

A photograph capturing a dynamic moment in a polo match. Two players are prominently featured in the foreground, riding chestnut horses. The player in the center is wearing a white jersey with a red maple leaf emblem and a white helmet, leaning forward with his mallet raised. Behind him, another player in a green jersey and red helmet is also visible. The background shows a grassy field with spectators and parked cars under a clear sky.

Action at the 2004 BMW International between South Africa and Canada (Photo: Shane Doyle)

# Polo

## – the rules

by Izak Hofmeyr

The game of polo consists of two teams of four riders each, trying to score goals on opposite sides of a five ha field, 300 metres long. There are six periods of play comprising seven minutes each. Each period is called a chukka. Every time you score, you change sides on the field, even if it is mid-chukka. If, however, you have played three chukkas and the score is 0-0, you change sides at the start of the fourth chukka anyway.

The reason for this arrangement, says Russell Watson, highest handicapped South African polo player and national captain for many years, probably has to do with the quality of the fields in the old days. It was probably easier to score goals from one end of the field than the other.

“If you look at the results of the big games of the past, the scores were 4-3 or 5-4. Now, scores can be as high as 15-10. Apart from fields that could be more level and easier to play on today, I think these days the balls, sticks as well as the horses are better than they used to be in the past. Technology just got better.”

Polo, traditionally, is a winter sport, lasting from April to September, but with the increase in popularity of the game in the Plettenberg Bay area, the season now includes a December/January period and then an Easter tournament in addition to the traditional winter season.

### Tactics

Bumping is a very important part of the game. It is illegal to bump at an angle, and also to bump anywhere except shoulder-to-shoulder. It is a fine art to bump just enough to move the opponent off the ball so that your team can take control of the ball, says Russell.

The number one player is the attacker and the number four is the defender. The number two is the scavenger on the field. He does most of the hooking, running, bumping and hitting. The number three is the playmaker. He is the player with the vision to set up the plays. With a good number two in front of him and a rock of a defender behind him, he is in a perfect position to, while getting good ball from the number two, set up plays that will put the number one in a position to score.

“There is a little bit of chess involved in this game. It is a big field – five hectares with only eight players on it. You can go to strategic places on the field that will make it difficult for the opposition to take control of the ball. If you are running down the side of the field, for example, you want the opposition on your left, so that your horse is between him and the ball. You are only allowed to play with your right hand, so the ball is on the right side of the horse. The left side is the defensive side. You

want to pass the ball in such a way that your team mate receives it on his right and so that he can place his horse between the ball and the opposition.”

### Horses for courses

Traditionally, he explains, the ideal polo pony was about 15,1 hh. They were able to turn on a dime and stop really quickly. This suited the type of fields that they played on in the northern parts of the country. You can slow down and speed up and manoeuvre much quicker on a smaller horse and dictate a game that involves more loose play, because of the rougher surface of the fields.

In Plettenberg Bay, however, the fields are really smooth, with the result that there is much less loose play. Here you don't need the manoeuvrability of the smaller horse, but rather the speed and momentum of a bigger horse. The result is that you need different types of horses for the different circumstances.

Generally polo players prefer mares. Geldings, if they are gelded too young, become timid. Sometimes they are gelded too late, then they become cheeky. Generally, he says, mares are more inclined to give as good as they get when it comes to the rough and tumble side of the game, which just makes their temperaments more suitable.

### Do horses like playing?

No doubt, says Russell, some learn to really enjoy it, while others simply hate it. Some stand and quiver in anticipation before a game and can't wait to get on the field. SAH

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