

STORY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

HORSE POWER

Polo is expanding in China as the ultrarich discover its skill, exclusivity and status



The art of polo is distinctly Persian. The word “polo”, meaning “ball”, is derived from Balti, spoken in the region of Baltistan in Pakistan. But, today, the game of polo is finding a shiny, new vitality among the billionaires in China. For them, the elite allure of the game, and the skill involved in playing it, make it perfectly suited to a luxury lifestyle.

In China’s Tang dynasty (617 - 908AD) emperors played with the finest horses they could breed. The sport was enjoyed in one of the country’s ancient capitals, Chang’an, and centuries ago was also played by women in male dress.

The modern game was created in India, with the first polo club opening in 1833, in Assam. The colonial British are credited for spreading the game worldwide, and the first polo club, the Calcutta Polo Club, was established in 1862 by two British soldiers, Lieutenant Joseph Sherer and Captain Robert Stewart.

British settlers expanded the game in Argentina, which for the next century produced some of the world’s top players, such as Nacho

Figueras. In 1876 James Gordon Bennett Jnr, the publisher of the now-defunct New York Herald newspaper, organised the first polo match in the United States, at Dickle’s Riding Academy on Fifth Avenue.

America’s finest club is now in South Carolina – a sterling example of how the sport has excelled and found a whole new audience in just over a century. “Aiken has been a presence on the polo scene since 1882,” says Barb Uskup, treasurer on Aiken Polo Club’s board of directors.

“Aiken Polo Club’s historic Whitney Field is the place to sip a cocktail while watching the ‘sport of kings’ each spring and autumn. Polo has grown in Aiken due to the tremendous amount of polo fields that each feature incredible sand footing, allowing



Players in action on day 3 of the Snow Polo World Cup 2015. Polo, one of the world's oldest games, is also one of its fastest – a moving polo ball can travel up to 117 kilometres per hour – and one of the most dangerous.

play not only during the two seasons of tournament polo but also allowing for practice chukkas 12 months a year. For players and socialites, the southern hospitality in Aiken is welcoming and embracing, making it a truly rewarding and fully entertaining experience.”

In China today, the sport has been developing for the past 10 years, and has been discovered by the new rich, who are keen to learn the fine art.

One of the best facilities, the Tianjin Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club, which is owned by Goldin Properties Holdings, describes itself as being the largest polo club in the country and prides itself on being a retreat for China’s “new nobility” – with the best equestrian facilities. There are three polo fields with 300 stables; its sumptuous hotel has 12 restaurants whose wine cellars have only the finest vintages; and plenty of real estate to acquire.

Opened in November 2010 with 890,000 square metres, the club was established to “promote a new lifestyle and create a polo community”, according to its general manager, Domenico Palumbo.

It is also an opportunity “to introduce a new and exclusive type of luxury to the region”, the company explains. Its facilities could draw the world’s rich and “add to Tianjin’s status as a landmark destination and contribute to its overall city status”.

The club also sponsors other major tournaments throughout the year, and draws teams from global polo centres, including Hong Kong. It also hosts the international Snow Polo World Cup, which is organised by the Federation of International Polo (FIP). The club is also building an indoor stadium with a retractable roof for 5,000 people, including special boxes for VIPs. The club’s marketing materials invite potential residents to “become a part of the new nobility” and “take your place among the elite”, while the company’s motto for the development is the Chinese phrase “qian jin mai wu, wan jin mai li” – which translates as “a quality house is worth a thousand pounds of gold, but quality neighbours are worth ten thousand”.

Reserved primarily for the wealthy, the sport requires some serious commitment, ➔

PHOTO: LIUXIN

RIGHT

The sport's appeal is its social aspect as well as the speed and exhilaration involved in watching horses running at each other.

BELOW

Young players try their hand at polo practice.



POLO IS A WAY FOR THE WEALTHY TO MAKE SURE THEIR FORTUNE GROWS GENERATION BY GENERATION

according to Palumbo: "Polo is an expensive sport because it gets to be very involved with a horse, the polo field, all kinds of equipment, a professional coach and so on. Our target market consists of private entrepreneurs who first of all, enjoy as well as can afford the lifestyle. There are a growing number of businessmen and their children who are starting to take the sport seriously in China by joining polo clubs like ours in Tianjin." In fact, at the Metropolitan Club, most of the members are also property owners – encouraging an active role in the sport. With more than 200 horses in the stables, some of the members even own their own animals.

The commitment to the game may involve hours and hours of time, and a lot of finesse, however. "Actually, it might [take] a lifetime to master the sport," Palumbo says. "It depends on a lot of factors – which level you start at, how ambitious you are. To master a skill such as a foreign language or polo ... is a lifetime project. You need to keep learning, practising as much as you can."

However, it really isn't just about the art of the sport – there are deeper implications at play here.

"Polo is not just a luxury thing," Palumbo says. "It is a game that historically connects with Chinese people. China is an especially important market for the 'sport of kings' as it aligns itself with a new world order. I think the Chinese are going to be the most influential superpower and polo represents the best passport they can have, wherever they go, they will always feel welcome. The horse is an international language. It doesn't matter if you speak Arabic, Russian, or Mandarin. If you understand the horse, you have a bridging point with anyone, anywhere in the world."

For this new class of Chinese, this is one more way for the truly wealthy to make sure their fortune grows year after year, generation by generation.

But the growth is slow and steady. As with golf, which entered the Chinese market in the 1980s, polo is the next elite sport. The Chinese Equestrian Association, which was formed in 1983, now has 280

PHOTOS: MARK HUDSON, THE AIKEN HORSE, HURLINGHAM POLO ASSOCIATION

registered athletes and 336 registered horses. Other clubs include the Beijing Sunny Time Polo Club, founded by Xia Yang in 2004, and the Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club, which was founded in Shanghai in the following year.

Meanwhile, there are 66 clubs in Britain and all host their own tournaments, mostly at the lower level. The key tournaments of the English season are the Queen's and Gold Cup played at 22 goals at Guards Polo Club and Cowdray Park Polo Club.

The Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) used to be a club in London and now acts as the sport's governing body – looking after rules and regulations as well as handicapping and the national team.

Britain has traditionally promoted the sport as a wealthy pastime, as China does, but HPA chief executive David Woodd says it is "much more accessible than it used to be". There are more clubs around the country and more ponies that can be

hired, he says. "To fund a team, you have to be wealthy – but to play as an amateur is open to many more," Woodd says, citing how the sport is also growing in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

The sport's appeal is its social aspect as well as the speed and exhilaration involved in watching horses running at each other.

"It is tougher than it looks, but it is clever as you can team up to play with and against the best players in the world, like pro-am golf," Woodd says.

"You do not have to be an outstanding player, but rather worth your handicap. It is a fast game which does not take all day, [and] is generally played in good weather at attractive locations.

"It is exciting to play, even at the lower levels, more so than to watch; you play with and meet interesting people, and you can play all over the world."

Nothing like speed, some travel and the beauty of horses to fall in love with. ➔



TRIP TO REMEMBER

What about planning a trip dedicated to polo? Abercrombie and Kent has just the thing – A Journey to Argentina.

Learn some of the secrets of one of the most traditional and unique sports the country has to offer. This week could include an introduction to the polo pony, and the possibility to watch practice drills and learn about what it takes to train a great polo pony.

Of course you'll also be escorted to watch a polo exhibition match and see this intricate and fast-paced game happen right in front of you. They have bilingual commentators that do a great job of explaining the fundamentals of the match.

Accommodation will be at the Four Seasons Buenos Aires.

A perfect journey to whet your appetite before finding your own club in China. www.abercrombiekent.com



ABOVE
The Royal Salute Coronation Cup 2016, England vs The Commonwealth

LEFT
Action on day 9 of the Snow Polo World Cup 2015. Polo is a new and exclusive luxury in China.