – On each team there is a barrier between 1-2 and the 3-4 players. The 1-2 go for everything and try to hurry the opposition to make a bad

backhand hit. The 3-4 players wait back and wait for the opposition to give the ball to them. 1-2 are attackers and 3-4 are defenders. The attitude of the players attacking at 1-2 and defending at 3-4 is different. Remember to play defense as hard as you play offense, because a goal saved is the same as a goal scored.

**TEAM MEETING** – Before each game, you should have a team meeting with your Captain to discuss team tactics, positions, responsibilities, and who each man is covering.

**ENJOY** – Never forget that we play polo to have fun. Polo is a combination of three sports: The eye-ball coordination of squash, the physical contact of rugby, and excellent equestrian riding skills. It is the only sport in the world where you can make physical contact with your opponent all the time. Try to learn something new every time you play, and appreciate the challenges and excitements of this most elegant of sports.

## **EQUIPMENT**

The following is a list of equipment used for polo. Some is essential, and some is optional.

1. polo stick (52" is a standard length)
2. polo helmet (wider brim than normal helmet for more protection)
3. polo whip (longer than normal whip)
4. polo boots (zipper in the front)
5. polo kneepads (protection from stick and ball)
6. white jeans (correct attire for games)
7. polo gloves (better grip on stick and reins and prevents blisters)
8. stick bag (for sticks, boots, helmet, kneepads, etc)
9. goggles (to protect eyes from ball, stick and dirt)
10. lycra tights (inside jeans if you are getting chaffed from too much riding)
11. elastic back support (for players who like it)
12. wrist support (for players who like it)
13. spurs (for advanced players)
14. glycerine or polish for boots (to prevent drying out and cracking from sweat)
15. foot mallet (28" great for practicing different hits and learning rules)

## **PRACTICE**

To improve your polo, it is necessary to practice. These are some practice routines that will help you improve your riding, hitting and team play.

**Private Lessons** – Most all polo clubs offer polo schools or private lessons with a seasoned professional. Taking advantage of these opportunities will greatly move your game forward.

**STICK AND BALL** – This is when you ride around on your horse and hit the ball on the open field. It is a chance to practice your position on the horse and your swing from different positions and your timing when hitting the ball. Practice hitting as slowly as possible. Always avoid hitting the horse's legs. Take your time to learn the correct swings on the wooden horse before trying on a real horse.

**SLOW CANTER TO THE RIGHT** – When warming up your horse, it is best to canter to the right. Get the horse on the right leg (Right foreleg out in front), and make slow canter circles to the right. This will relax the horse and the rider and prepare both for the Stick and Ball session. When Stick and Ball, you should make 90% of your turns to the right. This is good for the horse to be on the right leg, because it is a more stable platform for hitting during polo.

**CIRCLE TAP** – Canter your horse in slow circles to the right. Tap the ball with half swings with the head OPEN, so the ball will move to the front right of your horse (about 45 degrees), then turn the horse to the right and tap again. Make sure you swing back early and have your hand above the ball as you tap it. This sweeping tap is very useful in front of goal, and you should be able to tap in a circle for ten taps without missing the ball. If you do miss the ball, DO NOT STOP YOUR HORSE. Continue around in the circle and tap again on the next round. You need to rise up forward out of your saddle, squeeze with your knees, turn your shoulders, head over the ball, and look at the ball. Concentrate on making this a smooth, even, and effortless exercise to relax the horse and rider.

**TWO RIDERS DRILL** – With two riders, you tap the ball forward. Leave it, then the second rider hits up to you. You need to concentrate on LOOKING BEHIND after you pass the ball, so you can see where the second rider hits it. Then you JOIN THE LINE on the offside or nearside and hit the offside or nearside shot. Then you pass again, and let the second rider hit up to you again. MAKE SURE YOU LOOK BACK as he hits it to you. Then say to yourself – "LINE – MAN – BALL" as you join the line again.

**NEARSIDE TO OFFSIDE** – On this drill, you approach the ball on the nearside and hit the nearside fore shot. As soon as you hit the ball, you cross to the offside. In a polo game, after you hit a nearside shot, you can quickly take the line with the ball on your offside. The reason for this drill is to get the ball on your offside from the nearside. Generally, you will make a longer more accurate shot from your offside (right side).

**TWO HAND STOP** – During your practice, practice your stop a few times. Use two hands to keep the reins straight and correct as the horse collects its back legs under you and prepares to stop. Sit back in the saddle. Lean back a little bit. Legs a little forward, and squeeze. Pull the reins towards your chest without jerking the horse's mouth. Gentle but firm.

**BACK SHOTS WEIGHT IN STIRRUP** – When you hit the offside and nearside backhand, practice standing and putting your weight in the stirrup on the side of the horse you are hitting from. This will give the power to the back shot on that side of the horse. On the offside (right), weight in the right stirrup, head over the ball, bring the stick down like a hammer and watch the ball. On the nearside, lean out over the ball with weight in the left stirrup.

**BEND THE HORSE** – Before hitting the fore or back shots, polo professionals will bend the horse very slightly in the opposite direction from which they are hitting. This will take the head and rump of the horse away from the plane of the swinging stick to minimize the chance of hitting the horse and create more room for the player's swing. When hitting the nearside fore shot, a slight turn of the horse's head to the right before the shot will keep the head clear and keep the horse from crossing the line (on your left) after the shot.

**RIDE WITHOUT STIRRUPS** – It is great practice to ride without stirrups. This will strengthen your legs and your seat. You can feel your muscles burn as you canter with only your thighs and your seat keeping you on the horse. It is also good practice in case you lose your stirrup during a chukka.

**VIDEO YOURSELF RIDING** – Sometimes, you don't believe what a polo instructor tells you. If you have a friend video you when you are riding or playing, you will see instantly if you have a bad riding or hitting position. Most new riders are hunched over, and they can see the difference in their position by seeing it themselves and work to improve it.

**FOOT Mallet** – Use of a foot mallet is the fastest way to learn to join the line and practice the 4 hitting points. Practice looking behind, backing (open or tail), then your teammate joining the line and hitting forward then back again to you. The foot mallet will help you improve your swing and your positioning with the other players on your team.

In addition, you can practice the correct technique for riding off and hooking as well as the correct position for the throw-in, hit-in, corner, and 60 yard penalties. Here is a summary of what you can practice with the foot mallet:

1. Anticipation and turning before the backhand
2. Spacing between players (so you don't hit into your teammate's horse)
3. Joining the line (Line-Man-Ball)
4. Taking the man without fouling

5. Hooking from nearside
6. Backing Open and Tail
7. Position during Throw-in, Hit-in, Corner, Center and 60 yard penalties