

ANDALE! ANDALE!

THE INAUGURAL EMBASSY OF ARGENTINA POLO CUP IN CAIRO

By Bridget McArdle McKinney



ON THE HEELS OF UNSEASONAL HEAT, A COOLING BREAK IN THE WEATHER OPENED FOR THE INAUGURAL EMBASSY OF ARGENTINA POLO CUP TOURNAMENT IN EARLY MARCH AT FAROUK YOUNES' LOVELY ABU SEIR FARM. THE EVENT, ORGANIZED BY THE EMBASSY OF THE ARGENTINE REPUBLIC IN EGYPT IN COOPERATION WITH THE EGYPTIAN POLO FEDERATION UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE FEDERATION OF INTERNATIONAL POLO, WAS AN UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS.

It is always a great pleasure to walk into the grounds of the Abu Seir Farm through a cool lush arbor and see the stately palm trees and abundant colourful bougainvillea swaying in the breeze and casting shadows on the bright green lawns and fields. It feels like entering another more serene and less complicated world.

At the top of the of the arbored walk we were warmly greeted by His Excellency Eduardo Varela, Ambassador of the Argentine Republic to Egypt, and Dr. Mohamed El Shamy, President of the Egyptian Polo Federation, who invited us to join the growing band of spectators for a pre-match reception hosted by the gracious Farouk Younes and his charming wife Jacqueline, who is also the very entertaining resident polo commentator.

This event was initiated by Ambassador Varela following other Argentine diplomatic missions

around the world. Embassy of Argentina Polo Cup tournaments have been held at Cowdray Park Polo Club in England, Thai Polo Club in Pattaya, Ibiza Polo Club, Capital Polo Club in the Washington D.C. area, Magyar Polo Club in Budapest, Islamabad Polo Club in Pakistan, and many other locales to promote friendship through Argentina's beloved sport, polo.

As Ambassador Varela describes it: "Polo can be seen as means of bringing Egypt and Argentina closer, two countries that, in spite of physical distance and different historical experiences, are much more similar than it seems. In any case, this polo match with the Argentine and Egyptian players and flags, beautiful Argentine ponies, and the Abu Seir Pyramids in the background which are 4,250 years old, seems to me to be a magnificent way of celebrating our friendship."

Promptly at 3 o'clock we were ushered to our places field-side and the match to determine the winner of this 8-goal Embassy of Argentina Polo Cup was on. Before an enthusiastic crowd of family, friends, and esteemed members of the diplomatic and business worlds, two powerhouse teams, Team Kings and OS Team, faced off. Kings Team included local stars Mohamed Bassiouni, Mohamed El Sewedy, Marwan Mostafa, and Mohamed Salah, while OS Team carried the Argentine weight with Omar El Sewedy, Ibrahim Awadalla, "Segundo" CondeseStanga, and "Tete" Silvestre Fanelli.

The players came out battling with equal offensive and defensive strength, each team keeping the other from putting much value on the scoreboard, leaving a halftime score of Team Kings 3 to OS Team 2. However, in the third and fourth chukkas OS Team put the steam on and could not be stopped! Final score: 10 to 4 in favour of OS Team. Well done!

On Friday, as part of this wonderful polo weekend the treasured Abu Seir Cup was played and won by Team Egypt 8 to 7 against Team Abu Seir. Team Egypt included players and alternates: Margret Badr, Tete, Sherif Shalaby, Mohamed Wahid, Karim Loza, Mohamed Rashad, Ahmed AbouZeid, and Moemen Mannaa. For Team Abu Seir there was: Segundo, Ali Hesham, Mohamed Khalil, Mohannad Mostafa, Hana Badr, Mostafa Idris, Hussein AbouZeid, and Adel Mohamadein. Congratulations on your win, Team Egypt!

As we watched the match, I had a growing awareness that the caliber of play, finesse, tactics, confidence, teamwork, strength, and speed – of both the players and horses – far out-performed matches I'd watched here in other years. I was very impressed. The difference was remarkable. Was I just imagining things?

"No, you're not", according to Farouk Younes, the revered former 12-year

President of the Egyptian Polo Federation, "This is the result of a long-term development programme based on three pillars: developing horses, training players, and building polo fields to international level."

"I have endeavoured to pass on all my experience of more than 50 years of playing at the highest level as well as having been the tournament director of two World Cups in France and Mexico, and playoffs in Europe, Pakistan, India and Spain. I have been strongly assisted by excellent board members who were selflessly dedicated to polo as well as experienced players and horsemen. I have also passed on all my international polo connections to the Egyptian Polo Federation, and having been for many years member of the board and the Executive Committee of the FIP, I have also succeeded to have Mr. Karim Loza replacing me at FIP in order to continue our presence since my retirement. I am also pleased that the presidency of Dr. Mohamed El Shamy, assisted by

a new generation of polo players, will be taking it to another level", Mr. Younes explained.

He continued, "More importantly the game was stagnating at the low goal level; therefore, it was essential to start from scratch and to encourage our players through a series of professional coaching as well as polo clinics locally and internationally. It is unfortunate, that to this date none of our players have participated in high goal polo tournaments. However, we are getting there as the local talent is improving and their skill and riding abilities are continuously rising."

In regard to the development programme, Mr. Younes explained that, first, as to the horses, 20 years ago polo was played in Egypt on local horses until Abu Seir Farm initiated a breeding and acquisition program specifically to produce polo ponies of international standard using the best Argentine stock. Mr. Karim Loza, Board Member of the Egyptian Polo Federation and Region Ambassador

of the Federation of International Polo, adds: "Farouk's Argentinean breeding programme has been instrumental in improving the local horse power and its positive impact on the game."

Then for the players, the program involves intensive expert training both inside Egypt and abroad, offering possibilities to play polo in international settings, and testing serious commitment to the sport at the highest level. The players are not only trained how to ride polo, but they are taught the rules, regulations, and tactics of the game. As Mr. Younes says, "These young people are the future". As to the playing field, much time and investment has been put into the development and maintenance of a proper safe playing surface as close to international grade as possible. "A good field is good for the horses, the players, and the speed and safety of the game", says Mr. Younes.

And this dedication to the improvement of the horses, players,

and playing fields and the success of this on-going programme were clearly on display during this tournament. It's the type of sharp, fearless, powerful play I love to watch.

After the final bell, as the grooms led their charges off the field and as the prize-giving and post-match celebrations began, I looked around at the beaming players, shining trophies, happy friends and families on this sunlit day at the warm and welcoming Abu Seir Farm and thought "this game has it all". Dr. El Shamy probably summed up this feeling best: "An event like this really shows everything about the sport. The social scene, the setting, the horses, the players, the spectators, the food and drink...all of it. Really, polo is not only a game, it's also a way of life. It's a festival!"

Or in our case, an Embassy of Argentina Polo Cup fiesta!

