

Polo

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Hopes rise for return of sun and spectators

Improved grounds and more participants have boosted spirits after last year's bad weather and confusion over sponsors, writes *Bob Sherwood*

The start of this year's English polo season has been dominated by a particularly British concern. It has not been the comings and goings of top patrons or leading international players, nor the creation of new events or the input of sponsors that is the prime talking point. It has been the weather.

After last year's rain-deluged season – which created appalling conditions at times and hit the smaller clubs hard – and a late start to the summer, all hopes are for better weather for a game in which the sporting prowess and the accompanying social scene

sparkle more brightly in the sunshine. "It was a terrible summer last year," says David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association, the sport's governing body in the UK. "And I hope to God this one is going to be better."

At the end of last season, with the announcements that some high-profile patrons – not least James Packer, son of Kerry Packer, the late Australian investor and polo enthusiast – would not be returning for the 2013 season in England, there were some deflated spirits in the polo world.

However, the doubters now seem to have been proved wrong. About



Fair weather: England's 2013 season kicked off in May with the Veuve Clicquot Polo on the Beach event in Newquay Getty

17 teams, one more than last year, have entered for the prestigious Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup; three teams from 18-goal polo – their players' total handicap – have moved up to 22-goal and a new female patron, Sheikhha Maitha bint Mohammed bin Rashid

'Small clubs were badly affected last year when they were forced to cancel tournaments'

al-Maktoum, is adding interest and investment in the English game.

Sixteen teams will compete in the Cartier Queen's Cup at Guards polo club, in Windsor Great Park, which culminates on June 16. The Gold Cup will start on June 25 for four weeks at Cowdray Park. No fewer than seven 10-goal players, the highest ranking a player can achieve, will be in action.

Although the homegrown player rule – designed to bring more UK players into the top levels of the sport in which Argentine pros are dominant – will not take effect in the high-goal game until next year, a few more English players are in evidence this year.

As well as England captain Luke Tomlinson (playing for Emlor) and his brother Mark (EFG Bank Avarali), James Beim returns for a third season with Salkeld. All are seven-goalers. Four-goaler Henry Fisher is back after some years with Les Lions. Rising players Ollie Cudmore, Matt Perry and Max Routledge will be in action, too.

Whatever the weather, Liz Higgins of Cowdray Park says the club will be able to cope after a programme of extensive investment in the grounds. "We played every match

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Don't command respect, earn it.

Facundo Pieres

Facundo Pieres, 10-goal player, Captain of La Ellerstina

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Polo

Major polo fixtures 2013

Audi International Polo Series Chester Racecourse, England v Australasia September 7	Audi International Polo Series, The Gloucestershire Festival of Polo England v South Africa, Beaufort Polo Club June 15	Cartier Queen's Cup Guards Polo Club June 16	Suffolk Test Match Suffolk Show Ground, Young England v Young South America June 29	Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup, British Open Cowdray Park Polo Club July 21
Super Nations Cup Tianjin Polo Club, China October 1	Sotogrande Silver and Gold Cups Sotogrande, Spain July 28 - August 31	Warwickshire Cup Cirencester Park Polo Club August 11	Deauville Gold Cup Deauville, France July 31 - August 12	Audi International Polo Series for the Westchester Cup England v USA, Guards Polo Club July 28
	Tortugas Open Tortugas Country Club, Argentina October 13	Hurlingham Open Hurlingham Polo Club, Argentina November 3	Argentine Open Championship AAP, Argentina December 7	Camara de Diputados Cup AAP, Argentina December 8

Hopes rise for sun and spectators

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last year," she says, "even if some were in horrible conditions".

The club's budget for laying sand on the pitches alone is £85,000, and competition grounds have been stripped and relaid. "The budgets are colossal," says Higgins. Cowdray shifted the Gold Cup semi-finals to its club grounds last year to save the competition pitch for the final. "It was sheeting down in the afternoon but not one person left."

Other big clubs have invested in their playing surfaces, including Guards and the Royal County of Berkshire polo club.

But such expense is not an option for smaller clubs. Woodd says those clubs, which rely heavily on entry fees for much of their funding, were badly affected last year when they were forced to cancel tournaments.

The HPA itself faces problems this year. After Cartier switched its sponsorship, to be replaced by Audi, from the HPA's showpiece International Day to the Queen's Cup, attendance was noticeably lower.

Where this event has attracted crowds of well over 20,000, last year's audience was down to 7,000. Woodd says the attendance was declining anyway. Much greater competition

from other events in last year's Olympic summer and some confusion over the sponsorship change had an effect.

"It was a bit messy," Woodd acknowledges. "We are working jolly hard to get it back up to a good number."

The figures should be considered in a wider context, he insists. With events such as Polo in the Park, and the Gaucho International played at the O₂ arena creating new audiences, "there is a lot more polo going on" he says. "If you look at who is watching polo during the year, the numbers are going up."

The HPA has appointed Andrew Hine, former England team manager and founding partner of Polofix, an event management, sponsorship and player representation consultancy, to help generate sponsors and the commercialisation of HPA assets. Woodd says the hiring will put the HPA's commercial activity on a more professional footing.

On a broader scale, the growth of polo internationally means England faces growing competition as a major polo centre.

While England, Argentina and the US are still the most celebrated nations, high-goal polo is played in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, the Caribbean and some

continental European countries.

Two other are nations, China and Dubai, are making notable strides. In October, China's Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club in Tianjin, northern China, held the inaugural Super Nations Cup, with high-goal teams from Hong Kong, the US, England, Argentina and South Africa.

In January and February, it hosted the second fully-sanctioned Snow Polo

'The growth of polo internationally means England faces competition as a major centre'

World Cup. China's other major club, Tang, near Beijing, has held international tournaments. Together, the clubs have imported more than 200 top polo ponies.

While polo appeals to China's wealthy, there are few homegrown players. That is increasingly changing in Dubai, which has been playing the modern game for longer and where local patrons and teams are emerging.

Some forecast that Dubai could rival Palm Beach, the centre of US polo. Dubai

Polo Gold Cup series is scheduled to be increased to 18-goal level in 2015, up from 16 goals, with ambitions to lift it to the high-goal level of more than 20.

Some in the sport detect quite an improvement in prospects for English polo below the high-goal level, which has taken a dent in the present harsh economic climate.

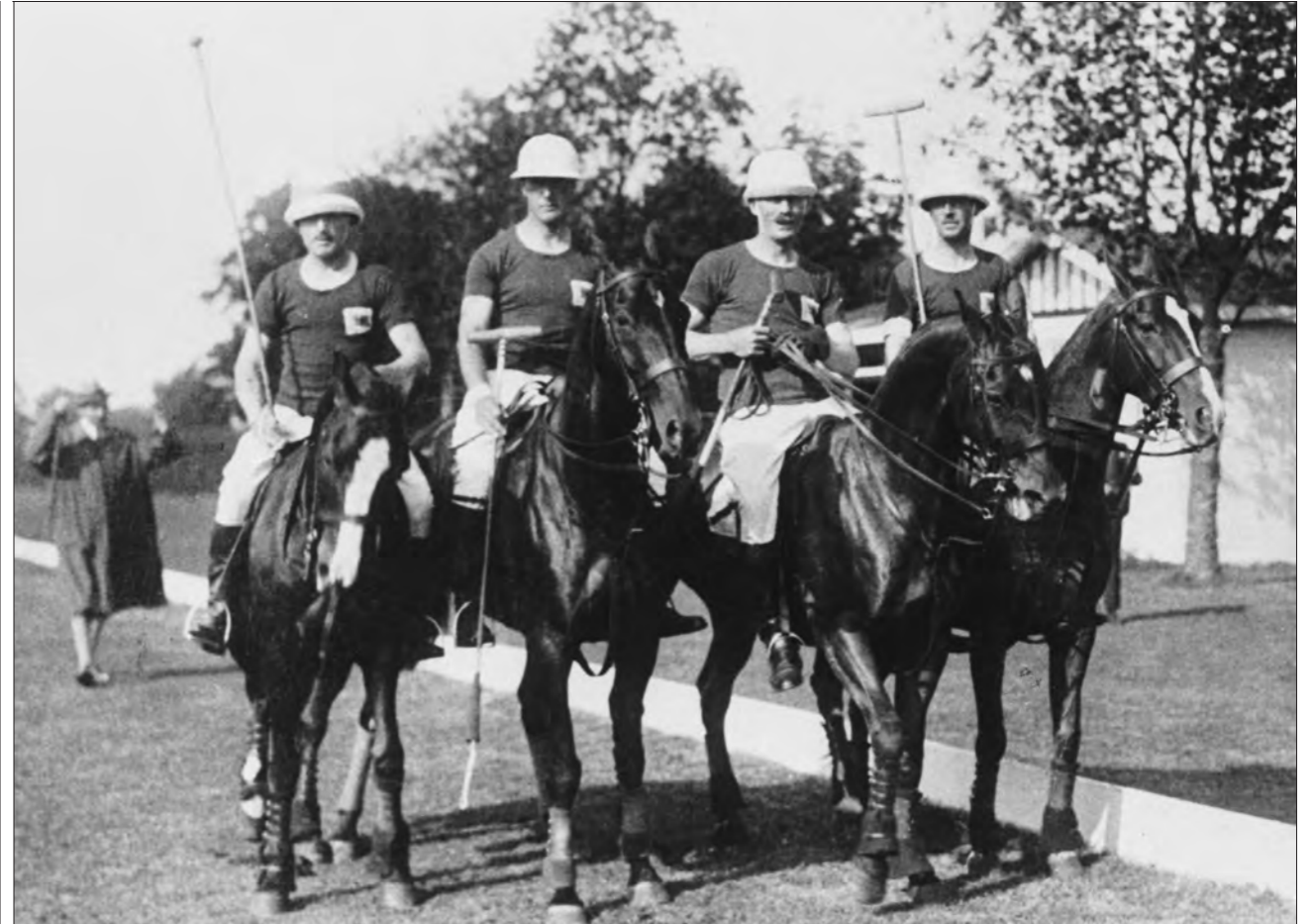
"My sense is there is definitely a buzz in the air," says Sebastian Dawnay, a professional player and coach. "People were making plans for the summer during last winter, and that's not really been happening in the past few years."

He says the financial downturn hit hard the enthusiasts of medium and low-goal polo - "the bankers and the traders" - who funded lower-level tournament teams.

"It was pretty scary the last few years. People who came for lessons fell in love with the game, then wanted to move up and play tournaments - that stopped."

"But now the lessons in the winter are unreal. Clubs are fully booked, with people happy to pay between £100 and £150 for an hour's lesson."

Now, I am again seeing people come for lessons who are wanting to go on and play tournaments. The corner has definitely been turned."



Mallets at the ready: the bronze-winning British polo team at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games

Getty/IOC Olympic Museum /Allsport

Campaigners push for Olympic inclusion

Many people are working quietly to have polo accepted once again as part of the world's greatest sporting event, writes *Catherine Austen*

The first modern Olympic equestrian medals were not awarded to dressage riders, eventers or even showjumpers. They were presented to polo players, on June 2 1900, when a joint British/US team took gold.

Those Olympic Games, in Paris, were the first to include horse sports, and polo was part of another four Olympics. When the games resumed after the second world war in London in 1948, polo was absent, and has been ever since.

The Federation of International Polo (FIP) has been working for some years to persuade the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to reintroduce the sport. Indeed, it was one of the reasons FIP was set up in the 1980s. To have a chance of making it on to the Olympic programme, a sport must be administered by an international federation, not just national governing bodies.

In 1996, the IOC voted to make polo a "recognised sport" again, which made it eligible for inclusion. But 17 years later, what chance does polo have of gaining a slot?

"Never say never - but I think it's pretty remote," says David Woodd, chief executive of the Hurlingham Polo Association. "My understanding is that the IOC is trying to reduce equine involvement, not increase it."

After the success of the riding events in last year's games in London, Olympic equestrianism looks safe for the present. However, the charges against horse sports, namely that they are elitist and expensive to stage, are hardly going to be lifted in polo's case.

Aurora Eastwood, an amateur polo player and pony breeder, says: "The logistics in mounting teams, flying and stabling hundreds of horses - around 30 per team - would be overwhelming."

Although there is a national element to the sport, the top players - who fit the Olympic ideal of "the best of the best" - are tied down to lucrative contracts by patrons, who would not easily release them for patriotic duty, even if the players wished to be.

The next chance for Olympic inclusion is in 2020. The IOC will announce

Facts Hurlingham

There is no official explanation why polo lost its place in the Olympics after 1936, particularly as the 1948 games were in London, but HPA head David Woodd says: "Hurlingham [the sport's then London base] was shut in the war, then the grounds were subject to a compulsory purchase order. It wasn't until 1952 that polo started up again in Britain."

the venue in September from a short-list of Istanbul, Tokyo and Madrid - none of which are in countries with a major polo heritage. In the 2016 games in Brazil, where the sport has a strong tradition, rugby and golf join the roster but polo was not considered.

"FIP hasn't really got its ducks in a row," says Woodd. "And it can't agree whether Olympic polo should be on an open basis or handicap - and until that agreement is reached, nothing can happen."

This is one of the central stumbling blocks to Olympic polo - whether it should be open to the best players from each country or whether a handicap level should be set - which is the way most polo tournaments work.

A handicap system does not seem to fit the Olympic ideal, but Argentina, which dominates the professional side of the sport, is the only country able to field a team of four 10-goal (the maximum handicap) players. Britain could field a 26-goal team.

Luke Tomlinson is the present captain of the UK's national side (which plays as England but is in effect a British team). He is positive about polo's chances: "Polo is a truly global sport again now, having not been for about half a century. It is a terrific spectator sport and would only enhance the equestrian side of the Olympics."

He believes that, at first, Olympic polo would have to be subject to a handicapping system. "To start with you'd have to fix it at about 22-goal," he says, "which would allow about 20 countries to take part."

Tomlinson thinks that the enormous logistics and cost problems could be overcome: "Simplify it - reduce each match to four chukkas [requiring fewer ponies] and perhaps have regional playoffs so that only a few teams end up at the Olympics. A hundred horses is still a lot but it is doable - it would require similar organisation to the World Cup."

The FIP World Cup has a 14-goal handicap and as many as 38 countries have taken part in it, which shows that, at that (medium-goal) level, the Olympic insistence that any participating sport is played "widely round the world" is satisfied. But 14-goal polo is not nearly as exciting to watch as 22-goal - or 40-goal.

There is a view within polo that the sport's only hope of regaining its long-lost Olympic slot is to come under the control of the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale), which governs the three Olympic disciplines of showjumping, eventing and dressage.

The FEI's president, HRH Princess Haya bint Al Hussein, is a likely future member of the IOC and persuading her of the sport's merits is crucial. Through FIP's endeavours, polo is going to be an exhibition sport at the 2014 World Equestrian Games in Deauville, France - a town with a strong polo history, where matches will attract plenty of spectators.

Princess Haya's interest in polo has increased since Sheikhha Maitha - the daughter of her husband, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum - started playing seriously. Sheikhha Maitha's Godolphin team is set to compete on the British high-goal scene for the first time this summer.

Polo is still a tiny sport in terms of participation but increasingly popular in the UK and other countries. It would benefit from the exposure the Olympics would bring. Its top players are superb athletes who could command a global audience.

"It's strange that polo doesn't have some kind of major international championship - it's quite limiting," says Tomlinson.

The sport may have taken initial steps towards its goal but, if it wants to reach Mount Olympus, it is going to have to put its running shoes on.

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Polo

Best is yet to come for world number two

Interview

Facundo Pieres

Argentine professional polo player

Jude Webber meets the modest player with quiet confidence in his abilities

Despite his status as polo's reigning young superstar – the equivalent of football's Lionel Messi on horseback – Facundo Pieres is modest to an excruciating degree.

No, he maintains, he does not even come close to the world's number one polo player, his fellow Argentine Adolfo Cambiaso (though after a blistering season Pieres is rated world number two). No, there is no rivalry with his brothers and teammates. No, despite becoming the world's youngest 10-goal handicap player at the age of 19, he has never felt destined for greatness. And if ever he feels down, why, he just remembers how lucky he is.

It all sounds too good to be true, yet Pieres, 27, seems genuinely unpretentious. He lives an international jet-setting lifestyle in a world of privilege but he does so wearing jeans and a baseball cap, surrounded by his family and doing what he loves best.

His feet appear to be firmly on the ground, though that ground is the luxury headquarters of the family's Ellerstina team in General Rodríguez, the area on the western outskirts of Buenos Aires that is the heart of Argentine polo country.

Softly spoken, rather serious and seemingly shy, Pieres is the talented star of an outstanding polo dynasty. His father, Gonzalo, a world-class player and now breeder, founded Ellerstina with Kerry Packer, the late Australian investor. His Ellerstina teammates are his older brother Gonzalito, also a 10-goaler; his younger brother Nicolás who has a nine-goal handicap; and his nine-goal brother-in-law Mariano Aguerré.

Since childhood, he has immersed himself in the sport, following his father on the US and European polo circuit before realising, inevitably (and despite an early passion for golf) that he was destined to become a professional polo player.

"When I was 12 or 13, I realised I was good but I never knew how far I'd get," he says. His game wobbled at around the age of 16 or 17. "I felt I wasn't playing well. I never wanted to give up, but I realised I was missing something."

That elusive something turned out to be experience. His game picked up, and by 19 he had entered the polo 10-goal elite – the highest ranking possible for a polo player – "but I knew I had a lot to improve".

Indeed, the good news for audiences thrilled by his victories in the top fixture in the world polo calendar, the Argentine Open, last December, and the US Open in April, is that he believes he is not yet at the top of his game.

"I think polo players are at their best in their 30s," he says. "You've got the talent and the experience. You play with your head – you learn to lose and how to win."

Which is why, despite Pieres' underdog teams defeating those of Cambiaso in both the Argentine and the US Opens, he still does not consider himself in the same league. He deflects comparisons with the same practised ease with which he strikes a polo ball.

"I don't attach much importance [to comparisons with Cambiaso]. He was and is so good ... He did things that are hard to equal," says Pieres.

But he is still proud of his Open victories. "If I want to compare myself with [Cambiaso] as an individual player because of the results of recent tournaments, that's one thing. But to want to compare myself to all his history, I couldn't. My aim isn't to surpass him or my dad, but to be the best I can be."

His on-pitch adrenalin and a desperate desire to win, whether he is playing a top tournament or tennis with a friend, is hard to glimpse as he talks. "I'm very

competitive. Thank God, I'm also calm," he says.

When it comes to personal ambitions, having a family is the only one he can think of.

"Everything else is pretty much related to what I do." He is so focused on his game, he says he has not yet considered what he will do beyond that – though he is as animated as the rest of his teammates when conversation over a simple lunch of grilled beef and bread turns to top-of-the-range SUVs and the gizmos that the vehicles boast.

While he cannot imagine his home being anywhere other than Argentina – where, because of the increasing demands of the international polo tour, he spends only about four months a year – "everything depends, like how the country is doing".

He wants to see changes to make polo more accessible and entertaining – such as allowing the kind of no-handicap-limit games played in Argentina to be possible elsewhere. "That would make it much more watchable. Television would be interested. We'd also need to change the rules, to make it easier to understand ... polo has a lot to do to become more entertaining and easier to appreciate," he says.

And the impetus should come from Argentina, which is by far the world's leader in the sport.

He wants to expand polo's social conscience. On his riding hat, he plugs the foundation for disadvantaged children set up by Lionel Messi and would like to organise an exhibition match to raise money for it. In short, "I've got nothing to complain about," he says. "I have to enjoy and be grateful. Lots of people would like to be in my shoes."



Facundo factfile

Name Facundo Pieres, known within the polo world as 'Facu'

Age Turned 27 in May

Nationality Argentine

Marital status Unmarried but with a girlfriend

Sporting record It might be quicker to list what he has not won: Argentine highlights include three Argentine Opens, four Hurlingham Opens, seven Tortugas Opens (the Argentine, Hurlingham and Tortugas tournaments together make up the game's celebrated 'triple crown' – which he won with Ellerstina in 2010). Then three US Opens, the most important tournament outside Argentina; one Gold Cup in the UK, one Queen's Cup in the UK, and a Gold Cup in Sotogrande, Spain. Last year's Argentine Open victory is among the sweetest for him as he played with both his brothers and they stormed to victory despite being widely expected to lose. "It was very special," he says.

'I think polo players are at their best in their 30s. You play with your head – you learn to lose and how to win'

Excitement mounts over Westchester

Events

The transatlantic series returns to the UK next month after 16 years, writes *Herbert Spencer*

One of the most anticipated polo events in the UK this year will be a rare revival of the historic Westchester Cup series between England and the US. It takes place next month at the Hurlingham Polo Association's flagship Audi International Day to be held at Guards Polo Club in Windsor Great Park.

The Westchester is the sport's oldest and most famous international competition. Established by the US in 1886, it has been contested just 16 times, with venues alternating between England and the US.

The contest became England versus the US in 2009, when England won in Florida. Before that, the team played as Great Britain.

This will be the first time the Westchester Cup has been contested in England since 1997, when Great Britain triumphed. Over the past 127 years, the US has won the trophy 10 times against Great Britain/England's six wins.

"Obviously England has some catching up to do," says Brig John A Wright, chairman of the HPA that, as holders of the cup, has issued the most recent challenge to the US Polo Association.

"We are doing everything possible to welcome the Yanks over here this year, but England is determined to hold on to the Westchester again."

In issuing the new challenge for the Westchester Cup, the HPA has specified that the two teams be handicapped between 26 and 29 goals, making the Westchester the highest rated match in the UK this year. As the FT went to press,

neither country had made its team selection.

"England could field a 28-goal or 29-goal team if we include Eduardo Novillo-Astrada, who holds a UK passport, as we did in 2009, or John-Paul Clarkin who qualifies as a Commonwealth player," says John Tinsley, chairman of the HPA's International Committee that selects the team. "We hope the handicaps of the two teams will be as close as possible to ensure the most competitive match."

The Americans, who have higher handicapped professionals than England, have left it to two-goal amateur player Marc Ganzi, who is financing the US team and could play on it, to select their players, subject to approval of the US Polo Association. This could mean that the visitors might only manage a 27-goal handicap.

"We are sending a veteran team that has competed consistently in the US Open at the 26-goal level," says Charles "Chuck" Weaver, chairman of the USPA. "I am confident they will represent our country well. The Westchester Cup represents what is right in our sport and gives our high-goal players a chance to represent our country on the highest stage of competition."

Among sporting links between the UK and the US,



Rivalry: the US has 10 trophy wins and England six Greg Ratner

only sailing's America's Cup (1851) predates the Westchester. The international polo test series, conceived by the Americans, began at Westchester Polo Club in Newport, Rhode Island. The best-of-three match event was easily won by Great Britain who beat the US 10-4 and 14-2.

Great Britain also won in 1900 and in 1902 when the two countries met at London's Hurlingham Club.

The US team achieved their first victory at Hurlingham in 1909 and went on to win in 1911 and 1913 at Meadowbrook on Long Island.

Great Britain regained the Westchester Cup at Meadowbrook in the last encounter before the first world war in 1914.

After that war, England lost its predominance in the sport to the Americans. The US won the Westchester at Hurlingham in 1921 and kept it at Meadowbrook in 1924, 1927, 1930 and 1939, having also won in 1936 at Hurlingham. The matches at Meadowbrook between the two world wars drew crowds exceeding 40,000.

Since the second world war, the Westchester series has been revived only three times.

The US won in 1992 in Windsor Great Park before Great Britain regained the trophy in England in 1997.

This year's Westchester match will be the main event on the HPA's Audi International Day, following a high-goal morning game played between Young England and Young Commonwealth.

The HPA's International Day is now in its 42nd year and in the past has been the world's biggest one-day polo event with up to 20,000 or more spectators.

"We are hoping for a big turnout from the American community in London to cheer on their team," says the HPA's Wright.

"There will be the stars and stripes flying around the Queen's ground at Guards and we're even thinking of having a hot dog stand to make the USA supporters feel at home."

Max Routledge

Polo player

"I'm looking forward to a dry summer and pairing up with Miguel Novillo again. I played with him in 2010 with Lechuza Caracas and we reached the Gold Cup final. This year is the first that I will be playing all my own horses, which I either bred myself or bought from the race track – that is really rewarding."



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Polo

England captain sets sights on Gold Cup win

Interview Luke Tomlinson tells *Helen Barrett* about Argentina, ambitions and accessibility

Luke Tomlinson is captain of the England polo team and the UK's number one player. He has played in four Argentine Opens and has won major UK trophies including the Queen's Cup and the Gold Cup.

Financial Times: How do you prepare for the polo season in England?

Luke Tomlinson: I spend the off-season – up until the end of April – in Argentina trying to play as high a level of polo as possible and bringing on younger horses. May is about me getting into shape for England and getting the horses schooled up.

FT: How does the Argentine game differ from the English game?

LT: In England the highest level we play is 22-goal polo, but it's probably the equivalent of 25-goal polo. In Argentina the highest is 40.

FT: Your handicap is higher in Argentina – why is that?

LT: I was an eight in Argentina and here in England I am still a seven, but I went down to a seven in Argentina after last season. The handicap depends on how you play, and a lot depends on horses. Until two years ago I put a lot of emphasis on being well mounted in Argentina and now I want to be better organised here.

FT: Why is the game of a higher standard in Argentina?

LT: It's the polo capital of the world. The climate is well suited and there are a lot of horses available. Buenos Aires province is flat, so they put polo grounds everywhere. There is space and you play all year round.

FT: What do Argentine players do differently?

LT: They have more access to horses than anyone else in the world, and receive advice from ex-10 goalers because invariably they've a cousin or an uncle who was very good.

Most important is being able to play full-time from as soon as they are old enough to want to be good. I started full time at 22 – very late compared with Argentine players.

FT: Did you always want to play professional polo?

LT: I did but I finished education and got a degree, then decided to have a go. In my family, polo was part of everyday life and I started playing in the polo club aged 10 or 11, but it was always two or three months a year.

FT: How hard do you train?

LT: I play matches two or three times a week. Then we have friendly matches another two times a week. I do lots of riding, and stick-and-balling – the equivalent of knocking a tennis ball against a wall – usually daily. Then I do a gym workout four times a week.

FT: How accessible is polo?

LT: At the height of the boom [in the 1990s] it was extremely accessible. It spread throughout England – there were very few clubs before that. Now there are about 100, where you can learn to play. But, in a recession it might not be high on people's list of how to spend their money.

FT: Is the polo economy showing signs of recovery?

LT: The fact that it is more accessible, easier to get into and more welcoming helps.

FT: Are preconceptions about polo fair and justified?

LT: Polo is very cosmopolitan and

Double act: Luke Tomlinson says his handicap depends on his horses as well as his performance Charlie Bibby



... a lot broader than it used to be. It is something you have to work at within the industry.

FT: Some say the game is too reliant on penalties. What is your view?

LT: The best games are those with fewer penalties.

FT: Which players do you admire?

LT: Facundo Pieres and Adolfo Cambiaso [Argentine players].

FT: You are 36, an age when professional polo players are ending their careers. What are your plans?

LT: I have not even begun to think about it. The good thing about polo as a career is that there are other aspects to the sport – coaching, managing – as well as dropping down a level and continuing to play.

FT: What ambitions have you got left?

LT: I would like to win the Gold Cup again in England and to win the Westchester again. My future ambition is to help people get into the game, to teach and to put back.

FT: Do you get recognised in the street?

LT: The odd time, yes. It is a barometer for polo and the exposure it gets – it is something that has happened to me more and more over the last three or four years.

FT: What are your predictions for today's match [England v South Africa] at the Audi International at Beaufort?

LT: South Africa have a lot of young talent and are a very strong side but I hope that we will win.

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Pressure to win leads to manufactured fouls

Penalty system

The speed and flow of the game is being affected, writes

Herbert Spencer

For spectators, few things in sport can compare with a well-executed field goal in polo, scored either through teamwork or the brilliance of an individual player.

Teamwork can put one player in perfect position to hit the ball between the posts. Even more exciting for the onlooker is a long run down the ground by a player, evading the defence and hitting to goal from as far out as 80 yards.

Now compare such field goals with goals scored from penalty conversions. When a foul is made, spectators have to wait while umpires marshal players, the ball is teed up at the 60, 40 or 30-yard marker and a player rides up to attempt the conversion.

Given the speed at which polo is played and the complexity of its rules, a certain number of inadvertent and unintentional fouls resulting in penalty shots are inevitable: this is a natural part of the game. However, even at the high-goal level, many matches occur in which goals scored on penalty conversions amount to as much as a third and sometimes more than half of the goals scored.

In this year's US Open Championship in Florida, 15 of the 29 goals scored were from penalty conversions. Facundo Pieres, the 10-goal Argentine player, ranked number two in the world and named most valuable player of the final, scored 12 goals – but only three were from the field.

The number of penalties increases when professional players on teams adopt the

tactic of "going for the foul" to get a free hit at the ball. It is not uncommon for players to "manufacture" fouls by tricking opponents into breaking the rules to get penalties.

Three years ago, the late Hugh Dawnay, an instructor and expert on the game, blogged scathingly on the website polocontacts.com about manufactured fouls in the 2009 Argentine Open.

All eight players in this encounter in Palermo, Buenos Aires, between La Dolina and Ellerstina were 10-goalers. Dawnay detailed examples of those players creating fouls to get penalty shots at goal. "Anyone who expected model behaviour from these heroes will be disappointed," he lamented.

'Rules should be clarified to prevent this unsporting, unfair and dangerous conduct'

Many agree with Dawnay, and some believe there has been a significant increase in players going for the foul over the past 15 years.

But Robert Graham, chief umpire of the Hurlingham Polo Association, believes the trick has been around for a while. "I can remember as a beginner in polo being told I had been 'old soldiered' when I was penalised," he says, "meaning a more experienced player had tricked me into fouling. This has always been a part of the game."

He admits, however, that, as polo has become more high-pressured, the number of goals scored on penalties in games in the UK has increased.

With wealthy playing patrons spending millions

of pounds to field high-goal teams that can win trophies, professional players argue that they are perfectly entitled to play close to the rules. "We are under tremendous pressure to win," says English professional player Malcolm Borwick. "So trying to get a penalty shot at goal, with an 85 per cent chance of success when we do, is just part of the game."

Dawnay's 2010 blog read: "Many will reply to [my] criticisms 'But everybody does it!' Surely in the interest of safety and fairness, manufacturing fouls should be stopped by the rules of polo being clarified to prevent this unsporting, unfair and dangerous conduct."

"Manufacturing a foul is unsporting, but sadly unless it breaks the rules it is difficult to persuade players not to do so," says David Woodd chief executive of the HPA. "You can only rely upon rules, not sportsmanship, because of financial pressures. But any rule that makes the game more attractive to watch and to play, and fairer, should be supported."

Graham agrees that the tactic "is not at all sportsmanlike. We have to blow the whistle on rules infractions, but rules cannot enforce good sportsmanship in any sport."

"Our professional umpires should be savvy enough to spot the most blatant of manufactured fouls and when they do they will double penalise the player creating the foul and not his innocent victim."

It seems likely that unless players change their approach, the manufactured foul will continue contributing to an increasing number of goals scored on penalties, depriving spectators of the pleasure of watching fast-flowing polo in which field goals are the norm.



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Polo

Silicon Valley widens the field for new players

Modernisation Locals develop a taste for high adrenaline pastime, writes *April Dembosky*

Peter Milner talks about grass in the way a sommelier talks about wine. He has played polo all over the world, and is intimately familiar with the climates and soils that support Bermuda, Fescue and Rye grasses. He stoops down and runs his hand over a patch of short Bermuda grass at the polo field in Atherton, California, nestled in Silicon Valley.

"The root structure is wide so it doesn't slip," he says. "In England, they have Fescue grass, but we couldn't grow that here because it's too sensitive."

Grass is just one of the unique aspects of playing polo in California, according to Liverpool-born Milner, who has played in countries all over the world. He is chief executive of Heart Metabolics, a biotech company that makes a drug for cardiac conditions, and the fourth company he has founded after a career as a cardiologist. On a recent Sunday, he sat in white trousers and red shirt, strapping on knee pads and zipping up his boots, before hitting the field.

"I always wanted to do polo, but couldn't afford it," he said.

Now that he can, he joins other professionals from high tech, finance and property who come out to the Menlo polo club to practice. Property professionals are well represented, as the technology industry has supported high home prices in the region despite the economic downturn, and because they can organise their work in the slow winter months to enable them to travel to the desert polo fields in southern California – the "mecca" of polo on the West Coast.

Silicon Valley tech types have also been gravitating to the sport, given their predilection for adrenalin and risk taking, although there are fewer geeky engineers who saddle up

than lawyers and start-up founders. "It's the CEOs and business development jobs where you're conquering," said Christine Vermes, the head of brand marketing at Intel, who took up polo five years ago.

Her club, the Menlo polo club, which celebrates its 90th anniversary this year, is undergoing a transformation similar to other clubs in the US. The sport is trying to modernise, shifting away from wealthy patrons who sponsor people to play with them, to a structure that allows the curious to explore the sport without committing immediately to the high costs of maintaining horses or high membership fees. Even at amateur level, polo in Silicon Valley costs about \$5,000 a month, Milner said.

West Coast clubs are experimenting with funding models. The Santa Barbara club has revenue streams from tennis and weddings, and the Empire and Eldorado clubs near Palm Springs get their main income from the Coachella music festival, which uses the fields in April.

The US Polo Association, a national non-profit organisation, is helping to attract more people to the sport. It generated a surplus of funds in recent years from discount polo clothing that it sold through retailers such as Sears and Target. It has been using that money to train coaches, build clubs and issue grants to regional clubs so they can purchase horses for lessons or to lease to beginners.

"The USPA is really trying to get away from the image that polo is just for the wealthy," says Francesca Finato, manager of the South Bay Polo club in Gilroy, and a recipient of a national grant. "I've had nurses come in for lessons, marketing people – even a firefighter."

The fastest-growing demographic in US polo today is women. The sport



Star attraction: Prince William playing at the Santa Barbara club

Reuters

was closed to them until 1973, when they were officially permitted to join men on the field. Before then, women used to sneak into games, registering to play with their first initial and last name, binding their breasts and donning fake moustaches.

"A horse is a great equaliser," says one woman at the Atherton field, icing her mallet arm after a chukka (a period of play). "It's one sport where women can compete with men on the same level."

Women suited up alongside men at the Silicon Valley Polo Classic this week. The third annual tournament featured a mix of professional and amateur players, and a rowdy crowd of spectators culled from local sports franchises and tech companies, dressed in extravagant hats and trousers. ExpertQuote, which provides

employee health and retirement benefit programmes to businesses, sponsored the event to entertain clients.

In an area where hang gliding and flying lessons are popular, a polo match is unique and exotic enough to appeal to Valley experience junkies. "To feel the thundering of the horses – it's an experience they haven't had before," says Raj Singh, chief operations officer at ExpertQuote.

This year the event featured a caviar and vodka tasting, including "luxury ice", designed to complement premium liquor, and made from water purified of anything that might cloud the taste. There was a contest for the best hat and the craziest trousers, for which the victors enjoyed prizes similar to the polo players.

"More than anything, it's about the pride of winning," Singh says.

Sport follows change in Colombia fortunes

Renaissance

The Andean country's clubs are open for business, writes *Andres Schipani*

At the height of the drug-fuelled violence that ravaged Colombia more than a decade ago, even the country's horses suffered. As drug lords sought status, entering the equestrian world by owning one of the most prized breeds of horse, the Paso Fino, they became a target for rival gangs engaged in vendettas. Stallions were castrated and massacres took place in stables. However, drug kingpins knew to stay away from Colombia's polo clubs and polo ponies.

"For whatever reason, *narcos* never even dared to ask to be members of a polo club, and nobody was keen on selling them horses," explains Felipe Uribe, a two-goal (low handicapped) player who used to administer polo for Club Campestre de Cali – a city that was controlled by a powerful drug cartel. "They knew this was no place for them, that they were never going to be welcomed, so they simply stayed away," he says.

In the early to mid-1990s, polo was relatively successful in Colombia, so much so that clubs would attract star Argentine players of the time, such as the Heguy brothers. But by the late 1990s, an escalation of violence and an economic crisis crippled the sport's development beyond the main clubs near the biggest cities of Bogotá, the capital, and Medellín and Cali.

"Over 10 years ago, people that had horses on their ranches decided to stop breeding because it was too dangerous to be out in the countryside on their own," says Uribe.

But with sustained economic growth, leftwing guerrilla groups in decline and drug gangs no longer a security threat, there has been a turnaround in Colombia's quality of life – and polo has followed. "Polo in Cali and Medellín and Bogotá is growing again," says Carlos Alberto Gómez, one of the very few veterinarians for sport horses in Colombia, who works at the Cali club. "Those people that were scared have come back, their sons are playing and breeding now with the best blood imported from Argentina," says Gómez.

Despite being a nation with extensive grasslands and cattle ranchers, especially close to the border with Venezuela, most of the population lives in the Andean region. There, three mountain ranges make it hard to find flat land to set up a polo pitch. Nonetheless, the Bogotá polo club, the country's oldest, recently moved to a new and expansive location in a valley on the outskirts of the capital. The club now boasts eight spotless fields and 650 stables – 850 during the season – which highlights the recent growth of the sport in Colombia.

"During the weekends in the peak of the season, there are horses and players everywhere here; this is a feast," says Alejandro Montaña, the club's vice-president. The number of younger members has grown by about 20 per cent in recent years.

The season runs during two dry periods – from January until March and July to September. During the season, the club hosts the country's two most important tournaments – the 18-goal handicap Uribe Cup and 20-goal handicap Strong Cup.

In an attempt to professionalise the sport, both are based on the patron model, in which individuals fund a squad of players and ponies in return for a place in the team.

"Even if security is much better so some people are still hesitant to be identified as polo patrons. It is understandable, because they could be targeted as the richest among the rich," says Felipe Márquez, a seven-goal player and the country's number one. "Overall, there is still a reluctance to professionalise the sport here, it is still seen as something very familiar, so it is quite amateur," adds Márquez. "But I am working on breaking that traditional scheme."

He helped set the new trend of professionalisation and horse breeding. Now, teams are bringing in Argentine players and stallions. Because of the lack of good Colombian trainers and grooms, players such as Márquez take charge. Today, a Colombian pony costs between \$4,000 and \$25,000. "The level of horses here has grown a lot in the past 10 years, same with the players," Márquez says as he trains a young sorrel mare he bred, whip in hand. "I think little by little, we are heading in the right direction."

For more on Colombia, visit www.ft.com/new-colombia

'A club requires passion – simply spending money is not enough'

Interview

Joo Bae 'JB' Lee
Korea Polo Country Club owner

The game has found a pioneering patron, says *Jude Webber*

Joo Bae Lee laughs a lot. He is particularly tickled at being polo's pioneer in his native South Korea, and a trailblazer for the sport in Asia.

"I don't know whether Korea needs polo, but I needed to enjoy the rest of my life," chuckles the retired oil trader, describing why he has poured some \$20m into building the Korea Polo Country Club, when a decade ago he could not ride a horse.

Polo was an accidental discovery for Lee: he had been working in Singapore and decided that horse riding would be an "interesting" hobby, so he signed up for dressage classes.

From time to time, he caught a polo game and was captivated by "the beauty of the horses running and the excitement of hitting a polo ball".

From then on, he was hooked. "It was a bit crazy... After three months of horse riding, I challenged myself to start polo," he said. That was in 2004. Six months later, in June 2005, he bought land on Jeju island, the volcanic outcrop off the southern tip of the Korean peninsula, which he had admired on his honeymoon. Five years later the club opened its doors.

"I am not a tycoon promoting polo in Korea, but I am ready to bear my role as the sport's pioneer," he says.

"So far, Korea is the newest country in Asia, I believe. I have a Japanese member who plays hard in Korea. He can become another pioneer in Japan, which does not have a polo club."

Appreciating the thrills and skills of the sport and having millions to spare is not all there is to it. "It's easy to be a patron, but it's not easy to establish a polo club," says Lee. "Spending money isn't enough. You need a passion."

A slowdown in South Korea, Asia's fourth-largest economy, is not the biggest problem. "The basic challenge of polo in Korea is not the economic issue," says Lee.

"To the new polo country, the most important thing is that I show them what polo and polo life are."

That has meant cultivating the sport's prestigious image and lining up a stable of sponsors – he now has six, including Royal Salute whisky, the automaker BMW and the Japanese sports drink Pocari Sweat. He has also sought to spread the polo gospel beyond rich golf enthusiasts with time on their hands.

"I am trying hard to open my club to many

local people who simply love polo," says Lee. "For example, I built a 45-metre by 90-metre covered polo arena for normal polo players. The cost of playing in the arena is much cheaper than the polo field."

Lee says he now has 31 members – only one of whom already knew how

'I need to spend five years more to establish a proper history and atmosphere of a polo club'

to ride. They include 20 players, and he hopes to boost membership to 100 by the end of next year. He has a stable of 38 horses, mostly from Argentina and Australia, plus two Filipino instructors and one Argentine polo "pro".

He thinks Korea, which, in the 13th century, was

invaded by Mongolia, a country considered by some to have been the cradle of polo, has "good [polo] genes from the Mongolian blood".

Though at first he intended only to build polo facilities, his club, designed by the late Korean-Japanese architect Itami Jun, is a full polo resort. It boasts 36 sleekly modern bungalows, a clubhouse with private wine cellars, a five-star condominium, a soccer pitch, and a swimming pool and gym. The club has views both of the sea and of Mount Halla, a dormant volcano that is South Korea's highest peak.

David Ko, a KPCC member and player on the budding South Korean national polo team, says it is "exciting and rewarding" to be involved in the new sport in South Korea, for which club members pay a deposit in the region of \$130,000 (refundable if a member leaves), plus an annual fee of about \$1,500. Ko, who works in private equity, travelled to Buenos Aires last year with Lee for the Argentine Open, not only to watch the world's undisputed best at the highlight of the world polo calendar, but also to buy horses.

He praised "JB" – as Lee is known – for doing an "excellent job of taking care of the logistics".

That includes organising games to raise the sport's profile in South Korea, such as the club's second international polo match from May 24 to 25, and the Pocari Sweat Cup from June 8 to 9.

Lee insists the time and cost is worth it. "It's very expensive, but I'm happy," he says.

"But I need to spend five years more to establish a proper history and atmosphere of a polo club." He hopes by then also to have broken even.

As for the longer-term future? Lee believes polo is in South Korea to stay.

"Many of my members are helping me. Somebody will follow me later when I am old," he says.



Family passion: Y Rock Lee, Euni Shin, JB Lee, K Rock Lee



Giraffe sleep two out of every twenty four hours. Out here, dining by the flickering flames under the acacia and their watchful gaze, I didn't want the night to end either.

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Polo

Learner makes quick strides

For the beginner

Feergus O'Sullivan gets on his hobby horse and achieves unity between stick and ball

Did even Prince Charles start his polo career jumping around on an overgrown child's toy? I have just begun my first lesson at the Guards Polo Academy's polo clinic, and I am slightly disconcerted to find myself straddling a wooden horse, swinging a cross between a croquet mallet and a snooker cue.

Run by former professional polo players Andrew Hine (once a national coach) and Guy Verdon, the clinic offers one-on-one training at the Coworth Park Hotel near Ascot, in whose grounds I find myself mounted. It all sounded quite dashing in the preliminary email, but taking a few preparatory swings with my polo stick before I get on a real animal, I feel less like the hero of a Jilly Cooper novel than a modern version of Don Quixote.

It seems that I am not alone in learning the rudiments of polo while already well into adulthood. British polo has been growing steadily for years. Today, the UK has three times more registered players than it did in 1990, the number now hovers around the 3,000 mark. While the gentry and army are still well-represented, Britain's new elite of bankers and hedge fund managers are swelling the polo-playing ranks.

Polo's centre of gravity is also shifting, with Russia and China starting to rival Britain and Argentina as hubs for the sport. New contenders such as the Goldin Metropolitan club in Tianjin are muscling their way in, thanks in part to their wild spending – the club recently spent \$2m on carpeting their field with snow for a winter tournament. The difficulty for this new elite is that its members were often too busy earning money (or too poor) to learn polo in their youth.

The polo clinic, one of many polo-related activities supported by Jaeger-LeCoultre, the watchmaker, is an attempt at solving this difficulty. Its pupils are usually either members of polo-playing families who have been left behind or older novices looking for a hobby.

Playing on anything like a serious



Woodwork: Feergus O'Sullivan attacks the basics

Charlie Bibby

level costs around £15,000 a year, as the toll the game takes on ponies (they never play more than one chukka without a break) means you need a bare minimum of two ponies if you plan to do more than dribble a ball around a paddock.

You can trim costs by joining one of the cheaper, non-competing clubs, reshoeing your ponies slightly less often or stabling them over winter in your own home (preferably not in the spare room) but the game has no real budget options. Taken against these costs, the £160 per hour the polo clinic charges for lessons (including horse and kit) seems relatively modest.

The lessons certainly prove to be an approachable way into the sport. When I arrive for my allotted two hours at Coworth Park, I am greeted by Verdon and his wife Charlotte, the clinic's administrator, and both are unfailingly friendly and helpful.

If they are shocked by the fact that I have never ridden before, they certainly do not show it. We start the session by looking at polo's rules, which seem simple enough. Two teams of four riders have to hit a ball between two posts during one of five seven-minute long games or "chukkas", blocking each other with the occasional stick swipe or rump nudge from their ponies.

The real difficulty is not in mastering the rules, it seems, but acquiring the necessary level of horsemanship. As I later find out on the wooden hobby horse, there is a knack to leaning over the ball boldly enough to hit it straight, without toppling off your saddle or bashing your pony.

In retrospect, the wooden horse makes perfect sense. I have never ridden a horse before – I do not fully trust animals whose feelings are not immediately readable in an arched back or wagging tail. If I had started practising my stick swings on a real, living mount, I would have lamed enough of them within an hour to fill a whole supermarket chiller cabinet. Guy and Charlotte cheer me on gamely, but I find it difficult to stop the ball careering off at an angle.

Finally comes the real horse, an 18-year-old professional polo retiree called Streak. I have been assured that Streak is a placid creature, though her muzzle is so covered with reins and bits that she still looks like Hannibal Lecter with hooves.

Once I am in the saddle, she turns out to be a dream, instantly responsive to the subtlest twitch of the reins. I feel a wave of gratitude to this beautiful, calm creature for letting me sit on her, and in awe of the excellent training she must have received, which manages the impressive feat of making a novice like me look good.

Swinging the stick low, I even manage to hit the ball through the goal, though admittedly I have no gauntlet of other players to run.

Inwardly thanking Streak, it occurs to me that polo's popularity among the aristocracy may just be because it involves being cheered and praised while riding on the efforts of others more talented, in this case a horse. I understand their enthusiasm – polo may be expensive, but judging by my first lesson alone, it may also be about the most fun you can have on six legs.

Demand stays high for crafted Argentine wares

Sports kit

Jude Webber finds ateliers broadly optimistic in spite of economic woes

A pair of handcrafted polo boots, made by Argentina's most prestigious family-owned artisanal atelier, is not just a stylish piece of sporting kit, it is also a smart investment.

The Fagliano family, bootmakers to players, patrons and princes for 121 years believe in keeping prices stable – no mean feat given Argentina is in the grip of inflation and has tough currency controls.

"We try to maintain the price come what may," says Eduardo Fagliano, great-grandson of the Italian who founded the atelier in 1892 just a stone's throw from the Hurlingham ground near Buenos Aires, where polo was first played in Argentina. "If you come here in 10 years, maybe they'll be the same price."

That is good news for polo enthusiasts. Casa Fagliano has enough orders to keep the antique, black sewing machines whirring until February 2014.

Large overhead lights are a modern touch in a cramped workshop that has changed little over the years and where the smell of boot polish perfumes the air. The traditional techniques Mr Fagliano learnt from his grandparents are the reason why polo's elite professionals and illustrious amateurs, including the UK's Prince Harry, travel to Hurlingham, an hour outside Buenos Aires.

A pair of boots takes some 45 hours to craft and stitch and the atelier turns out about 70 pairs a year. They can cost up to \$2,400, but they last for years with

proper care. "We don't want to be rich. We want to produce quality that lasts. We want people not to look at the price but to like it and buy it because of the ratio of quality to price," he says.

Argentina's foreign exchange policy is squeezing the ateliers. Many industries – such as tanneries – price wares in dollars. More than 18 months of increasing foreign exchange restrictions have made it nearly impossible to buy dollars legally in Argentina.

A gap has opened between the overvalued official Argentine peso rate that producers export at – now about 5.3 pesos per dollar – and the black market rate on which the price for their raw materials is based. That rate went past 10 pesos in early May, though it has since eased to about 8.6 pesos.

"We're losing competitiveness... we can't transfer all of these prices to our products," says Adrián Simonetti, head of saddlery La Martina, a leading supplier to polo professionals and one of the best-known kit brands.

He has, however, seen demand bounce back from lows following the financial crisis of 2008-09, after which polo patrons – who can easily spend between €2m and €3m a year on professional riders and horses – preferred to adopt a lower profile because of the climate of economic austerity. Now, Mr Simonetti says the company is experiencing strong demand, especially in Asia.

But for smaller producers it can be more hit-and-miss.

Fagliano: brand has existed for 121 years
Eyevine

La Fusta, a family-run saddlery, which has been catering to polo and other equestrian sports for four generations, says it has seen a drop in sales of about 30 per cent since the start of this year.

Tacos Top, which has been making polo mallets for three decades, is doing well, with demand strong from the US, Europe and Middle East, though China has yet to take off.

Argentina's default on debts of nearly \$100bn and devaluation in 2001-02 was "the first time in many years we got our orders up to date" notes Eduardo Fagliano's brother, Héctor.

Now, Casa Fagliano is doing well in spite of the downturn in developed countries. This is in part thanks to publicity from a deal with Jaeger-LeCoultre, the watchmaker, to produce watchstraps.

Adolfo Cambiaso, world number one, has been a client since the age of 16, when his father bought him some boots and said "he's going to be a star", recalls Héctor Fagliano.

US and European patrons are the biggest clients. "They give boots to their professional players," says

Eduardo Fagliano. "And the cheapest thing polo has is boots."



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