

THE INAUGURAL DUBAI CHALLENGE CUP 2016

# FIELD OF DREAMS

*IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME*

By Bridget McArdle McKinney



Zedan vs. Edrees

# ST. REGIS INTERNATIONAL CUP

## DUBAI CHALLENGE CUP 2016

18 GOAL HANDICAP



Bin Drai vs. UAE Polo



Patrício Neves - Edrees

IT HAS BECOME A CLICHÉ TO TALK ABOUT SKYSCRAPERS, EVENTS, CARS, JETS AND MOTOR CRAFTS, AND CELEBRITIES IN DUBAI IN BREATHLESS HYPERBOLE NORMALLY RESERVED FOR THE GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS – TALLEST! PRICIEST! BIGGEST! FASTEST! MOST FAMOUS! MOST GLAMOROUS! BUT NOW A NEW 18-GOAL CUP CONTEST, THE DUBAI CHALLENGE CUP, MIGHT WELL DESERVE SOME OF THIS HIGH PRAISE. ANNOUNCED ON 2 MARCH BY THE ORGANISING COMMITTEE OF THE 2016 DUBAI GOLD CUP SERIES, THIS NEW TOURNAMENT WAS DUBAI'S HIGH-GOAL POLO SEASON CLOSER, ENDING THIS SEASON WITH SOME OF THE FIERCEST BATTLES ON THE FINEST TURF IN THE WORST WEATHER AT WHAT WILL BE THE NEWEST AND MOST LUXURIOUS POLO AND EQUESTRIAN FACILITY, THE HABTOOR POLO RESORT & CLUB, CATERED AND HOSTED IN THE MOST ELEGANT VIP MARQUEE BY THE PRESTIGIOUS ST. REGIS HOTEL AND QUENCHED, OF COURSE, BY THE FINEST CHAMPAGNE, BOLLINGER. WHEW! SEVEN SUPERLATIVES IN ONE SENTENCE AND WE WERE THERE TO WITNESS IT ALL.

I had been planning to go over to cover the Dubai Gold Cup as I have many times before and at the same time take a look at the new polo facility everyone was talking about, but then suddenly the new Dubai Challenge Cup tournament appeared and I re-tooled my plans to catch this brand new high-goal event at a brand new polo facility – a two-for-one.

At the Cup announcement Mohammed Al Habtoor, founder of the Dubai Gold Cup Series and patron of Habtoor Polo, commended the prominent role played by His Highness Sheikh Maktoum Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, through his patronage of the Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series since its inception. He said that the introduction of the new tournament would add a new dimension to the Championship and build on the successes of the entire Series. "No words can describe our happiness with the introduction of the tournament," he said. "Our ambition has no limits."

### Dubai Gold Cup Series

Al Habtoor founded the Dubai Gold Cup Series in 2009. Since then it has grown in tandem with the city of Dubai. The Dubai Open is divided into two tournaments: the McLaren Silver Cup and the Julius Baer Gold Cup, both played under the rules of the Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) and both World Polo Tour-ranked tournaments.

It attracts polo stars from around the world, VIPs, celebrities as well as senior corporate executives from across the Gulf. Al Habtoor said, "The competition, which started with 10 goal handicap, has picked up momentum and evolved into an 18 goal handicap



Zedan vs. Habtoor Polo

competition in record time. This is down to the overwhelming desire of the participating teams and their owners who have backed the tournament for many years. They have all contributed to helping make Dubai a global polo destination."

He also commended the role HH Sheikha Maitha Bint Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum has played in the sport. HH Sheikha Maitha regularly plays in the Dubai Gold Cup Series as well as other polo events as patron of the UAE Polo Team, which successfully took the Dubai Gold Cup this year.

"The presence of HH Sheikha Maitha Bint Mohammed in the Dubai Gold Cup Series has contributed to the promotion of polo in the UAE and encouraged more players to the sport. She inspires women and is a great role model," he added.

#### Al Habtoor Polo Resort & Club – Field of Dreams

"If you build it, they will come"....Through a nasty sandstorm navigating from a map helpfully provided by the tournament organisers we made our way to where we thought we should have been, only to find a bustling dusty construction site, heavy machinery, trucks, and teams of hard-hats. Once we threaded our way through the commotion, we found the fields and tried our best under the very hot and dusty conditions to situate ourselves for viewing the Semi-final.

While waiting for the start of the first Semi-final match, which was delayed by the weather, I took a long look around at the structures under construction surrounding the fields and began to imagine what the finished product would look like: the grand St. Regis Hotel with every room overlooking the fields, the bungalows, villas and equestrian facility, the sunshine which normally graces this region. It began to take shape in my imagination and I could see what it would be, a lush and lovely resort venue devoted to horses and the sport of polo. A polo-lover's dream soon to come true.

#### And the Winners Are....

The Semi-Finals Despite the heat and dusty gusty conditions four great Semi-final teams waged battle for the two seats in the Final of the Dubai Challenge Cup 2016. I honestly thought that the first match would have to be called off for heat and wind, but UAE Polo Team and Bin Drai bravely mounted up and fought both the elements and each other. Despite two hard meetings with the turf by Bin Drai's Tomas Iriarte, Bin Drai took the prize 9 goals to 6.

It has been said that the second Semi of the day was one of the best games of the entire season, with a superb level of polo in five thrilling chukkas, between Habtoor Polo and Zedan.

Habtoor Polo worked with perfect coordination and collaboration which is the only way to face down Zedan's mighty 10-goaler Pablo Mac Donough, and reap a 11-9 victory, leaving Bin Drai and Habtoor Polo to vie for the St. Regis International Cup in the Finals.

The Finals: While the guests were protected from the chilly rain and drizzle with umbrellas, rugs and champagne in the elegant St. Regis marquee, the Finals day teams steeled themselves to test their skills, their ponies, and the quality of the turf on the new field on this sloppy day.

First up was the Bentley Cup Subsidiary Final pitting Edrees against

Wolves Polo Team (Ahmed Al Habtoor, Agustín Canale, Diego Araya and Jerónimo del Carril). Decided in overtime by a 30 yard penalty scored by Araya, the Wolves won the Bentley trophy 8 goals to 7. It was so encouraging to see another new generation of polo players step up and play at this level. Ahmed's father Mohamed Al Habtoor and grandfather Khalaf Ahmed Al Habtoor must have been very proud.

For the St. Regis International Cup of the Dubai Challenge Cup 2016 the Bin Drai team (patron Saeed Bin Drai, Tomás Iriarte, Matías Torres Zavaleta and Raúl Laplacette) met Habtoor Polo (patron Mohammed Al Habtoor, Marcos Panelo, Guillermo Terrera and Guillermo Cuitiño) in an excitingly close game. The action was expert, fast and strong. Then Guillermo Cuitiño took a terrific blow to the head which stopped action while the medics assessed the situation and treated him, but nothing could stop him. He hopped back on and kept on swinging. Despite a two goal gap with only two minutes to go, however, Bin Drai struggled to take that last goal, putting them 8 goals to Habtoor's 7 at the final whistle.

Raúl Laplacette was named the Most Valuable Player of the Final and the mare Mili from patron Saeed Bin Drai was the Best Playing Pony. We noticed during the divot-stomping that the new playing surface held up quite well in these very wet conditions to which Dubai is not normally subject, draining nicely, perhaps earning an honorary Best New Playing Turf.

As one who should know, Adam Snowden experienced Dubai-based polo commentator and 2-goal player has this to say about this high-goal season: "We have had a very exciting and intense 18-goal Dubai Gold Cup Series with many games going to the wire and even overtime generating keen interest with a new comer to the team list, the Wolves. We are looking forward to one, if not two, more new teams next season and a couple to return to the Series when the Dubai Gold Cup Series will be played at the Al Habtoor Polo Resort & Club. Yes, it is fair to say polo in Dubai, the UAE is healthy and growing!"

#### What's Next for Polo in Dubai?

Al Habtoor, who is head of the Dubai Gold Cup Series organising committee, confirmed that work is underway to extend the polo season in the United Arab Emirates to nine months. "This will undoubtedly attract the major teams and the best players around the world," he said.

Al Habtoor concluded, "I have big plans for the Dubai Gold Cup Series next year. We are making preparations for the opening of the Al Habtoor Polo Resort & Club. It is a horse lover's dream boasting the best polo fields in the world, and offering all equestrian disciplines. It will be a great addition to polo in Dubai."

In his press statement Al Habtoor thanked HH Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed for his ongoing support of the 'Sport of Kings', and said the growth of polo in the Dubai was down to the patrons, teams and supporters. "We have all played a key role in the growth of polo in Dubai. The city is now well and truly on the global polo circuit, which is a great source of pride for us all", adding, "Each year the Dubai Gold Cup Series gets better and better, attracting more teams and more players from the region and around the world. We are really pleased with its continued success. The introduction of new tournaments, such as the Dubai Challenge Cup, has been welcomed by everyone. This motivates us even further." 

Photos and additional commentary by Gonzalo Etcheverry

