

## **MY FIRST POLO MATCH**

By Rossanna Hays

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Yellow vs. white, dust flying everywhere. Men and women on horseback chasing a relatively small white but dirty ball. Quickly all are in a jammed up bunch, suddenly a player has an open shot down the arena – a seemingly sure shot becomes a mass of horseflesh and players in another cloud of dust. Did he get a goal or not? The ball is somewhere – yes! It is a goal!!

The riders gather in the center of the field and the referee throws the ball into the center of the group. There is a great scramble for the ball. On horseback this is not easy. The ball gets passed rapidly from player to player and not necessarily on the same team. After one beautiful back shot, one-player charges forward with the ball more or less in front of his horse's feet. The horse skids to a stop, the player pitches into a forward roll over the horse's head, landing on his back on the ground. To top it off the horse's feet are wrapped in the reins. Additionally critical, the player is caught in the reins as well. After careful approach and assessment, referees and players calm the horse and rescue the player who miraculously appears eager to mount and continue playing.

Here we go again. A straight hard shot bounces off the horse – amazingly the horse is indifferent. Rider and horse move on. After a brief scuffle and break away, two players meet and cross their sticks with smiling acknowledgement like knights of old. The referees are on horseback, the ball retriever wearing a sombrero holding what looks like a fishing net with a long handle, the other in a baseball cap and whistle. Abruptly the sombrero falls to the ground on a fast turn. The horse does not like the hat on the ground and backs off. Cautiously the other referee dismounts his horse to retrieve it.

There are lots of penalties' and resulting clouds of dust flying everywhere as riders and horses scramble for the ball. As they fight for the ball the announcer states "They killed that snake – I hope." Someone scores. It is apparent to the spectators that the horse is as instrumental in the match as the rider. Their limbs play the ball skillfully as the rider directs him toward the goal.

This Polo Match is taking place in a beautiful remote spot in the Gallos Mountains on the El Caso Rancho owned by polo player Buzzy Easterling, a New Mexico Military Institute graduate. The story goes that the Spanish Conquistadors did not have a name for the many turkeys they found in the area so they named the mountains "gallos," Spanish for chicken. The match is the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Louie Nalda Memorial Polo Match. Buzz has played the game he loves since his days on the NMMI Polo Team in the mid-1950's. Buzz played two Chucks each day. It is impressive to see this senior citizen smoothly play along side the others ranging 20 years old and up.

We are seated under a rugged but very much appreciated tin covered grandstand, which seats about 50. Significantly we sit on old but comfy theatre seats retrieved from the original Santa Fe Opera amphitheatre some 220 miles away. Chuck Rogers, an experienced polo player and announcer, professionally calls every play, adding colorful understanding to the game. A polo player/lady veterinarian with a broken foot acquired at Polo, keeps score and rings what appears to be an old church bell hanging at the end of the grandstand for any penalty, to signal the 30 second warning and/or the end of the “Chuck”. Between each Chuck a truck driven by the multi-talented announcer with his trusty dog in his arms, rakes and sprays the field. Dogs are a most important part of this scene – a myriad of loyal ranch dogs with scruffy, dusty hair, mostly of mixed breeds. One in particular would place paws up on the wall in front of the spectators watching the game intensely.

The horses are sometime racehorses, mostly dark colored although we will see a paint and two whites. The grace, skill and rugged abilities of the riders are exciting to watch. There is nothing phony about this game or demonstration. It is the real thing. As one spectator said, this is the game of “The Royals.” Players own a minimum of four skilled horses along with all the appropriate equipment and housing. The professions of these extremely energetic players vary from ranchers, a lawyer, a veterinarian, a horse trainer, an EMT and a playboy. They come from near and far – Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Quemado, Ruidoso, NM, El Paso, TX, and AZ.

We witness two days of Polo. The first is a Round Robin; the second is the play offs between the previous day’s high scorers. We devote an average of 4 to 5 hours to each day’s 3-hour game. At the conclusion of each day, everyone was invited to the 200-year-old bunkhouse on a dusty road behind the stadium, for yummy barbequed beef, chicken, beans, green chili and tortillas. The bunk house was filled with memorabilia going back to school days, visiting dignitaries, bullet holes in the ceiling beams from restless cowboys shooting flies, a claw footed bathtub, patchwork quilts, rustic furnishings, bear skins and more. It has bunkhouse class.

The second day of games begins fast – Robert drives an airborne ball to the goal, misses, picks it up again and scores. After the ball is thrown in for the next play, he once again drives it toward the goal but hits the wall. You begin to learn the names of the aggressors, Dan Coleman and his wife Sarah, Ernesto, Adrian and Rye Whiskey, who just happens to be a young girl from Ruidoso. This day every play is faster and rougher for it is for the Winning Trophy. Balls fly into and over the wall many times. As it turns out Buzz’s Red Team wins, the Yellow Team is second and the White Team is third. A large silver bowl is presented to the winning team followed by appropriate trophies for second and third place. High scorers and their horses are recognized for their outstanding performance. Each is given exuberant cheers.

My first experience with Polo was a memorable one. It was thrilling, challenging and a great deal of fun. I can’t wait for next year’s nineteenth match.

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