

## **If Ponies Could Talk**

*the invaluable resource of horse donations*

By Joanne M. Anderson

Chai was a small, bay mare who loved the game so much she seemed to leave her heart on the field. Lincoln's curiosity brought him to a higher level. Sky had lots of energy. Despite some leg injuries, Marley, the sweet mare, was really good in the game. Strudel was well-built and full of class and grace on the field.

Chai, Lincoln, Sky, Marley, Strudel and many more are remarkable horses donated to Team USPA by folks who love the sport. They understand well that not every player is in a position to own one, never mind a whole string. The different characteristics and personality traits of these polo ponies stand out in the minds of several young polo players who have been fortunate to know, ride, mount and care for them. Yet greater than these memories is their deep-seated gratitude that someone donated each one of these horses, making their own polo experiences possible.

For **Todd Thurston**, a 22-year-old University of Virginia 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 they had a string of ponies for me to care for, transport and work with, I began learning so much. I'd always fed one horse whatever my mother told me to feed it. Now 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.

An enthusiastic polo player and captain of the UVA polo team, Thurston earnestly began learning all about horse care, getting them legged up for the trip, dealing with injuries, feeding appropriately and developing a regimen that worked well for his prized cargo. Once in Sheridan, his polo life took on even more meaning. "I set my own schedule. I never had to ask to go stick and ball. I could take horses to the field and do stick and ball, and I was able to mount up others. That gave me an incredible opportunity to work with and learn from some of the great players," he continues. "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." In the classic if - then scenario, if someone had not donated these polo ponies, then Thurston 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 care.

**Jim Wright** was not born in the saddle or with a mallet in his tiny hand, but he was there - in the saddle with a small stick in his child-size hand - before his kindergarten year. By the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the California native was playing at the professional level and worked that summer at the Team USPA barn in Aiken. "I took care of, rode and played the Team USPA string and developed a close