

**Forget the
Ralph Lauren
image.
“A ballet on
horseback,”
maybe,
but this sport
can get down
and dirty.**

Amy Moore, an interpersonal communication major from Dallas who is riding Reiner, scrimmages with Brandon Hart, a Norman public relations major on Ledbetter. Moore is captain of the OU women's polo team.

Mark Hancock



December 7, 1941—the bombing of Pearl Harbor—marked the end of an era; the lives of nations and individuals were changed forever, and traditions faded away. That day in College Station, Texas, between chukkers of a polo game, players from Texas A&M University and the University of Oklahoma listened to the words of war.

“We knew that would be the last game until the war was over,” remembers Clark Hetherington, the 1942 OU business graduate who was the team’s captain in 1941.

The pre-war years had been times of glory for OU polo. In *The Sooner Story*, Charles Long recounts that the Polo and Riding Association was organized on campus in conjunction with the Army ROTC to give instruction in riding and jumping to those interested in equitation; the horses were borrowed from the University’s military unit. From 1929 to 1934, Oklahoma, coached by the ROTC’s Captain Jerome Waters, had the winningest team in college polo. Some of the team’s success also can be attributed to Helen Hetherington, the ladies’ coach. According to her son Clark, Hetherington’s eye for quality horses allowed the OU team to have some of the best mounts in the country.

During the '20s and '30s, Ft. Reno, Oklahoma, served as a U.S. Cavalry remount station, stabling 30,000 to 40,000 horses. Through a breeding program designed to produce top-notch mounts for the cavalry, Oklahoma mares were bred to thoroughbred stallions owned by the government. Local horsemen kept the offspring for three to five years before the cavalry bought them back to be transported to military bases and college ROTC programs nationwide. Each year, Helen Hetherington and a handful of OU students would travel to Ft. Reno to choose a polo string from a herd of some of the nation’s finest horses.

At the end of World War II, the U.S. Cavalry disbanded. As an instrument of battle, the horse had become obsolete. The University’s ROTC program no longer had horses or a need to train riders, and OU was out a polo team. Even the Hal Niemann Polo Field, named for the only student ever killed in OU competitive sports, disappeared beneath a wave of temporary married-student housing. Appropriately the area became Niemann Apartments, the only reminder of OU polo’s proud history. Today, only a sign on a stone wall remains.

Continued



by Lisa C. Smith

Sooner Polo Returns



Forty-seven years after the last polo match, however, a handful of students decided to resurrect the tradition. They formed a fledgling polo team, which has "club sport" status, recognized but not funded by the University. Since its revival in 1988, the team has competed in an intercollegiate program sponsored by the United States Polo Association, involving 300 to 500 players from 21 universities. While the students' dream of reinstating the team now is a reality, the price of keeping the sport alive has been high.

Each year, the OU Polo Club struggles to generate enough support from alumni and friends to provide the needed horses, stables, grain, saddlery, instruction and money to survive. However, 1994 served as a watershed year in the team's development. Because of the students' hard work and a record number of donated horses, the OU polo team finally has come into its own.

The club's string of polo ponies has tripled to 17, allowing the Sooners to host matches with out-of-state teams in Norman for the first time since 1941. Alumni also have sponsored the stabling of a half-dozen ponies at a local indoor riding arena. For the first time in the club's modern history, the collegians can train and scrimmage against experienced polo players during the winter months, honing their skills and getting a leg up on the competition before regional and national play-offs in March and April.

Preparing polo ponies for the rigors of matches against some of the country's finest teams is no easy task. The horses must be fit enough to play the four chukkers (periods) required during one game of indoor or "arena" polo, the intercollegiate variety of the sport. They must be able to gallop hell-bent-for-leather, stop on a dime and pursue larger, faster horses, fearlessly bumping opponents while the rider swings a mallet overhead, attempting to hit an inflatable indoor polo ball that is about triple the size of a tennis ball.

While the mere mention of polo elicits raised eyebrows



Djelal Kadir, editor of OU's World Literature Today and faculty sponsor of the OU Polo Club, saddles Reiner as the two prepare for a weekly Sunday scrimmage with the student polo players.

and possibly a simper from a public conditioned by Madison Avenue's vision of the game, the reality is quite different. Manure is not part of the Ralph Lauren image; neither are frozen water buckets in winter, flies in summer or warm, hairy bodies that can bite or buck, depending upon their mood. Club members spend three to four hours both morning and night, rain or shine, feeding, grooming and exercising the horses. No matter what.

The students care for all of the horses, year round, without any outside supervision, notes

Lynn Moore, whose son Mark reorganized the OU club as a student in 1988. "The students have to take care of the horses themselves. If they go out partying one night, it doesn't matter. The horses still have to be fed. If they don't feed them properly, the horses can colic and die."

OU Polo Club president Kim Buttram agrees that the work involved is "never-ending," as is the cost of caring for the horses. Each horse's diet of crimped oats and alfalfa, board, horse shoes and veterinarian bills amount to nearly \$100 per animal per month. While the club charges each member dues of \$200 per semester, sustaining the polo team would be impossible without outside donations of stabling and financing.

Among many local horsemen and alumni who have supported the club, Tulsa polo players Jack Oxley, a 1959 OU geology graduate, and Joe Casey have donated ponies to the team. In addition to loaning ponies and pasture, the club's supporters give time, energy and patience to the students. Veterinarians from the Oklahoma Equine Clinic care for the horses, making themselves available night or day for emergencies ranging from colic to a gashed leg requiring sutures and bandages. Several feed stores have advanced credit to the club when horses were hungry and cash was low, generously looking the other way for several months until money was available to pay the bill.

A number of seasoned polo players volunteer as coaches, discussing the finer points of backshots and bumping with

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students preparing for regionals and nationals. And each year the team goes throughout the Southwest in search of matches with its horses and gear loaded into a rig loaned and driven by David Ragland, of Edmond, a former USPA official.

But the polo team's biggest supporters have been Bob and Lynn Moore, owners of the Broad Acres Polo Club on Highway 9, southeast of Norman. For the past six years, the Moores' polo club has served as a home for OU's team, providing horses and stalls to the students, free of charge.

“We do it for the love of the game,” says Lynn Moore, explaining her family's continued support of the OU club although neither of her sons plays at the college level. “Hopefully, the students will come back and play at Broad Acres.”

For Mark Moore, a 1992 OU business graduate, much of the sport's appeal lies in the speed of the horses, the aggressiveness of the opponents and the possibility of injury or even death.

“It's a great thrill to play close to the edge,” says Moore, 1990's highest rated collegiate player in the USPA and team captain for a 1991 all-star team representing the United States in matches played in Argentina. “I never thought I would die playing polo, but I played as close to the edge as I could get—and sometimes I crossed over that line.”

The prospect of danger, challenge or glamour may lure students to polo, but the sport also teaches people skills, according to the club's faculty sponsor Djelal Kadir, editor of OU's *World Literature Today*. Kadir shares the assessment of humorist Will Rogers, himself a polo enthusiast: “Polo players are called gentlemen for the same reason that a very tall man is called ‘Shorty.’”

“The sport allows riders and horses to work together, and the students learn lessons that—whether they become members of a corporation, a political organization or a university—help them with the negotiations or relations associated with something larger than themselves. And in the process, they might become good players, too,” Kadir says.

Much of the horse training and management comes from a few students who have previous riding experience ranging from barrel racing to dressage. But Ragland

insists that the vast majority of students involved in collegiate polo knows nothing about horses before picking up a mallet.

“Of about 50 students on a collegiate polo team, 35 can't even ride at all,” he says. “That's typical. About 90 percent of the students who participate never would have had the opportunity to be exposed to polo otherwise.”

What begins as a college pastime becomes a life-long fascination for many of the Sooners. Clark Hetherington, retired as a Norman real estate developer, has played the sport for more than 50 years, the past eight as vice president of the West Palm Beach (Florida) Polo and Country Club.

“It's like an addiction,” says Ragland. “There's this saying, ‘The only way polo players leave the sport is by dying or going broke.’ There really is a lot of truth to that.”

But the rider is only a part of the game—and not the largest part, according to Ragland. “The real nitty-gritty of polo is the horse. About 70 percent of the sport is the horse, and the balance belongs to the player.” And he downplays polo's reputation as a rough sport. “The better a player becomes, the closer the game comes to being a ballet on horseback.”

While the college teams are separated into men's and women's divisions, male and female players are equally competitive, according to club president Buttram, who cites the challenges of the game.

“It's the hardest sport I've ever played,” she explains. “The rules themselves are very difficult, and you have to know what's going to happen two or three plays ahead. You have to stay on, try to control the horse and hit the ball, while concentrating on the other players.”

Despite intense competition between individuals and USPA teams, the students enjoy a unique camaraderie. “One of the reasons I love OU polo so much is because of what good friends we are,” says women's team captain Amy Moore (no relation to Mark), a Dallas resident whose polo career began at Culver Academy in Indiana before transferring to Oklahoma.

This spring, the women's team anticipates making its presence felt at the regional playoffs at Ft. Collins, Colorado, in early March. If team members play well, they



could reach the national play-offs in Burleson, Texas, in April.

While the team admits victory at nationals is a long shot, they remember 1990 when the men's team almost won. That near-championship had a shaky beginning two years earlier.

The 1988 team, consisting of Mark Moore and two other founding members, started by learning the game's rules and planning matches against other schools. "We never sat on a horse. We spent our time scratching out positions and strategy with a twig in the dirt," Moore remembers.

After arriving at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, the students prepared to play while arguing over whose team was the worst. "None of our students knew how to tack up," Moore continues. "I started wondering about their riding ability. And then our third player said, 'Hey, Mark, how do you get on?'" During that game, they fell off almost as much as they stayed on."

After carefully recruiting high school polo players and teaching local college students to ride, the men's team placed second in regionals from 1990 to 1992, each year losing to the eventual national champions.

This year, the women's team has the benefit of more, better-trained polo ponies than ever before, the use of an indoor arena and months of indoor coaching, courtesy of local players.

"We are going to have a very, very good girls' team. We feel that everyone is going to be surprised," Buttram predicts.

In addition to working toward regional and national competition, club members and alumni have set their sights on the future, planning fundraising efforts for a permanent indoor arena, which would enable the club to train year round in all kinds of weather.

"It's paramount to have an indoor facility," Ragland says. "And someone needs to be there, year in and year out, maintaining the integrity of the program."

Moore agrees, adding, "Having an arena would add so much to University polo here. It would be the next step enabling us to have a club that would last—this time, forever."



Mark Hancock

Suzanne Claude, an advertising/pre-law major from Norman, tacks up Honor. Polo team members take complete care of the horses themselves every day, rain or shine.



OU Western History Collections

Alex Cheek, left, peers over the shoulder of D. B. McCampbell as he records the score of the 1938 OU-Oklahoma Military Academy polo match, won by the Sooners 8 to 5. Standing in uniform is the coach, L. R. Wingfield. Seated at right is the timekeeper, freshman Clark Hetherington, who in 1941-42 was the captain of OU's last varsity polo team.