

WOMEN IN POLO

THE 'QUEENS' OF THE SPORT OF KINGS

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

I LOVE POLO. I WRITE ABOUT THE SPORT. I USE WORDS LIKE 'THUNDERING', 'POWERFUL', 'FORCEFUL', AND 'COMMANDING', ADJECTIVES NORMALLY RESERVED FOR THE MALE OF THE SPECIES. HERE HT IS HONOURED TO REPORT ON WOMEN IN POLO WHO DESERVE TO BE DESCRIBED IN THESE WORDS AND MORE, LIKE 'DETERMINED', 'FOCUSSED', 'DEDICATED', AND 'COMMITTED', TRUE ROLE MODELS FOR POLO AND FOR WOMEN IN SPORT IN GENERAL, WITH PROFILES OF POLO-PLAYING ADVOCATES HER HIGHNESS SHEIKHA MAITHA BINT MOHAMMED BIN RASHID AL MAKTOUM, HER SERENE HIGHNESS PRINCESS ANNA OETTINGEN-WALLERSTEIN, AND AMERICA'S OWN POLO ROYALTY SUNSET 'SUNNY' HALE.

Why did HT choose to profile these three women in this issue? Yes, there are the other very deserving women in the polo world, female pioneers who heroically broke the first bricks in the gender barriers in the sport of polo, and there are also many legendary and unforgettable women polo patrons, as well as the famous and talented women players with higher handicaps, all of whom we hope to cover in future issues. But what these three women share is a combination of unique attributes exemplifying today's all-around model woman representative of this magnificent sport.



First, they are not just supporters and observers. They are all hands-on players who have participated in such major tournaments as the Queen's Cup, the British Open, the US Open and Soto Grande, as well as other tournaments throughout Europe, the US, Asia, and the Middle East. They are rough and tumble; they have paid their dues in sweat and treasure. They are horsewomen in their bones.

They are achievers and doers. While each of our profilees can and do successfully play tournament polo with the men, each of them is an unabashed, unparalleled, and unrelenting advocate for women and girls in polo. In this capacity, they have each in their way created an institution or path for other women or girls who would dare to reach for the mallet.

Several organisations have been founded to encourage and support women's participation in the sport of polo, including the venerable International Women's Polo Association (IWPA) founded by Pippa Grace in 1989, formally launched in

1997, and sponsored by the Ascot Park Polo Club. Another dynamic force in women's polo is the Women's Championship Tournament (WCT) founded by Sunny Hale.

Beyond the formal institutions, women's matches, teams, tournaments, clinics, and exhibitions also reach thousands of people and introduce more and more women and girls to the sport. Indeed, women's and girls' participation in polo is growing exponentially. According to statistics by the United States Polo Association (USPA), women now account for more than a third of all registered players. New players are introduced and nurtured through events such as Princess Anna's prestigious annual 'Girls Only' Tournament series in Europe and Sheikha Maitha's Ralph Lauren International Ladies Polo Tournament held in Dubai, her Pinkz7 women's team and her very successful high-goal UAE Team.

Social media have a role to play as well. The seriously fun Women In Polo (WIP), active on Facebook, is

a recently formed charity aiming to promote opportunities in polo for women and girls who want to play and/or work in the sport. Recognising that women's polo is not only thrilling and fun, but is also the fastest growth area in global polo, its mission is to "turn these superb advantages into genuine opportunities across the board for female players of any age or ability who share our vision."

They explain: "Started in the UK but already with an international following we aim to create more opportunities for girls and women to play and work in polo...We want to try and level the field by creating more interesting and exciting playing opportunities for female players at all levels – and male players can join in too – if we let them!!!!"

With that, we now introduce you to our three star HT profilees, Her Highness Sheikha Maitha bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Her Serene Highness Princess Anna Oettingen-Wallerstein, and America's own polo royalty Sunny Hale.



HER HIGHNESS SHEIKHA
MAITHA BINT MOHAMMED BIN RASHID AL MAKTOUM

"I THINK IT'S A SPORT THAT ENCOMPASSES GRACE AND BRAVERY AND COURAGE."

Whilst spoken about the sport of polo by Sheikha Maitha, these positive attributes could very well describe this caring philanthropist, accomplished Olympian, gracious and dignified royal, and the Arab region's first and foremost female polo player and advocate – grace, bravery and courage!

Sheikha Maitha, a daughter of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Constitutional Monarch of Dubai and Prime Minister and Vice President of the United Arab Emirates, has quietly and elegantly made her mark as an athlete, lady and royal.

Although a rider all of her life, she directed her early athletic attention to martial arts and once she did so, she was on her determined way, starting her rise to the top. She won the Silver medal at the 2006 Asian Games in Karate and represented the UAE in the 2008 Summer Olympics in the sport of Taekwondo.

However, a back injury cut short her promising rise in that sport and led to a series of surgeries, which left her with a dilemma – what to do with the strength, energy and competitive spirit within her. Horse riding was a natural choice, but how could she take a risk with show jumping, the horse sport she knew? It was then that she was introduced to the strong and sturdy, but gentle and responsive and more or less earth-bound polo ponies at Desert Palm by international polo player and patron Ali Alwardy. She immediately took to this special sport and she hasn't turned back.

From novice training to high goal competition Sheikha Maitha made the move in a trajectory that took many of the people involved in the polo world quite by surprise. It is one thing to have a passion and the resources to fulfil it; it is quite another to achieve

the physical skills, strength, stamina, competence, horses, and entourage to actually compete at this level in the big league with the high goal players in so short a time.

She started her serious campaign at the 10-12 goal Cartier International Dubai Polo Challenge in February 2012, then on to the prestigious polo star-studded charity Laureus Polo Cup benefiting Laureus Sport for Good Foundation Argentina, playing with team members Pablo Macdonough and Nachi Heguy in June 2012; and then straight into the big time playing in the 20-goal Bledisloe Warwickshire Cup in July/August 2012 on the venerable Godolphin team.

But her road to high-goal was only just beginning. Warming up 2013 with her win in January at the 16-goal Emirates Cup followed in rapid succession in February by her team's win in the 10-12 goal Cartier International Dubai Polo Challenge and her golden-goal victory in extra time in the April Cup at Desert Palm with her all-girls' Pinkz7 Team, she positioned herself in England for her British high-goal season campaign in earnest.

There on 10 June she assayed the high-goal Cartier Queen's Cup at Guards Polo Club and was just squeaked out of the semi-finals by Alwardy's Dubai Team. A mere one week later, she is back on her pony to win the GCC Trophy. Only three days later, she returned to the Laureus Cup for team IWC Schaffhausen with a near-miss.

The rest of June and July kept Sheikha Maitha busy winning several impressive matches including vis Cortium, Lucchese and Emlor at the mighty Grand Slam-ranked Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup, interrupted on July 14 to generously participate in

the Fifth Chukker Access Bank match to support UNICEF in its anti- HIV/AIDS and anti-poverty campaigns in northern Nigeria.

This is all beginning to make me dizzy...but on she gallops to the 22-goal 42nd International Polo Tournament in Sotogrande for the Hublot Gold Cup in July and August, playing in both medium and high goal. Whew!

But no less impressive than all of this is the effort by Sheikha Maitha to open the sport of polo to women in the Middle East, with her highly successful all-women Pinkz7 team and her historic Ralph Lauren International Ladies Polo Tournament held in December 2013. This tournament, the first women's international polo event in the Middle East, lofted women's polo into the world arena and advanced the reputation of the UAE and the world view of women in the Middle East. Make no mistake, this was an event of historic proportions (Sunny Hale called it "an unbelievable moment in history") and was successful due to the strength and regal persistence of Sheikha Maitha and her supportive royal family, in particular her father HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The tournament was created to help build awareness of the sport of ladies' polo in UAE and to support Dubai Cares, a leading local charity, which helps to provide children access to quality primary education in developing countries.

This young royal born into privilege learned an important and humbling life lesson through sport: "I love sports. I love athletes. I love what sportsmanship represents, the value of sports. Just win or lose," she said. "It's very fair. There's no class, you know. Everyone is equal. You're on your merit."

HER SERENE HIGHNESS PRINCESS
ANNA OETTINGEN-WALLERSTEIN

"I REALLY LIKE LADIES' TOURNAMENTS...THEY'RE A BIT MORE AGGRESSIVE. THE GIRLS FIGHT MORE!"

HSH Princess Anna is not a heritage player but took to the game like a natural seven years ago when she was introduced to the sport. Her eye and heart are fascinated by the dynamics and elegance of the sport, the power, speed, and technique, but as much as that, the win. Her heart is also with her horses and her beloved Polo Club Wallerstein in beautiful Bavaria, Germany, where she works her horses every day.

The House of Wallerstein has a century old equine history. Prince Eugen and later his son, Prince Carl-Friedrich, had a strong influence on horse racing in their position as President of the International Club Baden Baden (1985 -1991).

Polo Club Wallerstein is located at the estate of the Princes of Wallerstein. Positioned in the splendid and wild countryside of southern Germany, the club emanates a gentle and refined abundance. She and her husband welcome polo players, sports enthusiasts, horse lovers and friends from all around the world to share in the splendour of Schloss Wallerstein and to enjoy their highly acclaimed horses and the sport of polo.

Prince Carl-Eugen and Princess Anna are also dedicated to introducing more women to the

sport and as president of the Polo Club Wallerstein Princess Anna is patron of her 'Girls Only' team and the founder and promoter of the annual international 'Girls Only' Polo Cup tournament series. In this capacity, Princess Anna has emerged as a dedicated and energetic ambassador for ladies polo worldwide. This international event is the most prestigious polo tournament for women in Germany and without doubt a prized and highly anticipated polo event throughout Europe.

Beyond hosting the Wallerstein Polo Cup, British Polo Days, and the 'Girls Only' Polo Cup at home, the sport allows Princess Anna to meet interesting personalities and to travel the globe with her husband to play polo at beautiful venues.

But, in fact, when asked, she would tell you that her own personal polo highlights include ladies' tournaments such as the Pink Polo Tournaments at Thai Polo Club in Pattaya, Thailand, the Royal Salute Cup in Jodhpur, India and recently the first Ralph Lauren International Ladies' Polo Tournament in Dubai in December 2013. As she describes it: "Women's polo is growing and it is good to see that women are respected as athletes in polo."

She looks to certain high-level

polo players for inspiration including the Tomlinson brothers, Luke and Mark, as well as legendary polo player and polo reporter Sarah Wiseman, as well as high-goaler Nina Clarkin who with +4 handicap is the UK's top woman player and one of the world's leading players. "They are brilliant riders, excellent, elegant but tough players and they take a lot of care for horses' well-being and for horsemanship in all of its aspects."

Her love of the sport is deep: "We all need something for which we are willing to make sacrifices, something that excites us and gives us that exhilarating sense of being alive. That something is polo for me. It is never too late to start. There is a lot of space for improvement and we all need to grow from day to day."

"Polo is dangerously close to becoming a downright obsession of mine. I started that sport very late in my life, but I am so thankful for every moment in this sport, in the past and future."

To young and upcoming players she has these words of advice: "It is important for young polo players, first, to be good riders and to be good in horsemanship. It is equally important to know that in order to become a good player you must treat a polo horse with respect."





SUNSET "SUNNY" HALE

"TO THOSE OF YOU WHO EVER HAD A DREAM FOR YOURSELF...I SAY GO FOR IT!"

Reared on polo, Sunny Hale has taken her life-long passion for polo and horses and created a life and career of professional polo in a man's world and in the process has become America's chief advocate for women's polo and the most famous woman player in the world, a true living legend. From an early age, Sunny found her sport and with discipline, hard work, training, as well as an innate natural talent and competitive spirit (and maybe a touch of stubbornness?), she has risen to the top of the sport, not only in specialised women's polo, but in high-goal international polo tournaments as well.

In fact, in her formative years, the only place to get serious high-level competitive experience was on men's teams, so she set her sights on proving herself in that rough tough masculine world. And she worked, and she was noticed, and she worked some more, and she was invited to join tournament play and with luck and drive she found herself a professional polo player travelling the world and being paid for what she loves.

A true pioneer in the sport of polo, she has at one point held a 5-goal handicap, the highest handicap of any female player in the world. She is the first woman in history to win the US Open Polo Championships, which together with the Argentine Open and the British Open are the highest ranked polo tournaments in the world, the polo world's Grand Slam events. She has earned the prestigious Woman Polo Player of the Year award a record seven

times and in 2012 was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.

Whoa, stop right there...now I'm impressed. The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame is dedicated to honouring women of the American West who have displayed extraordinary courage and pioneering fortitude, so it looks like they got the right cowgirl. Hall of Fame honourees include such luminaries and legends as Annie Oakley, Dale Evans, Georgia O'Keefe, Sacagawea, and Sandra Day O'Connor.

What passion, what obsession, and against so many odds, drives a person to continue to strive to achieve a nearly impossible goal? She tells HT: "I believe if you have a dream, you should go for it. Inspiration is the moment that your true passion presents itself and it is the window you choose to walk through or let close... either way it's all up to you. The by-product of following your dream is a fulfilled life."

Not content with being the best and most famous female player in the world, she set out to pave the road for other women to follow. The effect of the Women's Championship Tournament on the development of women's competitive polo is momentous and historic. Founded in 2005 by Sunny Hale to promote women's polo and top level women's polo competitions, the WCT is now the largest women's polo league in the world, where the top female polo

players compete. From strength to strength this tournament over the years draws women players through a qualification crucible at their local polo clubs all over the world to produce a sterling level of competition at the top, the annual Women's Championship in Wellington, Florida each April.

With pride she enthuses: "Women's polo is experiencing a moment in time where history is being rewritten. The competition is getting better and better and there are more new tournaments being added each season. I created the WCT out of a desire to network all of the women who share the same passion for polo around the globe and promote top level competitions among them. There are so many more opportunities for women arising and with the great success of new tournaments like the first ladies tournament in Dubai, the possibilities are endless."

We end this profile with Sunny's words of advice to women players: "My best advice to women players is that if you have a goal, be willing to work hard at what you want and prove yourself with your performance, your goals are reachable if you follow this formula. I have played with and for some of the greatest players of our time in the highest levels of the sport, so I can say this with absolute certainty. I would also say that one of the greatest gifts is to be able to remain a respectable woman and a sportsman as you go after your dream, no matter what the pressure." 🙌