

ON THE POLO FIELDS OF COWDRAY

JAEGER-LECOULTRE GOLD CUP FOR THE BRITISH OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP 2015

By Bridget McArdle McKinney

© Rob McKinney



“AS THEY PASSED THROUGH EASEBOURNE THEY SAW COWDRAY – THE BEAUTIFUL PALACE AHEAD, GLINTING GOLDEN IN THE SUNLIGHT, ITS MYRIAD WINDOWS TWINKLING LIKE DIAMONDS, AND THEY HEARD GAY MUSIC WAFTING FROM THE MEADOW BY THE ROTHER, COLOURED PAVILIONS, SWARMING WITH GAILY DRESSED FOLK IN CRIMSON, GREEN AND CROCUS YELLOW.”

While our approach to the Cowdray estate in the heart of England's South Downs to attend the Jaeger-LeCoultre Gold Cup Final was not quite as that described above in Anya Seton's best-selling historical romance *Green Darkness*, still while on the grounds – and in fact, in anticipation of arrival – we could not help but feel the weight and authority of this ancient and venerable venue, heralded in British history and romanticized in fiction with its many layers of events, romance, dramas, tragedy, and passion of historic proportions. That 'beautiful palace' is now an imposing ruin, but, yes, there were 'coloured pavilions, swarming with gaily dressed folk in crimson, green and crocus yellow' among other colours ready to enjoy a day of outstanding polo at the Gold Cup Final.

The Beauty of Cowdray Park

Here to report on this year's Gold Cup Final we were fascinated to see the extent and reach of the Cowdray aura throughout the area from its diverse ancient properties (identified by yellow-painted window frames), its farm products, and its unique and ubiquitous demi-gryphon crest, as well as the Cowdray Park Polo Club members' obvious pride in hosting this event.

Cowdray Ruins, the 'beautiful palace', first built as a fortified manor on the River Rother in the late 13th century and later in the 16th century re-built by Sir David Owen, Henry VII's uncle, as a palace in the Tudor style, is today a magnificent restored ruin. Its past is replete with mysteries, historic intrigues and battles, nefarious employees (including one Guy Fawkes) and even a curse!

Now owned by the 4th Viscount Cowdray, this beautiful 16,500 acre estate is the site of Cowdray Park Polo Club, which has been called the "Home of British Polo" having hosted polo matches on the grounds for over 100 years and is now the venue for some of England's most prestigious polo events, including the Gold Cup.

Jaeger-LeCoultre Gold Cup Action

Debrett's describes the Gold Cup Final as "one of the most glamorous and chic country events in the sporting calendar, with world class players in action, celebrities in abundance and a stunning location." This match ranks with the Argentine Open and U.S. Open at the very top of the World Polo Tour ranking, as a Grand Slam event. Banner sponsors Jaeger-LeCoultre, the luxury watch brand, came on board last fall to support this event, enriching an ongoing relationship it has had with Cowdray as its Official Timekeeper.

The Gold Cup Final caps the run for the British Open Polo Championship, the premier English 22-goal handicap tournament. This event attracts all of the top high-goal polo players from around the world competing for the Cup through 40+ qualifying and final rounds.

As the pack of 14 teams played through grueling qualifier rounds distilling their reduced number into the quarter finals, one picture was becoming increasingly clear – Dubai cannot be beat, you might as well hang up your mallets and go home, with one esteemed polo expert stating playfully to The Telegraph that at this rate, "we might as well give them the Gold Cup already." They were amazing, having landed 46 goals in their first three matches. With a powerful and strategic team including Josh Cork, Martin Valent, Diego Cavanagh and polo's World No. 1 Adolfo Cambiasso, returning to defend its 2014 Gold Cup with a near decade of dominance in international high-goal polo, who could doubt that?

But they were not invincible as Zacara (Juan Martin Nero, Lyndon Lea, Rodrigo Andrade and Jack Hyde) halted Dubai's near-unstoppable momentum hard in its tracks to the shock of many, including - no doubt - the team itself and its patron Rashid Albwardy. The defeat must have been devastating. But it



Santi Stirling rides off Facundo Pieres

opened the door for convincing semi-final wins for UAE Polo Team (Jose Araya, Jr., playing for patron Sheikha Maitha bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Lucas Monteverde, Pablo MacDonough and Santiago Stirling) against Apes Hill 14 - 8 and King Power Foxes (Top Srivaddhanaprabha, Hugo Lewis, Gonzalo Pieres and Facundo

Pieres) against Zacara 15 - 9. The moment of truth had arrived.

On Gold Cup Final day, the atmosphere was cheery, fun, and familiar with families, picnic parties (both elaborate and basic), tents, tailgates, dogs, and laughter, more congenial than fancy, more country than high street. And Zeus or whichever gods of weather were

paying attention that day stopped the rain which had been falling off and on for several days at the perfect moment for the fields to dry and the sky to open up in sunshine, cerulean skies and billowing white cumulus clouds. The commentators John Kent and Felix Wheeler warmed up the crowds with a rousing match of

penny-farthing polo and otherwise kept the spectators informed and amused with their excellent commentary throughout the more serious match that followed.

Before the match, while the grooms appeared relaxed and full of play, the atmosphere at the team tents seemed a combination of nervous energy and quiet resolution – the

players and coaches knew that out of the dozens of chukkas it took to arrive here, everything now rides on the next few chukkas. UAE had a perfect team set-up – a good balance of teamwork, experience, age and daring. But they were up against a team with an extra advantage: two players who have played together from early age, who have the ability to work together with a simpatico forged in family, who perhaps share polo ‘ESP’ on movement and strategy, the Pieres brothers Facundo, the world’s No. 2 player and Gonzalito. King Power Foxes also had the advantage of the sheer drive of an up-and-coming team with a reputation to prove and the momentum of The Queen’s Cup win a month before behind them.

Ending in a 2 - 2 tie, the first chukka set the stage for a nice, tight match the fans adore, but that was not the match this was destined to be. The Pieres boys took over the second and third chukkas, showing their tremendous technical skill, impressive strength and speed with Gonzalito powering the ball from throw-in to goal in the third bringing King Power Foxes to a dominant 7 – 4 lead at half time.

Following a goal trade, the quiet fourth chukka was upset by a hard meeting with the turf for King Power Foxes patron Top Srivaddhanaprabha who was replaced by 17-year old Kian Hall. The fifth chukka belonged to the 10-goalers Facundo Pieres and his cousin Pablo MacDonough who fought like a champion to improve UAE’s position scoring three goals including a successful 150-yard charge down the field, leaving UAE in a better position at 10 - 8 with only one chukka left to go.

The young men took over the final chukka, opening with UAE’s 16-year old Jose Araya, Jr. taking hold and speeding the ball down the field in a dramatic dash and landing the ball just wide. A collective gasp and cry from UAE supporters – oh, the heartbreak! Following a masterful stick-and-ball goal by Facundo Pieres, 20 year-old Englishman Hugo Lewis from the King Power Foxes was

next up with a spectacular end-to-ender, followed by a tap-in goal set up for him by Facundo Pieres. This will be a day Mr. Lewis will never forget; he will probably ensure that his children and grandchildren never forget it either. At the end, it was a happy day for King Power Foxes with a final score of 14 – 8, concluding this year’s English high-goal season.

Horse Power

But the game is nothing without the horses and their contribution to the thrill, excitement and beauty of this sport. Before the match, I spoke briefly with one of the commentators and when I asked him which team he thought would win, he discreetly refrained from providing a direct answer, suggesting instead that this match would be likely won by the team with the best horse flesh. He said, “Watch Galactica in the third chukka and Cube in the fifth,” both favourites of King Power Foxes Facundo Pieres. In polo, you cannot win without a winning polo pony, whose traits according to Hurlingham Polo Magazine’s Victoria Elsbury-Legg must include “great acceleration, very handy, she stands her ground against being bumped and has a good heart”, all qualities she attributed to “Twisted Automotives Best Playing Pony” of the match - Pablo MacDonough’s Dolfina Divina.

Behind the Scenes

As the sun began to set and the crowds began to disperse, we reflected on the day and all of the effort which must have been exerted to make this happen. For Liz Higgins, who has handled PR, Communications and sponsorship for Cowdray Park Polo Club since 2002 and was closely involved in the management of all Cowdray’s polo events including the Gold Cup, the four week period of the Gold Cup is obviously a very busy time for her and her staff.

Liz explained: “The atmosphere changes dramatically from the opening day of the tournament



Gonzalito Pieres chased by Santi Stirling





Lord Cowdray with Daniel Riedo, CEO Jaeger-LeCoultre



with the influx of the Gold Cup patrons and the high goal players, their families and supporters. Our members love to follow a team through the tournament and many of them watch every single match. As the excitement builds through the tournament, so does the number of spectators so that by Quarter Finals weekend we have several thousand people attending. Semi Finals day is huge in terms of corporate entertaining and one of the best days for polo in Europe as the four highest ranked teams of the contest battle it out for a place in the Final.”

“We welcomed around 14,000 people to this year’s Final”, she enthused, “and the sun shone, people picnicked all around the grounds, the retail village was a haven for all kinds of fabulous fashion and country goodies, and to top it all we saw a great match! Once the presentations were over, I finally enjoyed a glass of delicious Louis Roederer champagne and reflected on what a great job I have!” We’ll add our salute to the end of this year’s Gold Cup and the British high-goal season and look forward to a return to the fields of Cowdray next year. 🍷



king power winners