



KBL DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP 2012

# STEPPING IT UP!

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By Bridget McArdle McKinney

GONE WERE THE POLO CHEERLEADERS WITH THEIR GOLD POM-POMS, GONE WERE THE SKY-DIVING PRIZE COURIERS, GONE WERE THE POLO PASTICHE UNIFORMED ENTOURAGES AND POSEURS... THIS CUP EVENT, SPONSORED BY KBL, WAS SERIOUS, FOCUSED, PROFESSIONAL AND TO THE POINT. AND IT SHOWED – IN THE QUALITY OF PLAY, IN THE QUALITY OF PLAYERS, AND, I'D SAY, IN THE QUALITY OF THE SPECTATORS. NO LONGER "POLO LITE", DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP HAS STEPPED IT UP TO A NEW LEVEL.





▲ Zedan v. Abu Dhabi 5 to 4 in final qualifier

stellar level of the polo professionals, including Ignacio Gonzalez, a 6 handicap playing for Mahra Polo; J.J. (Juan Jose) Brane, a 7 handicap playing for Bin Draï Polo; and Nachi Heguy, an 8 handicap playing for Zedan Polo.

### **NEW RECOGNITION BY THE WORLD POLO TOUR:**

The strong sense I had of a heightened seriousness and professionalism was, of course, a combination of all of the above, the level and quality of the event organisation, teams, patrons and players, but I think there was also another important factor. The World Polo Tour (WPT), an international ranking of polo players, resolved to include the Dubai Polo Gold Cup in its lists as a Challenge Cup ranking event.

According to the WPT information, the WPT rankings “are not based on the quality or skill of the players involved, but rather on the rewards and showcases of those professionals and amateurs who have achieved success in a given calendar year in the most competitive polo tournaments around the world”. Thirty points are earned by players winning the Dubai Polo Gold Cup. The WPT also announces monthly pro and amateur awards and we find that just before the start of play at the Dubai Polo Gold Cup, in February Faris Al Yabouni, patron of Abu Dhabi Polo, was awarded top Amateur Player for his performance at the Royal Salute Nations Cup tournament in the UAE.

This international endorsement is a remarkable achievement for the Gold Cup after only three years since its inception, because it recognises the status of the tournament, it will attract high level international and local players, and as a result the status and players will attract more polo sponsors, patrons, and fans. Always a good thing!

### **A PLAYER WITH POLO IN HIS DNA, NACHI HEGUY:**

A player for Zedan Polo, Nachi Heguy needs special mention for those who

### **STEPPING ON UP!**

As promised in our report on the Dubai Polo Gold Cup 2011 (HT Issue 35), we returned to the stunning grounds of the Dubai Polo & Equestrian Club for the third Dubai Polo Gold Cup and we sensed a change immediately. First, we noticed that many of the organisational teams in place last year were still in place this year and that means that the historical experience is being put to use and any issues of the past were, at least, recognised, if not addressed. It was good to see Tournament Director Santiago Torreguitar there amiably orchestrating the symphony of horses, players, matches, press, and sponsors. And, of course, the delightful and experienced commentator, Adam Snowden, the very helpful Isabel Arguelles and Cristina Gusita, and lively and exceptionally talented event photographer Annemieke Goos.

On the fields there were, of course, the tried and tested local polo teams returning for this Gold Cup, including Abu Dhabi Polo (patron, Faris Al Yabouni), Bin Draï Polo (patron, Saeed bin Draï), Ghantoot Polo (patron, HH Sheikh Falah bin Zayed Al Nahyan), Habtoor Polo (patron, Mohammed Al Habtoor), Mahra Polo (patron, Rashid Al Habtoor), and

Zedan Polo (patron, Amr Zedan).

The Dubai Gold Cup Committee created an independent body to establish handicaps for this Dubai Gold Cup Series. The group included representatives from polo clubs from around Dubai, as well as the HPA (Hurlingham Polo Association, the governing body for polo in the UK) and referee Charles Seavill, chaired by Santiago Torreguitar. The Committee included:

- Chairman – Santiago Torreguitar
- Member – Neils van Baasbank (Desert Palm)
- Member – Juan Roman (Ghantoot)
- Member – Charles Seavill (HPA)
- Member – Adam Snowden (Dubai Polo Club).

Noticeable was the rise in quality of patron play. Although only three UAE players rose in handicap ranking last year, we would have thought that Faris Al Yabouni and Mohamed Al Habtoor might have been considered for a promotion last year, and we certainly expect to see close review of their efforts for next year’s rankings. Special mention must be made of the quality of play of Amr Zedan in this tournament, particularly in the final and qualifier.

Noticeable also this year was the

are not closely involved with polo and its world. Nachi (Ignacio) Heguy has polo in his DNA.

As Jonathan Kandell reported in 1998, Nachi, a one-time 10 handicap lives and breathes polo. Of the Heguy family polo dynasty he reports, "Their great-grandfather, a French-Basque immigrant named Bautista, arrived in Argentina at the turn of the century when land was cheap and bought several thousand acres about 300 miles west of Buenos Aires. The family polo tradition began with the first generation of Argentine-born Heguys. But it was the second generation, the brothers Alberto and Horacio, who reached the pinnacle of international play." In reference to his heritage, Nachi said, "Other destinies were possible, I suppose, but they seemed so much harder than polo." There was a point at which he and his cousins could field a 40 handicap team – what's harder than that?

### THE SEMI-FINALS:

Nachi Heguy and Zedan Polo made it to the run-up to the semi-finals which took place away from the host location at a polo resort community, a new and very beautiful venue for Gold Cup matches, Desert Palm.

Unfortunately for the forceful and strategic Abu Dhabi, Lady Luck was not with them. Zedan Polo took the prize with some skilful play by Amr Zedan. As Zedan Polo team's Nachi cantered off the field with his signature smile, I asked "Do you always smile?" Of course, he just smiled and pointed to the heavens. Despite winning five goals to four, it was patron Faris El Yabhouni's Abu Dhabi team that moved forward to the Subsidiary Final against Rashid Al Habtoor's Mahra Polo on the final day of play.

### THE KBL DUBAI POLO GOLD CUP FINAL:

The gala final day of the Dubai Gold Cup Polo arrived – the great Habtoor Polo against the skilful Bin Draï. As in past years, the event organisation was impeccable. The VIP area was decked out and marqueeed to give the event's special guests and sponsors an exclusive and serene venue to dine, wine, network and spectate.

And what a match it was! The first chukka of the final started in a measured way at 2-2, but Habtoor Polo pushed forward in the second to take control of the game. In the third, Mohammed Al Habtoor's team played really their best polo and with two new goals increased

the difference to three goals on the scoreboard ending the third 5-2.

You could see Bin Draï beginning to react powerfully at the end of play in the third, and in the fourth Bin Draï followed up with two new goals to even the score at 5-all with a magnificent goal by J.J. Brane with only 30 seconds to go in regulation time.

But it was Guillermo Cuitiño, top scorer of the tournament, who gave, in the last two seconds of extra time, the celebrated victory to Habtoor Polo by 6 goals to 5. The Subsidiary Cup was for Abu Dhabi after beating Mahra Polo 7-5.

A truly superb effort by Habtoor Polo, winning the Dubai Polo Gold Cup for first time after three hearty tries.

### BEAT THAT!

Next year's tournament promises to really take it to another level – from 15 goal to a mega-20 goal. As Chairman of the Dubai Polo Gold Cup Series, Mohamed Al Habtoor, states, [The 20 goal handicap will] make it the highest handicap tournament in the Middle East". That will be something to see. And we'll be sure we're there to see it! 🏆



▲ The proud Cup winners - Habtoor Polo

Photos courtesy of Dubai Gold Cup/Gonzalo Etcheverry