

Polo ~ From Team USPA to You, Your Next Great Equestrian Sport

By Joanne M. Anderson / jmawriter.com

[Forward by Elizabeth Hedley, USPA Polo Development LLC]

You have heard it before, the “sport of kings” riding the equivalent of “elite equine race cars”, that is how the sport of polo has been described. However, there is something you should know, something that could make a difference in your life. Polo is waiting for you. Polo is your next great equestrian sport.

This is the first of a series of 6 articles the USPA Polo Development LLC will present to you, the readers of Elite Equestrian Magazine, in hopes of shedding new light on one of the oldest equestrian sports and how you can enjoy it today, as much as we do. Whether you decide to play it, spectate it or sponsor it, polo is the perfect combination of great horsemanship, team effort and social fun.

We look forward to your joining us as a reader and a rider at your local polo club. Here is a look behind the scenes of one of our most successful programs called **Team USPA**, organized by Amanda Snow and Kris Bowman, and written by Joanne M. Anderson an acclaimed equestrian writer.

There is a program called Team USPA whose overall concept is to contribute to growing the sport of polo in your hometown. The concept is easy. First a group of young talented American polo players are selected from all over the United States. Then they are offered opportunities to become their best at the sport. They are mentored by top professionals, certified as umpires, coached in competitive games and taught the fundamentals of the sport. Eventually these young accomplished individuals return to their cities and towns origin, ready to cultivate the sport at their local polo clubs, where you as an equestrian can take lessons, learn the sport and enjoy the undeniable fun polo is famous for.

“Polo – Team USPA, Ambassadors of The Sport”

Across the centuries, polo has been played by youth and men and women from all walks of life on all types of horses. It's a game of skill, speed, strategy, teamwork and horsemanship. Observing those traits, along with enthusiasm and commitment, in young people engaged in playing polo, the U.S. Polo Association launched TEAM USPA to give a leg up to developing players who might not otherwise be able to stay in the game.

“I could never have made the contacts, found the network or experienced the exhilaration of polo or rubbing elbows or mallets with the finest polo trainers and players in the country,” states Kylie Sheehan, 22, former captain of the University of Virginia Polo Club. She grew up in a city with a non-horse family, and TEAM USPA has advanced her dream to reality.

TEAM USPA was established in 2010 and now has 55 members between 18 and 25 years old. Each one is selected through a comprehensive application process. Personal traits and playing skills are also evaluated, along with potential and their love of the sport. Once accepted, members have great opportunities to be mentored by professional trainers and players, learn training techniques, horse care and transport, and advance their game proficiency.

Intensive year round training clinics are offered all over the country and include equine handling and medical knowledge, contract details, refined playing expertise, game strategy and horsemanship. Each member is required to pass the umpire certification test to assure in depth knowledge of the rules and regulations that govern the sport of polo. TEAM USPA members often mentor and offer umpire services in the junior polo realm, as well as serve on committees and as ambassadors for the sport wherever they go.

TEAM USPA initiated a training program in Argentina in 2012 which provides exposure to high goal polo and opportunities to train and ride many different horses. Will Tankard, 29, a charter TEAM USPA member spent 10 weeks in Argentina and returned with increased skills and confidence. "They put on a lot of pressure, but do it in such a way that you really get into seeing and reading things during a game you may not have noticed before. My learning increased exponentially every day," he explains. "TEAM USPA has certainly put me in places I never could have gone on my own." He credits his affiliation with getting a job, meeting a variety of polo people, greater ease and skills in the sport and more. When asked if he did anything but play polo there, Tankard quipped: "Why would I want to [do anything else]?"

The people are only half the equation for TEAM USPA because one cannot wield the mallet without a pony underneath. "We are ever grateful for those who donate horses to our program," says Kris Bowman, executive director of the U.S. Polo Association. "Each pony is invaluable to achieving our mission and provides different kinds of lessons than what our professionals can teach." Some horses arrive young and green, others are experienced and love the game as much as their riders. Most fall in the middle, however, and give TEAM USPA members not only the chance to practice and play regularly, but also to develop a keen awareness of how different polo ponies perform during the excitement of a match. Identifying and capitalizing on a horse's strengths can determine the outcome of the final score.

For Todd Thurston, a 22-year-old college student, the donated ponies elevated him almost overnight from a working student to man-in-charge of a donation string of ponies. "The whole experience was pretty amazing," he says. "When TEAM USPA said it had a string of ponies for me to care for, transport and work with, I began learning so much. I had a string, a truck, a trailer and some 2,000 miles to go," referring to the journey ~ ponies in tow ~ from Aiken, S.C. to Sheridan, Wyo.

"If I hadn't had the TEAM USPA donation horses, I couldn't have ridden with Carlucho Arellano, for example, a mentor relationship that continues to this day," Thurston adds. In the classic if - then scenario, if someone had not donated these polo

ponies, then he would never have had the experience and opportunity to advance his game, develop a network and learn the myriad details of day-to-day horse transport and care. A deep appreciation for the donation ponies is echoed throughout TEAM USPA membership.

According to Amanda Snow, director of player development: "More than two-thirds of TEAM USPA members have participated in interscholastic (high school and under) and intercollegiate polo programs, sometimes referred to as I/I. The National Youth Tournament Series (NYTS) program for youth 19 and under creates opportunities for young players to compete with peers across the country and vie for the annual National Championship trophy." Statistics indicate a 31% increase in young players with great potential due to the tournament program in school polo clubs. Snow and others rely on coaches and mentors everywhere to encourage and promote polo, as well as identify players for TEAM USPA. "It's the best way for polo players to advance their game," she adds, "and keep playing through college and going forward."

Polo is really the "sport of everyone" who enjoys horses, competition, exhilaration, the thrill of victory and appreciation for a game well-played. The camaraderie, sportsmanship, integrity and generosity of the polo populace is rivaled only by the passion, skill and allegiance of the polo ponies. Through TEAM USPA, players can reach full potential and offer back experiences and skills to bring along others. It's a cycle that will positively impact polo circuits for years and decades to come.

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