



Keep your eye on the ball! Buenos Aires meets Beijing

MINT POLO IN THE PARK 2013

POLO RETURNS ONCE AGAIN TO HURLINGHAM

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

THE PURISTS MAY SCOFF, BUT IF YOU TAKE THE LIKES OF SOME HEFTY 6-, 7-, AND 8-GOAL PLAYERS, CUT THE OVERALL PLAYING AREA BY ABOUT A THIRD, STREAM-LINE THE RULES FOR SWIFT PLAY, PUT THE SPECTATORS RIGHT UP FRONT (WITH THEIR PIMM'S AND POMMERY'S), AND STAGE THE WHOLE EVENT IN THE 'HOME AND CRADLE OF BRITISH POLO' AT HURLINGHAM, BELIEVE ME, YOU HAVE ONE EXHILARATING EVENT.

The brainchild of Daniel Fox-Davies, founder of Fox-Davies Capital, this event has really caught on and is going stronger than ever in its fifth iteration. As was done with Twenty 20 changes to cricket, so Fox-Davies devised a polo event with revised rules which would promote the sport of polo and attract a whole new generation to the sport. Polo generally suffers from bad PR, being considered snooty, inaccessible, difficult to view and film, too technical and complex, and with no 'home team' to cheer for. Fox-Davies with expert technical advisors revised the rules to produce an accessible, incredibly fast-paced and thrilling exhibition polo tournament at middle-goal level.

As Fox-Davies explains: "The

idea started after I'd been playing for eight or nine years and I realised that many people really had never seen a polo match." He came to realise that you would need to bring the play closer to the crowd. And he thought: "Let's bring it to the city...find a ground." After looking at Hyde Park and Regent's Park, they came across Hurlingham Park and with its polo history it was the obvious choice.

Fox-Davies believes that a crowd-and-sponsor-pleasing event with a 'faster and dynamic game' will raise awareness and enthuse spectators, which will benefit and support standard competition polo. And with five such successful events here at Hurlingham and one in Abu Dhabi - and more on the drawing

board - it looks like his formula is working!

Whether as one of the 32,000 spectators at this year's MINT Polo in the Park you paid more attention to your lawn picnic co-partners and beverages or stayed riveted to the boards watching play, you will not have gone home from this event disappointed.

'HOME AND CRADLE OF BRITISH POLO':

Held at Hurlingham Park, the event has strong nostalgic and emotional pull. It was at the Hurlingham Club itself that British polo first found a formal home in 1874 following the establishment of the Hurlingham Club Polo Rules in





The competing teams line up

1873, now the Hurlingham Polo Association Rules, which govern international polo to this very day. The renowned club hosted the first international match between England and the United States in 1886 (which became the venerable Westchester Cup) as well as the polo competition for the 1908 Summer Olympics.

World War II changed it all when several acres of the Club were absorbed by the local authorities, including the old Polo Field No. 1, where MINT Polo in the Park 2013 presided this June.

No bad feelings, though... the stately Hurlingham Club embraced the return of polo. As Niall Kilgour CB, Secretary and Chief Executive of The Hurlingham Club said: "I am

delighted to see polo back here; it seems a natural fit for the area and polo in the Club's old No. 1 field." Long-time Club member Jane Westbrook agrees: "Of course, The Hurlingham Club and the sport of polo are tied inextricably. As members of the Club we are pleased to see this great sport return to our old field. And having a Club marquee makes the event very special indeed." The Club Secretary also expressed gratitude to the Hammersmith & Fulham Council for its 'brave and bold' decision to allocate the venue for this event for the benefit of the local area.

IT'S NOT POLO LITE!

For Polo in the Park, the rules were adjusted for speed, excitement, and spectator

participation – offering a concise but complete experience of the sport. The field was designed in an elongated octagonal and shortened to 250 yds length x 120 yds width at the widest (a standard field is 300 yds x 160 yds). The number of team members was reduced from four to three with the number 2 and 3 position roles taken on by the number 2 player. The throw-in has been substituted by the "Dash", in which, as the name implies, from the goal line one representative of each team charges madly at the ball placed on the mid-line (and at his opponent). I thought this was some kind of pseudo-Medieval jousting, but was to learn from Fox-Davies that the "Dash" was an old American polo starting practice at Westchester which

was later discontinued following events such as the TKO of both opponents in a “Dash” collision in 1888 at Myopia Polo Club in Massachusetts. Myopia, indeed!

Another oddity is the “D Ring” at the 45 yard line, from which all fouls are played and from outside of which scores played carry double score. And the pace of play is ensured by the rule that teams only change sides at the half. While I felt that the rules added, yes, excitement, but also an extra element of danger, every player I spoke with had this to say about this unique event: ‘It’s FUN’!

Mohamed El Habtoor, patron of City AM Abu Dhabi Team, second place winner at this year’s event and the winner of

Polo in the Park 2011, explained: “Polo in the Park is completely different. This is not like normal polo. It’s closer, you can hear the people and see the people, they’re right there next to you. As a spectator, if you can’t see the play, you might lose interest. Here people really watch, it’s fun. And everyone has a good seat, whether in the grandstand or hospitality.”

PLAY HIGHLIGHTS:

Day one Friday, 7 June, was London’s official Summer Office Party, and it was clear that some attendees had skived off work to attend as the omniscient cameras and unabashed big screen revealed group after group with brochures or hands hiding identity! Ah, well, the

ponies kicked off with Camino Real Team Buenos Aires (with highest ranked 8-goal player Piki Diaz Alberdi) in a reasonably calm and professional win over Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park Team Beijing 9 to 7, followed by a more enthralling match between City AM Team Abu Dhabi who out-goaled Otkritie Team Moscow 5 to 3. 2012 champs MINT Team London held their own - just - over IG Team Sydney in a tense moment when home team player George Meyrick scored his goal in the last 10 seconds to take the match 5 to 4.

Saturday was Ladies’ Day billed as ‘the Social Event of the Season’, which some social arbiters might debate, but which still attracted the young and

The crowds cheer Team Sydney and Team BA





2013 Mint Polo in the Park Winners Team Sydney

the bold, the restless and the beautiful of London. This day of typical London clear/rain/drizzle/clear weather witnessed Moscow take it from Beijing 9 to 7 and Sydney beat Buenos Aires 7 to 4. Abu Dhabi took the edge over the MINT London team 4 to 3 in a frightening match which saw Guillermo Cuitino, Abu Dhabi's No. 3, take a horrific tumble which had him out cold for several minutes. While play stopped and all players abandoned their mounts and mates to run to Guillermo's aid, specialist medical care and transportation was summoned and in the background Otkritie's Max Charlton jumped on to substitute and finish the match in Abu Dhabi's favour.

Final's Day was promoted as a

family day and the organisers made sure that mater, pater and familia were all catered for with the Mahiki Coconut Sunday Brunch Party, Club Med Kids' Zone, luxury shops, art galleries, and the KERB Food Market with every foodie taste imaginable. Octopus curry, anyone?

Eyes were on the home team for the Plate Final match for third and fourth places between MINT Team London and Otkritie Team Moscow, where despite a valiant try, London failed 5 to 4. The Grand Final match of the tournament placed IG Team Sydney against City AM Abu Dhabi. The adrenalin and excitement of the crowd pulsed through the grounds as excellent play after play brought each of the teams within striking distance of the win. Sydney

held out to win MINT Polo in the Park 2013 7 goals to 5. Special mention to Max Charlton again for substituting for Cuitino (who although he was able to leave hospital in time for Sunday's final match, was forbidden to play) in the final for Team Abu Dhabi and a special mention of the excellent commentary and insights by sports presenter Abi Griffiths throughout the three-day event.

Where else can you dress up, watch serious polo, hob-nob with celebs and polo stars, maybe find yourself on television, drink Champagne to your heart's delight and then trundle over and catch the Putney Bridge Tube home at the end of the day? 🍷

Photos courtesy Captive Minds