



# SPORT OF KINGS

By Jeanne Ferris

All photography courtesy of Brent Haywood

*Between horsepower and horseplay, San Diego holds a longstanding legacy and regard for the game of polo. It is a sport where both rider and pony are trained athletes, paired as a team; however, once the ball is thrown, you have no idea what happens next.*

The siren call of polo is as ancient as the stories in "1,001 Arabian Nights" – 6th century Persian literature and art depicting tales of the game. Embraced by royalty, it has developed into an elegant, international sport, rife with ceremony and élan.

The polo pony, a more traditional term for the horses, is usually a mare standing 15 hands high and weighing up to 1,100 pounds. Even though they are chosen for their speed, stamina and agility, temperament is a critical factor; after all, a rider is only as good as their horse. And at \$250,000 tops, a mount can be worth more than a good education.

"A great level of trust with your horse is needed to play well," shares Sue Landis, a



former Women's World Champion polo player with dual U.S. and New Zealand citizenship. "The faster you're galloping — the sooner you have to start your swing. You need to know your horse can calmly keep you safe and be agile at full speed."

After Sue's team won the title in 2001 in England, dining with Prince William and Prince Harry was the "crown" of a memorable victory.

Notably, the San Diego Polo Club celebrates this year its 25th anniversary in Rancho Santa Fe — the same location since envisioned by Willis Allen and Harry Collins; polo has actually been played in San Diego for more than 100 years. The club's agendas are community inclusive and philanthropic minded, and has attracted some of the highest rated (10 goals)

players in the industry.

Several pro players from our hometown team recently took the time to share their thoughts regarding the game, the pony and life on the road.

**FINE Magazine:** *What first inspired a career in polo?*

**Ashton Wolf:** I started grooming for Casablanca (an American team in San Diego) and took lessons with the White Family. I picked it up quickly and soon became pro.

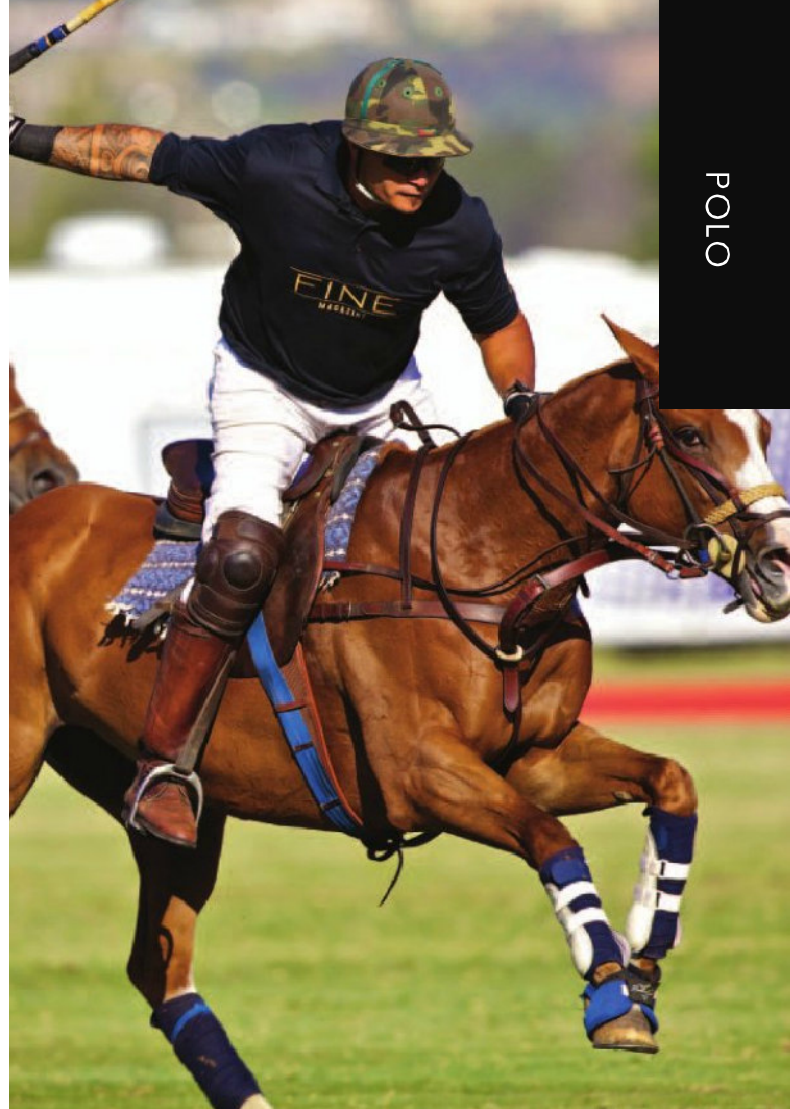
**Diego Cossio:** I started playing in 1996 in the U.S. I played for 10 years under the famous Steve Crowder. He's a good man and I owe him a lot.

**Miguel Gutierrez:** My father and my grandfather



## TRACEE BRUNETTI

Sometimes it doesn't take a childhood on a ranch in Argentina or a polo pedigree to enjoy the game at a higher level. Tracee is a testament to just how fast someone with the willingness to learn and the passion to play can excel at the sport of polo. A native San Diegan with roots in Point Loma, Tracee happened upon an advertisement offering a free lesson at the San Diego Polo Club, "I called and asked if you had to know how to ride a horse to try the class. Patti Fitzgerald answered the phone and said, "No! Just come on down!" So I did." In addition to playing in international locations such as England and the Dominican Republic, Tracee can also count a Female MVP award at the SDPC on her list of accomplishments. As a balancing activity, polo brings her clarity in a life we often find cluttered and distracting, "When I play polo, nothing else exists."



played, I was always around it. Polo helped with my shyness.

**Colleen Wilson:** I grew up with horses – I prefer English saddle and dressage. It was a natural fit.

**Tracee Brunetti:** I answered an ad for a free lesson at the San Diego Polo Club! Patti Fitzgerald told me I didn't have to know how to ride and here I am.

**FINE:** *How does the polo world work on the "inside?"*

**Gaston VonWernich:** There is a lot of hard work that goes into preparing for a game [and] everyone has their duties that contribute to the club. The grooms are the unsung heroes working all day to exercise, feed and groom the horses.

**FINE:** *How do you relax?*

**Colleen Wilson, Ph.D. (animal nutrition and patron of team Adeptus):** Playing polo is relaxing. I see my horses six days a week and I have a string [seven or eight] of horses here.

**FINE:** *How do you manage your family time around the traveling involved in playing polo?*

**VonWernich:** It's hard. I have four kids and a lovely wife. We do the best we can. We home school our kids in Argentina and I'm able to spend time with them [when at home]. They come to San Diego when they are on holiday; [and] when they're here, they bring their bikes to the barn, play polo, come to my games and spend time with me.

**Ashton Wolf:** My wife understands but she doesn't like it too much. We have three kids: a 5-year-old, a 3-year-old, and a 9-month-old. She lives in Santa Ynez where we have a lot of family support. I try to help out when I'm



## DIEGO COSSIO

Diego Cossio grew up on a sugar cane ranch in Tucuman, a province about 1,200 kilometers north of Buenos Aires. His family's land was covered with horses and he learned to play polo from his father. Diego's strategy for winning involves a specific game plan and tries to keep his team connected throughout play. A kiss and hug from his family, Stacie and Colton, have always given him luck and success both on and off of the polo field. Over the years, Diego has come to know countless polo players and he says that without a doubt, Mariano Fassetta is his best friend within the sport. Likewise, Joe Henderson is his favorite player to compete against because of his warrior-like skills and clean play. Diego hopes to continue his professional career for years to come.



home, but I am gone most of the time.

**FINE:** *Do you buy your ponies already trained or do you prefer to train them, and what do you look for?*

**Wilson:** I buy "made" horses. The best are from Argentina and I look for disposition, soundness of limbs and with at least three years of polo training. I like mares because they are keener, more into the game and easier to train.

**Wolf:** I breed, train (make) and sell. Sometimes, I buy horses that have been racing at Del Mar. I have been training polo ponies for 10 years [now]. I look for speed, and the good ones follow the ball on their own. A good polo pony can play for about 15 years. [It is worthy to note that Wolf owns 30 horses].

**FINE:** *What do you love most about the game?*

**Diego Cossio:** Working outside with horses.

**Miguel Gutierrez:** Meeting good people, traveling around the world.

**Sue Landis:** Polo is the ultimate adrenaline rush! ♦

**San Diego Polo**  
sandiegopolo.com

## 2011 POLO SCHEDULE

- 8.14 Fernando Gutierrez Memorial Cup
- 8.21 Fernando Gutierrez Memorial Cup Finals
- 8.28 USPA Rossmore Cup presented by FINE Magazine
- 9.04 USPA Rossmore Cup Finals
- 9.05 Labor Day Arena Tournament & Barbeque
- 9.11 Red Baron Bash- Bi-Planes Fly-In
- 9.17 Willis Allen Memorial Cup Finals presented by Giving Back Magazine
- 9.25 USPA Spreckels Cup
- 9.30 Crash & Burn Party
- 10.02 Closing Day: USPA Spreckels Cup Finals