

Young equestrienne discovers polo at 2005 UHA Equine Trade Show (My Adventures in Polo)

by Caitlyn Phillips

My polo experience did not begin as glamorously as one might imagine. My polo career began on a sunny Saturday afternoon as my parents and I milled through an equine tradeshow at our local fairgrounds in Uxbridge. After about half an hour of wandering and talking to neighbours my father spotted them. When I say them I am referring to two horses that were stationed on the baseball diamond, yet these were not true horses at all. A) They did not move, and B) they were constructed solidly of wood. Now my father after knowing me for many years (15 in particular), is perfectly aware of what it takes to embarrass his teenage daughter, of course he headed straight for the horses. I followed reluctantly 20 meters behind pretending I did not know the man who was so intent on riding the wooden pony. As I neared the diamond my father had already mounted the horse, and to my surprise he was then handed an extremely long croquet mallet, at this point I was convinced it would only be a matter of time before Woody the horse gave way and my dear old Dad took a tumble. Thankfully this was not the case. It was then my turn to take a ride aboard Woody. Thankfully I managed to not embarrass myself, and found I actually had a decent swing. There was a brief exchange of information and I was scheduled to play polo the next day at Phil and Tammy Van der Burgt's JustUs farm. Phil said we would play four chukkers, I stood there quietly, stupidly thinking, "What are we chucking?!" And so it began.

After a few more trial polo sessions I was introduced to the rest of Cedar Valley Polo Club's all girls interscholastic team, we clicked together perfectly. We began our polo instruction on the ground with small hand mallets, this was a real hoot because we also learned the fine art of bumping each other while running around with a mallet in one hand and our imaginary reins in the other. We finally made the transition to real horses which was not a hard one because I, like my team mates, had grown up riding. We played in club polo twice a week, and had a lesson each Thursday. We also came up to the farm on our spare time to practice, and groomed for larger tournaments. We were immersed in polo 24/7, I was in heaven.

The most exciting part of the year was when The Cedar Valley Polo club ended the 2005 outdoor polo season by hosting the annual Jackson's Cup on Sept. 10,11 at JustUs Farm in Mount Albert, Ontario. Both Senior and Junior players enjoyed a terrific weekend of outstanding competition and sportsmanship. The first day of competition was well celebrated on Saturday night, with the last day of competition following Sunday Afternoon. The Jackson's cup ended up going to Andre Leclipteau, Neill Shewan, Candy Higgins, Maddie Baker, and Emma Goodman. With the consolation champions as Phil Van der Burgt, Chris Wright, Steve Wawryk, Dominic Morrissey, Samantha Pedersen, and Caitlyn Phillips. I did not mind the fact that I was not on the winning team, I was just ecstatic that I had survived my first polo tournament, and was determined I would play in many more.

I recommend anyone, horse experience or not, give polo a try. I must admit I was a little intimidated the first time I played, perhaps even a little horrified as I watched eight people on horses thundering down an imaginary line all chasing a little white ball. But the most valuable piece of information I have come away with and now use in every aspect of riding is this, once you learn to relax and allow your horse to do his job polo or any other equine sport, becomes a lot easier. Phil has always told me that "the horse has eyes so he can look ahead, the rider should be looking at the ball and others around him." It all comes down to trusting the horse and a little practise helps too. I will be returning next year, and hopefully playing this winter, I hope I will see you on the field.