

THREADNEEDLE DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

FROM QUALIFIERS STRAIGHT THROUGH TO THE FINAL, FROM MARCH 2ND TILL THE 11TH, PLAYERS BOTH PROFESSIONAL AND AMATEUR AGREED THAT THE ACTION WAS HOT, HOT, HOT AT THE DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP SPONSORED BY THREADNEEDLE, A LEADING INTERNATIONAL INVESTMENT HOUSE. A 15 GOAL TEAM HANDICAP FOR THIS EVENT ENSURED THAT WE WOULD SEE NOTHING BUT HIGH QUALITY PLAY THROUGHOUT, AND WE WERE NOT DISAPPOINTED.



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Faris Al Yabhouni & Rashid Al Habtoor



▲ The winning team, Abu Dhabi Polo

Held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Deputy Ruler of Dubai, at the beautifully groomed and appointed Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club, this is the Gold Cup's second year. The Club itself is truly a stunning venue "for everything equestrian and a lot more", according to its promotional material. It has 336 stables and 13 paddocks, two international standard polo fields, show jumping and riding arenas, a pool, spa, gym, lounges, dining rooms and terraces.

Rashid Al Habtoor, a player with 20 years experience who heads Mahra Polo Team, the winners of the Dubai

Polo Gold Cup 2010 and the Silver Cup 2011, says that, although he was disappointed not to advance to the semi-finals in the Gold Cup this year, "The Cup Series is a great event. To have 16 teams at this level and 45 or 50 polo professionals in Dubai for this event is a great step for Dubai. Not many countries in the world host play at this level."

The Gold Cup Series Director, Santiago Torreguitar, agrees. "The quality of play has been just so good, the games so close...Mohammed (Al Habtoor, Cup Series Chairman) has put fantastic support behind this event." We found the organisation and the use of technology for the

event pretty much flawless, following not only the early planning stages of the series before the event, but also daily scores and news during the event on the Dubai Polo Gold Cup website (www.dubaipologoldcup.com) and on its dedicated Facebook page. We were also able to purchase our tickets on-line in advance, a great convenience.

After thrilling qualifiers and the semi-final, advancing to the Threadneedle Gold Cup final, Abu Dhabi Polo faced Dubai Falcons. Abu Dhabi Polo (patron and avid horseman Faris Al Yabhouni, and team mates Ramiro Dagna, Alfredo Barabucci, and the remarkable Facundo Sola)



▲ Action on the field

▼ Spectating in style

took the Gold, winning nine goals to seven. Dubai Falcons showed spirit, fight, and technique, led by Saeed bin Draï, and even with the skill and expertise of team members Nicolas Petrachi, Tomas Iriarte, and Salvador Ullaa the Falcons could not save the day.

If I could hazard a guess, the most valuable player of the tournament was the skilful Argentinean Facundo Sola, the charger of the Abu Dhabi team. He's been a player for 17 years and he is only 21 years old, so, yes, that means that he's been playing polo from the age of four! With a seven handicap, he's earned his place to give advice and his advice for young players: "Work a lot with the horses, ride a lot, practice a lot and train a lot." His father once told him that every time you step onto the field it is to win, never give up. "Even if it was my father or brother on the other side, I always played to win,



and after the match we were all just family again.”

Ghantoot Polo (led by keen polo player Nasser Al Shemsi and including team players Nasser Al Dhaheri, Gonzalo Azumendi, and Hugo Barabucci), won the subsidiary final beating DCC Sumaya in a tight eight to seven match. Hugo Barabucci, a six handicap powerhouse on the Ghantoot Polo Team, described the quality of play, “The whole tournament has been very good, the games excellent”. He looks forward to more polo tournaments of this calibre in Dubai in the future, but feels, as did many of the officials and players I spoke with, that perhaps for now maintaining a 15 handicap tournament makes sense and will ensure good quality play, a more inclusive spirit, and more opportunity for events.

Throughout the week, what added to all of the action and excitement and enriched the experience of the event, was the informed and amusing Adam Snowdon, the qualifiers and semi-final commentator. A two handicap player himself with years

of mileage under his wings, he led the spectators through play by play action and the inscrutable rules of play and penalty with wit, humour, enthusiasm, and a critical eye, finding plays “cracking”, “cheeky” or “beautiful”.

Umpires Keyte, Seavill, and Ellis were very strict wardens of the game, with a couple of calls which raised some comment in the field, but it was all for the sake of horse and human safety and to preserve the integrity of the sport. It is difficult, indeed, to spot a bump or ride-off a few feet off angle or line from the sidelines of a 300 yard field or even seated on a moving pony infield, so the decisions are left to the umpires, who assumed them in this tournament with firm, but calm, authority.

As time ran out on the final chukka of the match and the players cleared the field, there was more excitement yet to come. Up in the sky high above the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club two light aircraft circled – then first one diver, then the next jumped out and paraglided down onto the field carrying the prized Gold Cup

and other awards, to the merry astonishment of the crowds. Then accompanied by a bevy (flock?) of ‘polo cheerleaders’ in gold boots with pom-poms, the winners came forward to receive their due.

The festivities didn’t end there. Following the award ceremony, the spectators and players retired to mid-field for a full-on party with DJ Serhan, DJ Mark Pickup and the Playboy Mansion DJ Lil Louda playing the latest, all hosted by the Horizon Lounge.

With the relentlessly exhilarating action on the field, the festivities, and the chic ambience of the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club, the Dubai Polo Gold Cup is certain to attract even more spectators and players next year. We certainly plan to be there! 🏆

**Pictures courtesy of:
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▼ A joyous celebration, Faris Al Yabhouni & his brother

