

Polocrosse Within reach

*Bob Sherwood on
the polo hybrid that
anyone can play*

➤ **THERE ARE NO CHAMPAGNE MARQUEES OR LUXURY BRAND SPONSORSHIPS.** The winners will not see their photographs in the society pages. But this is still the most fun I have ever had on horseback.

At full gallop across a manicured pitch in Kent with an opponent hard on my shoulder, I have just enough time to send a pass to my team-mate then watch him dispatch the ball between the goalposts.

This is a game of polocrosse. It has the exhilaration of horse racing, the camaraderie of a riding club and the combat of polo. A major difference from the latter is that players are allowed to ride only one horse in a tournament, playing alternate chukkas (periods of play) to allow the pony to rest. By comparison with polo, where a string of ponies is needed, polocrosse is cheap and accessible. With no professionals or patrons, it is everyman's polo.

As the name suggests, the game combines elements of lacrosse, with teams competing for possession of a foam rubber ball that is picked up, passed and caught using racquets with a shallow net. Teams are made up of six players, divided into two "sections" of three who each play three of the six chukkas, which usually last six minutes.



A junior polocrosse match. Teams are made up of two groups of three players who take it in turns to compete

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“I am almost constantly shoulder to shoulder with an opponent, a horse pressed against my leg”

Players can strike an opponent's racquet to try to dislodge the ball from their net, but only in an upwards direction, to avoid hitting the horses. “Riding off”, where a rider deliberately places his horse alongside an opponent's mount to prevent them reaching the ball or making a tackle, is a much-used tactic. Bruised knees and knuckles are an accepted hazard.

The game is most popular in its native Australia and parts of Africa, though it is spreading in the US, Europe and the UK. You won't hear many Argentinian voices, then, but there are always plenty of Aussies, Kiwis, South Africans and Zimbabweans, even here in the rolling Kent countryside.

Mike Turner, chairman of the Kent Target Polocrosse Club, says the accessibility of polocrosse is one of its great draws. “Because each tournament is split into five divisions, according to skill and experience, everyone can play at their own level.”

I've played for Kent Target for a few years now, and in that time I have seen the skill level rising in what is still a young game in this

country. Playing in the mid-ranking “C” division, I'm trying to keep up with the lightning-quick teenagers.

This particular tournament has started well. To avoid colour clashes with other Kent teams, my teammate Oli has selected FT pink shirts. It's not a very macho look. Perhaps spurred on by the inevitable taunts from our opponents, we win the first game comfortably.

I'm riding Candelaria, my Argentine-bred chestnut polo mare. She's one of the largest polo ponies here – I'm hardly jockey weight, after all – but what she loses in swiftness of turning she makes up for in her long striding gallop and tank-like riding off ability, even if her brakes are sometimes a little unreliable.

By the time the second match starts, it is raining heavily and the pitch is getting slippery. I've played with Oli a number of times and we have developed a strategy. As the midfield player, it's my job to try to win the ball in the line-out that starts each passage of play, tidy up loose balls, tackle, mark opposition players and deliver him the ball. He does the flashy stuff, scores the goals and takes the glory.

Tournaments are held over summer weekends at different clubs, of which about 20 belong to the United Kingdom Polocrosse Association. In a tournament, teams play three or four matches, which means that our two victories on the Saturday have now put us into Sunday's final (with only the obligatory Saturday evening party to negotiate in between).

We have watched our opponents earlier on and know we have to stop their attacking player from gaining possession. But from the first line-out, he's on to the ball in an instant and we are a goal down with just seconds on the clock.

It is immediately clear that this is a much tougher game and, under



THE DETAILS

For information on polocrosse clubs, go to www.polocrosse.org.uk Kent Target is based near Goudhurst, Kent, www.kentpolocrosse.co.uk

pressure and with the pitch surface still slick, we are making mistakes. The game is happening in a blur. We are playing flat out, racquets are crashing into tackles and I am almost constantly shoulder to shoulder with an opponent, a horse pressed against my leg.

Twice I pick up the loose ball from the ground only to be ridden off across the sideline before I can turn or make a pass. But, with muttered oaths and shouted instructions passing between us, we are holding our own as the teams match each other goal for goal.

In the dying seconds of the final chukka, Oli gathers the ball. I jump Candelaria in front of the opposition defender, who is alongside me. Kicking on hard, I block off her horse and leave Oli free on goal.

It should be the winner, but, to my astonishment, the umpire has judged that I unfairly held the defender over the sideline and the goal is disallowed. I protest my innocence but it doesn't stop me getting a thunderous look from Oli as the bell sounds and we are forced into golden goal extra time.

He shouldn't have worried. He scores, and we win. But after the thrill of such a breathless, bruising encounter, the result surprisingly doesn't seem to matter that much.

Amid the muddy, sweating horses queuing up for the wash-down afterwards, I bump into someone I had talked into trying polocrosse over a drink a few months earlier. He has just played his first tournament on a borrowed horse. He has scored a couple of goals and is beaming.

“That was unbelievable,” he says. “It was all so fast I didn't know what was going on most of the time.” He pauses. “How do I find a horse for next season?” ■

pursuits@ft.com