

Polo 101

THE DIVOT STOMP

If you've seen *Pretty Woman*, you know about the Divot Stomp. It's one of the oldest and most widely known traditions of polo. When the game breaks at halftime, spectators are invited to march onto the field to socialize and replace the mounds of earth (divots) that are torn up by the horses' hooves during the game. This serves as a great time to meet new people, move around after the first half, walk your dog, and help keep the field safe and beautiful.

DRESS

Believe it or not, polo can be casual and laid back, as well as extravagant. Many people envision polo as the Kentucky Derby where ladies don beautiful dresses and elaborate hats. But, depending on the location and type of polo event, casual dress is absolutely acceptable. The game of polo has become more of a family event, and going to watch a game after getting done working on the tractor is becoming the trend.

SAFETY

As in any sport there are factors you have to be mindful of as a spectator. In baseball, foul balls may fly into the stands; in golf, a player may hit the ball off the course; and in basketball, a player may fall into the seats. In polo it's the same. A player may get a bad hit on the ball and it'll go flying into the crowd, or if spectators aren't paying attention a horse may come a little too close to them. It's up to the spectators and the players to keep the game safe and enjoyable, so watch the game and keep an eye on what's happening around you.

THE GAME

A match consists of 4 to 8 chukkas or chukkers (periods) that last 7 minutes and 30 seconds each. A horn is blown at the end of 7 minutes to signal to the players that 30 seconds remain in the chukker. During the 30 seconds, play continues until a team scores or the ball hits the sideboards. If neither occurs, at the end of 30 seconds the horn blows twice to signal the end of the chukker. Each time the whistle is blown the clock stops, signaling that a foul has been committed or that it's the end of the chukker. During the breaks players are able to switch ponies. After each goal the teams change direction. This allows both teams equal opportunities to score in case the field or weather is working to one direction's advantage. The game is continuous and can only be stopped if a foul is called, an injury occurs to either a polo pony or rider, or if a player's tack is broken. The goal is to hit the ball between the two goal posts. If the offensive team misses, the defensive team is allowed a "knock-in" from the spot where the ball crossed the end line, continuing play. The team that scores the most goals wins.

THE PLAYERS

There are 4 players on each team, assigned positions on offense and defense. The number 1 player is the offensive forward, and the number 4 player is the defensive back. Numbers 2 and 3 are considered to be the strongest, most experienced players, number 3 often being the quarterback or field captain, and number 2 being responsible for pushing the play both on offense and defense. Player number 1 covers number 4, and player 2 covers player 3.

THE FIELD

A regulation polo field is 300 yards long by 160 yards wide (the area of about 9 American football fields). The field is usually lined with boards on the long sides to prevent the ball from rolling out of play. It's still possible, however, for the ball to bounce out over the sideboards. Goal posts are placed 8 yards apart at each end of the field. The posts are usually easy to remove and covered in a foam layer to protect the polo ponies and riders in case of contact. Most polo fields are carefully maintained to keep them safe for the ponies.

POLO PONIES

Webster's dictionary defines a polo pony as "a horse trained for use as a mount in playing polo and characterized primarily by endurance, speed, courage, and docility." Without the polo pony there would be no polo. The ponies must be able to release bursts of speed, come to a stop from high speeds, turn quickly and accurately, and have the confidence to push another pony to the side. Many polo players describe their best mounts as having big hearts and a feel for the game.

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