



Mohamed Al Habtoor, patron of Silver Cup 2013, photo by Brad Fawcett

DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP 2013 FINAL A COMMANDING GHANTOOT WIN AT THE MIDDLE EAST'S PREMIERE POLO EVENT

By Bridget McArdle McKinney



HT RETURNED TO DUBAI AGAIN THIS MARCH FOR THE DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP FINAL ONLY TO BE DISAPPOINTED. YES, DISAPPOINTED THAT WE WERE NOT THERE TO SEE THE ENTIRE SILVER CUP SERIES OR THE QUALIFIERS AND SEMI-FINAL OF THE GOLD CUP SERIES, WHICH WE LEARNED WERE 'OMG!' THRILLING, 'IF ONLY YOU HAD SEEN IT!' THRILLING, 'BOY, YOU MISSED IT, TOO BAD!' THRILLING.

Held as usual on the stunning grounds of the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club at Arabian Ranches, this series is the most anticipated and prestigious open in the Middle East, bar none. There is really nothing like it and the effort taken to make it not just happen, but to make it special for participants and spectators is enormous.

You may recall our reports on the Dubai Polo Gold Cup from 2011 (Issue 35) and 2012 (Issue 39) where we felt a trend developing in the presentation of this incredible series. In 2011, the event was a solid polo tournament, but with a lot of bells and whistles catering for the casual observer. 2012 was the year that took a serious polo tournament to a more serious polo audience. And this year saw the evolving annual tournament try to find its feet with a combination of a chandeliered VIP tent and a catch-as-catch-can atmosphere on the lawns with toddlers and rowdies, coolers and beach umbrellas. Not entirely certain that this is the right combination but trial and error will, we're certain, result in a tournament presentation next year which is not too hot, not too cold, but just right.

THE FIRST AND THE BEST:

Held under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Deputy Ruler of Dubai, the chairmanship of Mohammed Al Habtoor, and Polo Management for the Cup Series of Santiago Torreguitar, this was the highest handicapped polo event in the Middle East, Africa or Asia, a genuine 'first and best' in a country of superlatives, the 'largests', 'tallests', and 'most expensive'.

"I am proud to see Dubai playing host to yet another top polo event," said Mohammed Al Habtoor, the Chairman of the Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series. "Each year the event reaches new heights. Dubai has quickly gained popularity and found its place on the polo world stage. In 2012 the Dubai Gold Cup Series was recognised by the World Polo Tour (WPT). We have been privileged to attract some big names to the event year after year. Of course it is lovely to see many familiar faces (players, officials and spectators), but it is also great to see new faces on and off the field. This year we have upped the stakes by

increasing the handicap from 15 to 16 goals. This means the Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series (Dubai Open) is now the highest handicapped tournament in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. A great achievement! Last year I was fortunate to lead my team to victory.”

Six teams took part in the Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series this year: Habtoor Polo, Mahra Polo, Zedan Polo, Bin Draï Polo, Abu Dhabi Polo and Ghantoot Polo.

The line-up for the series was:

Abu Dhabi Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
Faris Al Yabhouni (Patron)	UAE	0
Manuel Elizalde	Argentina	4
Juan Jose Storni	Argentina	5
Juan Ambroggio	Argentina	7

Bin Draï Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
Saeed Bin Draï (Patron)	UAE	0
Ignacio Ithurburu	Argentina	2
Salvador Ulloa	Argentina	7
Juan Jose Brane	Argentina	7

Ghantoot Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
HH. Sheikh Falah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (Patron)	UAE	
Ali Al Merri	UAE	0
Pelayo Berazadi	Argentina	4
Juan Zubiaurre Canal	Argentina	4
Facundo Sola	Argentina	8

Habtoor Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
Mohammed Al Habtoor (Patron)	UAE	0
Ignacio Bello	Argentina	3
Guillermo Cuitino	Argentina	6
Martinez Ferrairo Ezequiel Eduardo	Argentina	7

Mahra Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
Rashid Al Habtoor (Patron)	UAE	0
Guy Gibrat	Argentina	4
Augustin Canale	Argentina	6
Fernando Papi Bourdieu	UK	6

Zedan Polo		
Name	Country	Handicap
Amr Zedan (Patron)	KSA	0
Matias Logioco	Argentina	3
Rodolfo Ducos	Argentina	4
Nachi Heguy	Argentina	9

BRILLIANT QUALIFIERS:

Exciting qualifiers threw up the semi-finalists, pitting Habtoor Polo against Abu Dhabi and Ghantoot against Bin Draï.

One particular qualifying match, with Bin Draï facing Zedan, merits mention. In its qualifier, Bin Draï defeated Zedan by 7 goals to 6 in an exciting match, showcasing a high level of polo expertise and action. Zedan made a great start taking the score to 3 goals to 1 but a quick response by Bin Draï with Salvador Ulloa, the MVP of the game, tied the score at 3 in the end of the first seven minutes of the match.

Amr Zedan’s team, with Nachi Heguy (the monster 9-goaler whom HT interviewed in its issue 39) leading the action, maintained a one goal difference through the second and third chukkas until Bin Draï managed to tie the game and start the last chukka with 5 goals apiece. Juan Jose (JJ) Brane, with two goals gave Bin Draï the victory and the ticket to the Semi-finals of the Gold Cup.

HABTOOR AND GHANTOOT WIN THE SEMI-FINALS IN STYLE:

Both semi-final matches displayed a high level of polo with plenty of goals in the two games. The first match between Habtoor Polo and Abu Dhabi was a close game. In the first three chukkas both teams maintained a small goal margin between them. The first chukka Abu Dhabi led by 3 goals to 2, and in the second period they ended with 4 goals apiece. The third chukka gave Habtoor the advantage at 6 to 5.

The one goal lead was very important for Mohammed Al Habtoor’s team who played the fourth chukka in a very clever way and with an early goal by Mohammed managed to control the game and earn the victory.

In the second game of the Gold Cup semi-finals, Ghantoot played a superb match, with two great initial chukkas that were crucial for the final result. With a great performance by Facundo Sola, who scored four goals, Ghantoot went several goals ahead in the first half of the match

(5-1 and 7-2) to control the game in the second half. Despite Bin Draï reacting in the last chukka they couldn't manage to catch Ghantoot who finally won by 9 goals to 5.

GHANTOOT WINS THE GOLD CUP!

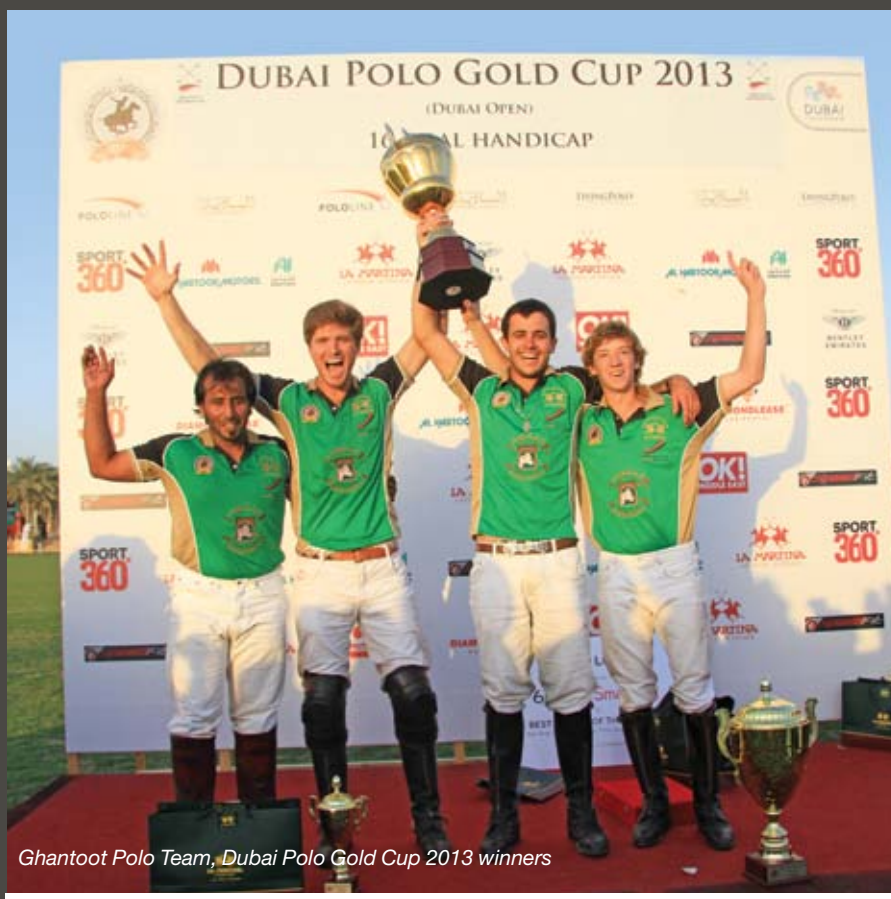
What a match! Ghantoot mastered Habtoor Polo in the Gold Cup Final by 14 goals to 6 to win the most important trophy of the season, Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series 2013. Bin Draï Polo Team won the Subsidiary Final after defeating Abu Dhabi by 10 goals to 7.

The team of Ali Al Merri, Juan Zubiaurre, Facundo Sola and Pelayo Berazadi played a thrilling and technically superlative match from beginning to end and took a deserved victory. After two tied chukkas, Facundo Sola, the MVP of the tournament, led Ghantoot in the second half of the game to a comfortable win. Sola scored 9 goals for his team and also was the top scorer of the tournament, Habtoor Polo tried hard, with patron Mohammed Al Habtoor and Captain Guillermo Cuitino playing a good game, but couldn't stop the excellent performance by Ghantoot.

While my heart is somehow always with the Habtoor teams, due to their patrons' and teams' personal dedication, investment, and vision, this time we had our eye on Ghantoot and, in particular, the young Facundo Sola.

Well, there he was – the true Most Valuable Player of this tournament – highest scorer, strong, skilful, energetic and humble, what we would call a true ambassador of the sport of polo. Facu, as he's known, is coming into his prime. For the 2013 polo Triple Crown, following a dazzling performance as part of the Magual team in the Qualifying Tournament and also in the Hurlingham and Palermo Opens in 2012, Facu's handicap was raised from 7 to 8 goals and he has been lured to join the La Aguada line-up, replacing Guillermo Caset, to wear the violet colours.

In 'PoloLine' he is quoted as saying: "This is a huge chance for me, I have to take advantage of it and give my



Ghantoot Polo Team, Dubai Polo Gold Cup 2013 winners



best for the team...I got a call from Javier (Novillo Astrada), before Christmas, and he told me about a chance to join the team. At first, I didn't want to be under an illusion so I didn't take it too seriously, but the truth is... I was completely excited about it!!!!!"

Well, we've been watching him for a while! As we wrote two years ago in our spring 2011 issue when Sola was playing for Abu Dhabi:

"If I could hazard a guess, the most valuable player of the tournament was the skilful Argentinean Facundo Sola, the charger of the Abu Dhabi team. He's been a player for 17 years and he is only 21 years old, so, yes, that means that he's been playing polo from the age of four! With a

seven handicap, he's earned his place to give advice and his advice for young players: "Work a lot with the horses, ride a lot, practice a lot and train a lot." His father once told him that every time you step onto the field it is to win, never give up. "Even if it was my father or brother on the other side, I always played to win, and after the match we were all just family again."

Before we end, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge Pelayo Berazadi's "El Pibe", the "Best Playing Pony" of the Final. Well done!

Congratulations to the winning Ghantoot team and to Habtoor Polo for bringing the sport of polo to new heights in the UAE. See you all there next year! 🏆