



PHOTO BY PAT MACVEAGH

- Polo in Virginia Today -

Compared to foxhunting, showing, eventing or steeplechasing, polo seemed a boutique sport in these parts, but construction of the new field is a sign that something is stirring. Investigation was called for, and so I found myself headed for Great Meadow one May morning.

At Great Meadow Leslie VanSant, newly appointed as the facility's executive director, introduces me to Juan Salinas-Bentley. I learn that Virginia is a center of American "amateur"* polo – the big boys in Florida (and Milwaukee?) play at the "professional" level. Juan, a professional, is the operations manager of "Polo Great Meadow (hereinafter PGM) 2002." Our arrival diverts him from a scrimmage between eight inexperienced players, four to a side, practicing for the coming season. He looks at his watch, blows a horn, and ends the chukker (a polo game is divided into six periods called chukkers, each lasting seven and a half minutes.) I ask him about himself.

"I'm a polo professional, a 'Tex-Mex,' born in San Antonio. I found out

* It seems that "amateurs" are those who play for fun on evenings and weekends, while "professionals" treat polo as their principal activity, whether for pay or not. Many "amateur" teams recruit professionals to their ranks.

recently that my grandfather played for the Mexican Generals, against George Patton and other Americans. I work full time for Phil Staples – here in the summer, in Florida in the winter.

"We practice and play 2-goal on this field, arena polo over there [he points to a fenced but uncovered enclosure a hundred yards away] and 8-goal at the old Phipps Field [now called the Goose Creek Polo Club Field] south of Route 50. We rent that."

Polo players are rated according to skill on a range of minus 2- to plus 10- "goals" to establish handicaps to keep the team competition even. The sum of the ratings of the players on a team is the team's rating. "2-goal" means that the team will have, perhaps, two players that are rated 0, and two more that are at 1-goal each. An 8-goal team might have a 4, a 2, and two 1's, or any other combination that totals no more than eight. If the team an 8-goal group is playing is rated at only 6-goals, the lower rated team starts the game with a two goal credit on the scoreboard. In some cases, as at PGM, the minus to zero ratings are called C, B, and A, no doubt to bolster the self-confidence of the less skilled. Horse sports are humbling enough without using negative evaluations.

I note one change from years ago. *"Those players are all wearing face masks. That's new."* Juan is in favor of face masks:

"There were too many eye injuries, but there is a downside with masks. If you fall they can catch in the ground and twist your neck."

In polo, as in all other horse sports, falling is both undesirable and inevitable. Juan offers to let me borrow his book of old clippings to catch up on polo history in the area. Then he leaves to set up the next practice session.



PHOTO BY DOUGLAS LEES

Betsy Manierre at Great Meadow – note face mask



We are standing next to an array of large trailers, most with horses tied to rings along the trailers' sides. Moving around and between horses, washing them, cooling them out, tacking them up, are the players and grooms. The horses seem calm and relaxed, the day warm. I fall in with one of the players, an older (for polo) man in his fifties. Tom Leonard is in the heating oil business, in Woodbridge.

"I have time in the summer, winter is our busy season so I can't foxhunt."

"How long can a guy play polo?" I ask.

"I'm 55, I'm in the twilight. Some play into their 60's. But you lose the quickness, the hand-eye coordination. By their 40's the pros are in a pretty steep decline."

"And the horses?"

"A horse can play until he's 19 or 20. Ideally you need six, one for each chukker. Maybe with a young one he can double up. It used to be three was enough, but the game is faster now, and the horses better. When I started you could buy three horses out of the stockyards for \$200 each. Now an old one costs \$8,000. For what I want you have to go three times that. And some are successful race horses, and go for much more."

He pauses, then concludes:

"You need Thoroughbred types that can really roll it."



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Ponies in waiting



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Juan Salinas, Nelson Gunnell and Phil Staples

Tom used to run the games held in Washington on the Lincoln Mall, and fills me in on some of the players and polo fields out here. A few names among them are familiar.

"There's Phil Staples, Dick Reimenschneider, the Reinharts, Garrick Steele, who's building that new field near you. Then there's the Doughertys, Kevin and son Matt, daughter Erin is an All-American at UVA. Maureen Brennan just bought Kent Farms, there's a field there. The Steiners at Foxlease have two fields. Nelson Gunnell has a field behind his grandmother's house. The Muldoons started in show jumping, but switched over. Jack Sanders used to play polo..."

Juan returns to continue my lesson. As he does so a player trots by, calling to his groom in Spanish, so I ask Juan, "Are there a lot of Hispanic players?"

"It's very international, Chileans, Argentines, Mexicans, Aussies, Kiwis, Brits... we play five or six days a week. Our 'Ride for Charity' program is a 501-c3 corporation. We get a great Friday night crowd for arena polo, 300-500 people under the stars, very family oriented. The 'Chief of Protocol' cup was put up years ago by Joe Smoak, then it was discontinued. We're going to revive it at Great Meadow this September."

Juan pauses for breath, then concludes:

"There are so many things that could be going wrong in the world, but my biggest dilemma is 'Who's going to be playing polo on Sunday?' "

