





POLO IN EGYPT
SPORT OF KINGS
AND THE KINGS OF THE SPORT

By Bridget McArdle McKinney



▲ Marwan Mostafa

THE PONIES TROT OUT
 ONTO THE FIELD, THE
 SPECTATORS DRAW
 TO THE RAILS, THE
 ANTICIPATION BUILDS,
 AND WHEN THE BALL
 IS ROLLED OUT FOR
 THE FIRST CHUKKA,
 THE ACTION BEGINS.
 THE EXCITEMENT OF
 THE SPORT, THE POWER
 OF THE PONIES, THE
 ATHLETICISM OF THE
 PLAYERS AND THE RISK
 OF DANGER COMBINE
 TO MAKE POLO ONE OF
 THE MOST THRILLING OF
 EQUINE SPORTS, THE
 SPORT OF KINGS.

The origins of polo are debated. Most historians of the sport, however, consider that the game was first actively played as a cavalry exercise in Persia as early as the 6th century BC, migrating with conquest both east

to China during the Tang Dynasty (7th century AD) and west to Byzantium, arriving in Egypt during the Ayyubid period (12th century AD).

Then, as now, the sport carried a combative air and, truly, to watch the sport today there can be no doubt of its military beginnings. But polo also has its softer side. The sport has been celebrated throughout its history in poetry, pottery, painting, and song. The 12th century polymath poet, astronomer, mathematician and natural scientist Omar Khayyam used polo to illustrate divine command and fate in this quatrain from his famous Rubaiyat:

'In the cosmic game of polo you are the ball
 The mallet's left and right becomes your call
 He who causes your movements, your rise and fall
 He is the one, the only one, who knows it all.'

The name itself, polo, comes from the Tibetan word 'pulu', or ball, and, indeed, it was with surprise and great breathless amusement that my husband and I a few years ago

witnessed townsmen in a dusty square in high altitude Ladakh on the Indo-Tibetan border play this very game, which they called "ta pulu" – horse ball.

While several variants exist, the game is played on a field 300 yards in length and 160 yards in width, by two teams of 4 players each, timed in six 7 minute periods or "chukkas". Each player has a role, whether defensive, offensive, or tactical, and in competitive polo each player has a ranking or "handicap", which is assessed with reference not only to the player's goals or skills, but also to the player's teamwork, strategy, and sportsmanship. The rankings range from minus 2 to plus 10, but a ranking of plus 2 is considered very good in this difficult sport.

As mentioned, polo has a long history in Egypt dating back more than eight centuries. In more modern times, the sport was organised originally through the Khedival Sporting Club, now the Gezira Sporting Club. Polo matches were established in the first days of the Sporting Club, perhaps as early as the late 1880's and the polo season became an international society essential, the place to "see and be seen".

Egyptian polo greats of the past included Saifalla Pasha Youstri in the 1920's, Victor Smeika in the 1940's, Salah Foda in the 1950's and the legendary Alex Ebeid who won the Coupe D'Or of Deauville seven times and the UK Queen's Cup twice.

Today, polo in Egypt is governed by the Egyptian Polo Federation, headed by businessman and long-time polo player and polo advocate, Farouk Younes, whose private Abu Sir Polo Farm is host to matches, polo clinics, and weekend practice sessions. The Federation, itself a member of the Federation of International Polo, the world governing body of the sport, arranges local and international matches and clinics in Cairo and Alexandria; it arranges, as well, the participation of Egyptian polo clubs in matches abroad.

According to Karim Loza, Member of the Board of the Egyptian Polo

Federation and Regional Ambassador of the Federation of International Polo, the Federation not only encourages the public to enjoy the beauty of the sport as spectators, but, as importantly for the maintenance and longevity of the sport, encourages junior riders to begin, develop, and grow into the sport. Just this past December, for example, a group of junior Egyptian players travelled to Jaipur for a polo clinic to learn the techniques of India's famous 61st Cavalry Regiment.

Federation clubs in Cairo, the Gezira Sporting Club and the Egyptian Mounted Police, and in Alexandria, Alexandria Sporting Club and Smouha Sporting Club, have polo teams of high calibre. The long polo season, lasting from September to June, compared to the relatively short European season, allows much more time and access to practice and perfect technique and train up young ponies as well as young players to competitive level.


The best polo players in Egypt carry a plus two handicap. On a beautiful Friday morning recently at Younes' Abu

Sir field, I met two of these top players: Marwan Mostafa of the Police Team and Aly Kashef of the Gezira Sporting Club.

Marwan has been playing for 10 years and says, "Polo is the best thing in my life. I began my life as a show jumper; my father was a general in the Egyptian Police Cavalry and was my first trainer as a horse back rider. Once I saw a polo match I knew that this was the sport I had to practice forever as this is a team sport, which is much more interesting for me than a single player sport. Since then I was addicted to polo. I travelled to many countries representing Egypt either with the national team or with the Police Team - which won the best polo team in Egypt - and we won many tournaments in Nigeria, Ghana, India, USA, and Scotland. As for the people who have influenced my polo career, one important one was Rege Ludwig, who left a special mark on me during his visits to Egypt as a trainer. I wish to see polo as the best sport in Egypt with wider spread and more teams. We have actually begun to build a new team in the company I work for

named El Sewedy Polo Team. Finally, I would like to thank the president of the Egyptian Polo Federation, Mr. Farouk Younis for his efforts in organising the tournaments and clinics and we players look forward to more".

Aly, a pilot for Egypt Air, says that polo is in his blood, a sport passed from grandfather to father to son, a comment I hear time and time again from players. From a pilot who flies the world it was interesting to hear Aly quote Winston Churchill's view that a polo mallet is the passport to the world. He adds philosophically, "I would like to be the best polo player but if I think that I have reached the top I'll stop training and become over confident and then, you're not the best player again."

"I love horses and I love football, so it's a combination of both. In any country under any rules, I get the same satisfaction – horse and man", says Aly. Well said all. 

Thanks for Mohmaed El Sewedy for [the polo action photos

▼ Aly Kashef

