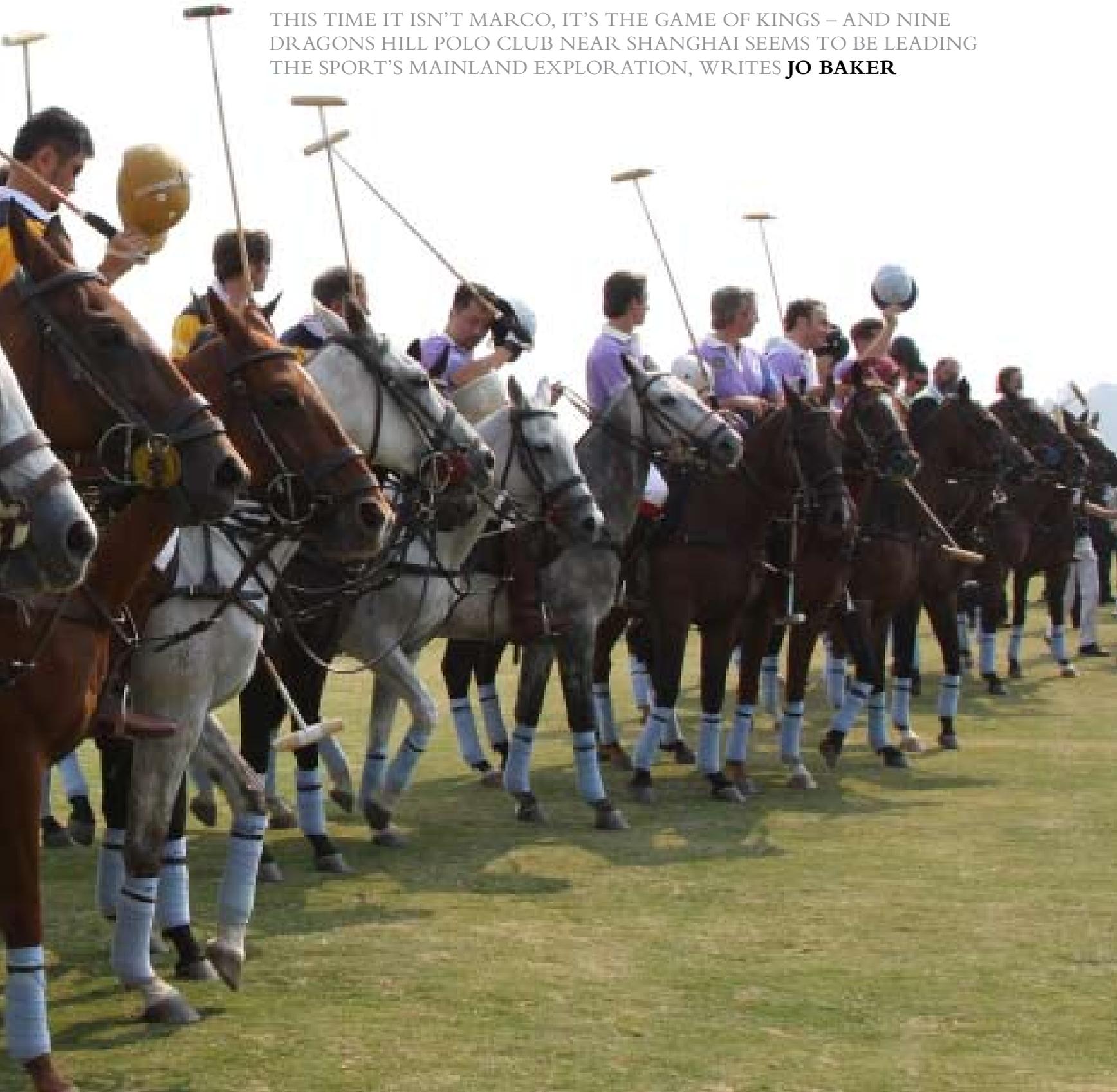




Polo Returns to China

THIS TIME IT ISN'T MARCO, IT'S THE GAME OF KINGS – AND NINE DRAGONS HILL POLO CLUB NEAR SHANGHAI SEEMS TO BE LEADING THE SPORT'S MAINLAND EXPLORATION, WRITES **JO BAKER**





“ If Prince Charles can come to Nine Dragons Hill and play polo, ties develop and bilateral trade will develop further

A LINE OF Australia’s finest polo ponies fidget unhappily in the stalls, one picking moodily at the stable planks with his well-bred teeth. China is in the throes of its worst winter in 50 years, and it’s not only people that are suffering. “They don’t really like being inside,” says Romiro Pellegrini, a young vet and skilful polo player from Argentina. “They’re athletes. They want to be out playing, and this snow just gets them down.”

The 65 ponies of China’s new Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club may well be dreaming of last October; three days in which man and horse tussled on a field of verdant grass to a backdrop of fizzing champagne, hats of architectural daring and delicate wags of enthusiasm. Shanghai’s elite were learning how to do “garden party” and in the process sporting history was being made.

Polo hasn’t always come with champagne, although it was a royal pastime in China for centuries. Its roots in Central Asia – Persia around 600BC it is guessed – suggest a sport played among horse-hardy villagers, with its past incarnations using the carcasses of goats and the heads of men. However, during its move through Tibet and India, and into the British Empire (where it was largely used to train cavalry), it was successfully refined and the Game of Kings emerged in all its present Mumm-quaffing glory.

Prince Charles and his brood play it, the Sultan of Brunei is a former player and many a deal in the Middle East has been eased along by a chukka or six. With polo’s role of honour ranging from dukes to CFOs, it seems only fitting that it be poised to hit one of the world’s fastest-growing elites.

“As prestige goes, it’s only really matched by having your own Formula One team,” says Steve Wyatt, the man who made both China’s first international polo tournament, and its home – Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club – a reality. He founded the club in August on a development belonging to his partner, millionaire tycoon Li Qinfu, where it complements a marina and a golf club, all encased in rosy, faux-Mediterranean architecture. The site between Hangzhou and Shanghai is within easy reach of a rich, restless client base and it nurtures a small but enthusiastic team of Chinese polo players-in-training.

Still, as impressive as the sport is, even Wyatt – a keen player – will admit that only 10 percent of the time involved is spent on a horse; and most of the club’s 300 or so members have taken the less active social membership. When considering polo for his Nine Dragons property, Li, who’s among the top 320 in China’s Hurun Rich List, foresaw a powerful new social niche for those in China’s top tier; one that would have been unthinkable just 10 years earlier.

“In the future we can see polo attracting a lot of leaders from other countries, like Britain or the Middle East,” Li says from behind a massive desk in his 43rd-floor Shanghai office. There is an oil painting of him in the pose of a Versailles noble hanging on the wall. “Not long ago, the Japanese Prime Minister played baseball with the Chinese Premier during a visit, and it was a very good chance for them to nurture their relations. My suggestion is that if Prince Charles can come to Nine Dragons Hill and play polo, ties between our countries can develop and bilateral trade will develop further!”

Wyatt stresses the global power of the polo network or, as he terms it, the “family.” “It’s a small community anywhere in the world, usually of successful business leaders. If you have an international handicap, you’re automatically welcomed into the circle in exclusive club X in country Y,” he says. “Several times I’ve just turned up; somebody will be out exercising the horses, you’ll get chatting to them over a coffee and then you find out that they’re running the Hermès fashion house or something like that.”

He picked a good example. Patrick Guerrand, director of Hermès International, does indeed play polo. He also owns The Polo Club du Domaine de Chantilly, France’s premier club.

This expansion into China is all part of an emerging global trend. As the rich grow richer and increasingly fond of seclusion, high-end villas, marinas, golf and equestrian clubs are being rolled into megawatt, gated leisure packages – such as the impending Culu Culu in Argentina (a country that harbours the highest concentration of skilled players) or Apes Hill in Barbados. For wealthy Chinese, time in the saddle can lead to an airtight world of wealth, heritage and high culture overseas.

However, these are early days. It hasn’t been easy to start a club from scratch in a country with little horsemanship in its modern history. Polo circles have the bar set high, and quality control is Wyatt’s one major worry. He and Li brought in 14 thoroughbred polo ponies from Australia, Pellegrini from a club in Thailand and the deftest of Mongolia’s young horse hands, as well as a clubhouse furnished with antlers and



between our countries can ”



polished leather. But the key, he says, was in piquing the interest of the right men.

“The point is, you only get one chance to create a first impression, so it’s important that you have people who are of the kind that you’d expect to be gentleman players or patrons,” he explains.

He found his gentlemen – three of them at least – on the racetrack. Ferrari racers have just the right combination of wealth and personality, Wyatt decided, plus an essential competitive streak.

His idea was to train them for participation in a pioneering international championship at the club – one that could rally the local elite.

The three are Larry Lin, Michael Wang and Tony Wang – a group of chairmen, managing directors at the very top of their professional game. The club’s fourth Ambassador Team player is Brian Xu, whose Shanghai Marco Stationery company is responsible for manufacturing a vast proportion of the world’s pencils. He discovered the sport during a stint in Santa Barbara and was keen to get back in the saddle.

From little or almost no equestrian experience, the four men found themselves in front of a 3,000-strong crowd 10 weeks later, on two freshly inaugurated polo fields recently pulled from the sea. Each man was placed in a team with some of the world’s top polo contenders, including international championship winners, a former national team captain and the reigning world champion elephant polo player, James Manclark. A landmark exhibition match also took place between new, mostly overseas-trained teams from Shanghai and Beijing.

As aficionados will probably note, a real appreciation of the sport can’t be honed in a year; and polo’s frilly spectator culture is as big as the sport itself. “We spent a while beforehand with PR getting the message out there about what polo is,” remembers Wyatt. “We did an etiquette day for ladies with sponsorship from a hat manufacturer.

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Champagne flowed. It was a way of talking about garden party – how to look and be the part. Those not dressed appropriately on the first day – by the third day they'd all got it."

Tournament sponsorship came from Royal Salute Whisky with its brand ambassador, the 13th Duke of Argyll, rambunctiously present along with other hues of European

nobility. The Royal Salute Cup came from HRH Queen Elizabeth's jeweller, Richard Fox. Divots were gleefully trodden in, luxury cars test driven, best hat competitions held and an extravagant gala dinner hosted among the Renoirs and Degas of a fine art fair at Shanghai's Exhibition Centre (a horse and carriage were craned in); all hooking a local upper crust which, until then, had thought golf or sailing to be as good as it got.

Wyatt is determined that the next event should raise the bar higher and he's keen to expand his ambassadors team among the business elite. Another generation of new players has signed up for the club's intensive tournament skills course, one of few in the world (although clubs in other countries are jealously protective, here there's a well directed push – provided you have the right credentials).

"I don't know if polo will happen in the next Olympics, but the next World Cup . . ." Wyatt says before pausing. "Well, it would be awesome to have a Chinese national team there."

He's not alone with his ambitions. There are a few other small polo operations in China, though allegedly none with thoroughbred polo ponies. Li also has grand plans for the property as a whole, and speaks with a gleam in his eye of an intricate Disney-meets-Sea-World-meets-Monaco kind of sprawl that aims to rival Macau as a mini-break destination.

But for now, the ponies must find their stride after a very chilly winter, perhaps warmed by the knowledge that being a pioneer has never been easy. ■

The Gist of the Game

Polo teams generally consist of four players, each on a horse, with a game split into six or eight chukkas of seven minutes each.

There are breaks of three minutes between each chukka, plus a five-minute break at half time.

The aim is to get the ball through the opponent's goal using a long mallet. Goal posts are 7.3m apart, and an outdoor polo field is roughly the size of eight football pitches.

Since the safety of the polo ponies (which are actually horses) is primary, penalties are given for reckless play and riders must take care not to bodily intercept the ball. Despite this, games are fast-paced, tremendously strenuous and often aggressive.