

Polo Democratic mallets

Can new rules do for polo what Twenty20 did for cricket?

By Bob Sherwood

➤ **RUSHING AT A HEADLONG GALLOP**, I'm poised to strike the ball when my mallet is yanked back by a player behind me. Then another horse is pressing against mine, forcing him sideways. The rider has her elbow in my ribs.

"Gladiatorial" is how Jack Kidd — one of the country's top polo professionals, and my coach for the day — describes this robust and fast-paced sport. "It's so exciting to watch, but it hasn't been presented properly. People think it's stuck-up."

Kidd, the older brother of similarly horse-mad model turned television personality Jodie, is determined to change that view. As one of the driving forces behind the Polo in the Park event, to be held at London's Hurlingham Park next week, he is trying to make polo accessible to a more general sporting public.

Given the game's aristocratic connections and high price tag, this seems like a long shot. But Kidd thinks he can convince me. That is why I'm sitting astride a wooden horse at Ascot Park Polo Club as Kidd teaches me to strike tethered balls with a mallet. Most of my swings meet with a healthy sounding thump. "You're a natural," he laughs.

Still, once mounted on Manolito, a polo pony unconvinced by my steering, things become a bit trickier. At times the ball careers across the arena; at others it stays exactly where it is as I try to look suave while playing an air shot.

Kidd shows me how to do it properly: aim the ball by driving the swing's follow-through in the direction I want it to go. To demonstrate, he aims at a loose ball 20 yards away. The two spheres collide as cleanly as a snooker player's pot.

Matches at Polo in the Park will be played by four teams of



Bob Sherwood
gets in the swing,
striking tethered
balls at Ascot
Park Polo Club

**THE
DETAILS**

Polo in the Park will be held at Hurlingham Park, London, on June 5 and 6. Polo lessons on the mornings of the event will cost £100. Public tickets from £35. www.polointheparklondon.com

professionals representing different international cities. In addition, the World Polo School will offer lessons to spectators who have never even sat on a horse before.

Once Kidd has discovered that I actually ride regularly – and occasionally play a related game, called polocrosse – he accelerates my education. Joined by another pro and some club players, he organises a couple of chukkas. The lesson quickly spirals out of control.

Kidd tells me which player to mark. I approach her, and we drive our horses as fast as we can shoulder to shoulder, breathlessly exchanging brief remarks between rushes. It's friendly, but unbelievably physical.

I'm concentrating on just trying to stop her getting near the ball, but that's not enough for Kidd. "Go now", "get in behind", "drive on into space", he barks, adding, a little optimistically: "It's your ball." It rarely was.

The chukkas pass in a blur – chasing, stopping, turning, jostling and occasionally even hitting the ball. In the saddle, I'm bending and twisting as I swing the mallet, and already I know my muscles will pay me back tomorrow.

When I speed in front of the pack and line up the killer shot, my mallet is hooked from behind, foiling the stroke. But just a couple of times the ball sails away cleanly.

Once, gloriously, it actually flies between the posts. And then I get it. I understand why otherwise rational people lavish obscene amounts of money on this game. The adrenaline-rush is astonishing.

Polo hasn't been played at the Hurlingham club since the second world war, when its pitches were taken over to grow vegetables. World Polo Series, the organiser behind Polo in the Park, has stumped up thousands on new pitches and promises to repair any damage. Thereafter the Series will go on a global tour.

Daniel Fox-Davies, the financier who created the World Polo Series concept and is backing the London event, argues that polo can appeal to a far wider range of people even in these recessionary times.

His idea is to simplify the sport, removing unnecessary rules to make it easier for crowds to understand. The World Polo Series is also borrowing elements from other sports: yellow cards, a sin-bin, umpires wearing microphones.

"I think polo is misunderstood," he tells me. "Around 95 per cent of polo is low-grade, grass roots played by people from many different walks of life. I think we can give it a new audience."

Fox-Davies was given a polo lesson as a birthday present seven years ago. He is keen to explain that non-riders can take up the game easily and play at a level that suits them. And, despite his wealth, he is adamant that playing polo does not require the income of a hedge fund manager.

Even so, the World Polo School lessons should probably carry a financial health warning. Two weeks after my lesson, with the rush of the chukkas still coursing through my veins, I bought one of Jack Kidd's polo ponies. ■

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Second opinion Acupuncture a myth

By Margaret McCartney

“ Britain's backs are in terrible shape. We spend more time off work because of back pain than for any other ailment, according to the NHS. So it's not surprising that we are keen to relieve our suffering. A new study on acupuncture and back pain tries to do just this, though in truth it is as confusing as it is informative.

Published in the Archives of Internal Medicine and performed in the US, the study compared 638 patients with chronic back pain. Each person was randomly ascribed to one of four treatments.

One group received "usual care". The others were given either "individualised", "standardised", or "sham" acupuncture. Individualised meant that the therapist prescribed "distinct points" for that person's particular problems. Standardised meant that the needles were inserted into points which are "considered effective by experts for chronic low back pain". Sham acupuncture consisted of



a series of movements with a toothpick and cotton wool, designed to make the person feel as though they were having needles inserted into the skin, when in fact there was no penetration at all.

This is the gloriously interesting bit. Acupuncture, either prescribed or standard, was effective in relieving symptoms of back pain and in improving back function. It also helped people to reduce their use of anti-inflammatory painkillers.

However, sham acupuncture – toothpicks and cotton wool – performed just as well as both these methods. Conventional therapy, meanwhile, was significantly worse in comparison.

So what do we do now? We have a treatment that seems to work – but the sham version of it is just as effective. It would be very useful to find out why. Is it a placebo, working via the empathy and care delivered by the therapist? Only 18 per cent of patients in the "usual treatment" group got around to reading the booklet they were given on back pain.

Perhaps the patients receiving acupuncture were more motivated to do exercises or to be active, and it was this which helped. Or perhaps there is something about touch, or pressure, which triggers a physiological process which eases pain and improves function.

It certainly appears that "sham acupuncture" is therapeutic – so perhaps we need a new term for the practice, because "sham" now seems misleading. It says a great deal for the acupuncturists who involved themselves in this trial, because they were brave enough to question how – and if – their treatment works.

If only their colleagues in the complementary medical world had the same dedication: it may be that there is much

“ more useful knowledge to be discovered. Margaret McCartney is a GP in Glasgow. margaret.mccartney@ft.com



For lively discussion of the latest medical issues go to Margaret McCartney's blog at blogs.ft.com/mccartney