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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2012

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## Polo & hearts

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# THE NEW GUARD

IN THE PAST, POLO WAS THE REALM OF PLAYBOYS AND PACKERS. NOW THE ANCIENT SPORT IS INCREASINGLY BEING PLAYED BY WOMEN.

WORDS KERRIE DAVIES PHOTO CARLY EARL

On a 35C day, the row of plane trees cast cooling shadows beside Windsor Polo Club's sprawling fields. Horses rest, tethered to a long, silver horse float emblazoned with the words "Sydney Polo Club". Other horse floats are covered with budget tarpaulins, and the clubhouse is a basic bar and sausage-sizzle affair.

"You won't find much hoity-toity here," observes a polo player. You will however, find lots of polo playing women.

Under the trees, Zoe Kelly, in jeans and flats, sits with her son, Jasper, three, intently watching the eight horses galloping after a flying polo ball. Her husband, Hamish Kelly, is one of the eight, despite only learning to ride a horse five years ago. Tomorrow, it's her turn to play.

"I'm envious when he's playing because I want to be out there. But not today in this heat," she observes from the cool of the trees. "It's usually not this hot, as the polo seasons are autumn and spring."

Zoe, along with fellow competitor Sophie Utz are part of a rising number of women polo players who rediscovered horses when they discovered they could play the game. "Women in polo is the fastest growing area of the sport," Riverlands Polo School founder, Adam Meally, comments.

"Recently, 400 people booked in for lessons, of which 85 per cent were women."

Zoe will be playing in the Paspaley Polo

## WHERE TO LEARN

**Polo:** Riverlands Polo School at Windsor Polo Club.

Lessons from \$100 and non-competitive club chukka membership available. The club has 15 polo ponies available for lessons and games seven days a week.

**W:** windsorpoloclub.com.au

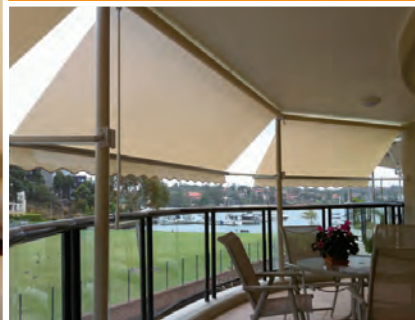
**Riding Lessons:** Centennial Park Equestrian Centre.

**W:** cpequestrian.com.au

**Pony Club:** Avondale Pony Club, St Ives. Olympian equestrian Edwina Tops-Alexander is a life member.

**W:** avondaleponyclub.org.au

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ABOVE: Sophie Utz and Zoe Kelly at Centennial Parklands Equestrian Centre. LEFT: Polo women in action.

in the City, and both she and Sophie are in the upcoming ladies' event in Windsor. The latter is one of the few events which are gendered. Most events are mixed, with player chosen on ability and handicap mix. "It's liberating," says Sophie as she unwraps protective pink bandages from her polo pony Tangles' forelocks.

"I love the adrenalin and hearing the thunder of hooves. The hardest thing for me is nerves. You have to go for it out there. Adam (Meally) and I are working on that."

Mothers like Zoe Kelly have also found that, unlike racing, polo is family friendly.

"Hamish and I play at different times mostly so one of us looks after Jasper. If we play together, we need to bring the nanny or family to look after him so I can concentrate on playing polo," she says. She and Jasper may be a mother-son team one day, but today, Jasper, who has a rocking horse and polo stick at home, sits on a picnic chair munching a sausage sandwich.

Nearby, Sophie sits in the shade watching the action for tips. Like Olympian Edwina Tops-Alexander, Sophie was a member of Avondale Pony Club in St Ives, where many north shore girls (and boys) learn to ride. When she discovered polo lessons at Riverlands Polo School, next to

Windsor Polo Club, after high school, it was a whole new game, literally. She's now about to buy her first polo pony, and is considering whether she can stretch to a pair. Most dedicated polo players have at least two horses each, because horses need to be changed every chukka (seven and a half minutes) to rest.

"Everyone's budget varies," says Pam Mascart from Wollstoncraft, a polo supporter. "People can get obsessed. You can lease horses until you understand

how far you want to get into the sport, but you need to know your limits."

Zoe and Hamish have five horses, who are stabled nearby. "We first went to polo in the UK, and Hamish loved it. I was the horsey one, so it was

funny," she says. "We were told, it's better if you both play because it takes up so much time. So I said, "Ok, I'll do it too."

While Zoe grew up riding, she thinks it may have actually hindered rather than helped when it came to polo. "We have people who have never ridden," she says.

"You have to ride differently when you play polo anyway. Women who are good at hockey, golf and tennis are often good at polo. Adam (Meally) is great at identifying potential players and bringing people on."

Polo's premise seems to be no guts, no

glory. The fast, reactive ponies explode into action after the ball. Pam gives a beginner's guide to polo in the shady sidelines.

"It's safety first," she says. On the field, the horses legs are protected, and players wear helmets, mouthguards, knee guards and elbow guards. An ambulance is on standby at tournaments. Pam's daughter Billie once hurt her fingers while going for a goal, and once was briefly knocked unconscious when her horse slipped.

While Sophie and Zoe are late starters, Billie started aged 12, when the family lived in France. After finishing her degree, she hopes to travel as a polo player for a couple of years. She's one of Sydney's best juniors.

"Am I?" she laughs.

"That's what Zoe said," Pam replies.

"Billie and my husband Bruno often play together. I love watching it, but I don't want to play competitively," says Pam. "We are here every weekend during the season."

Zoe knows the feeling.

"Our friends aren't fans of our polo addiction," agrees Zoe.

"They know to expect us late to invites during the polo season because we are here." Pam suddenly breaks the peace.

"Heads up" she calls. A ball soars over the boundaries.

"It has become a passion for us," Pam says. "You don't turn your back on polo."

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HOITY-TOITY  
HERE'**

### WHERE TO SEE POLO

**WHAT:** Ladies Polo International and Hector King Trophy

**WHEN:** Sunday, November 11, from 10.30 am

**WHERE:** Windsor Polo Club, Old Kurrajong Rd, Richmond

**COST:** General admission \$20; Car boot picnic area: \$100 per car (max. four people in car) and "Clubhouse" Catered Marquee (including alcohol) from \$135pp

**W:** windsorpoloclub.com.au

**WHAT:** Paspaley Polo in the City.

**WHEN:** Saturday, November 17

**WHERE:** Centennial Park.

**COST:** \$105

**W:** ticketek.com.au

### WHAT TO WEAR

Sydney Polo Club recommends maxi dresses and kaftans; wedges or pretty flats for divot stomping at half time; stylish jeans with a shirt; sunglasses and hats.



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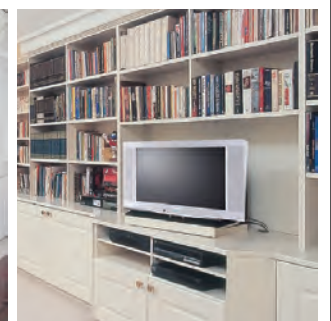
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