

**REFLECTING
ON POLO
IN ARGENTINA**

Javier Tanoira

June 2009

PREFACE

In the month of January 2009 I was meditating on the high-goal polo season that had just come to a close and I realized that polo was not only changing, but that it was heading towards something that I definitely did not like. I had attended most of the Triple Crown matches for one reason or another, and I couldn't remember having watched one single game that I could consider entertaining. The Open final between La Dolfina and Ellerstina was the cherry on the icing: it was a cut-up, slow game; fouls galore, where the only thing worth watching was the final outcome in the supplementary chukka.

I became aware that players found that they were more efficient when forcing a slow game in which being in possession of the ball and not passing it was key, and by scoring through penalties.

I also became aware of something particularly worrying: 40-goal team La Dolfina; three times Argentine champion from 2005 to 2008; with the best player in the world today on the team, had lost three matches during the 2008 season when playing against the teams immediately below them as regards handicap rating. At Tortugas they fell at the hands of La Aguada in the semi-finals. At Hurlingham, Pilará also beat them in the semi-finals. And at Palermo, the final went to Ellerstina. And in all three cases, as Lucas Monteverde stated at some interview, they were beaten by having “to take a dose of their own medicine”, i.e. playing a closed game; trying to keep possession of the ball; catering to whoever is holding the ball and aiming at a “foul-or-goal”. Based on this, I asked myself the following question: How are those three teams going to set about playing the 2009 season?

In exactly the same way. They are going to go out to play using the same tactics they used before in order to win, and La Dolфина—that last year displayed a rather curious performance from the point of view of its being a 40-goal team in which each of its four members played up to their 10-goal rating, and despite this, did not win any of the Triple Crown tournaments—will probably not change their pattern of play which they have been putting into practice for several years.

It occurred to me, therefore, that the first thing I had to do was to share my concerns with as many people as possible, including the players, to see if we were in any way unanimous in our diagnosis, or if it was only me who saw things this way.

I began by watching videos of matches as from 1980 to this day, so as to remember what polo was like before and where the more marked differences appeared. I read the rules for the first time in my life, to see which are the rules and regulations that an umpire must abide by in order to be able to judge a play on the polo field. As I knew that any change in the rules must be agreed by consensus by all the parties involved, I decided to meet up with as many people who understand about polo as possible, but I also informed the polo regulatory authorities in Argentina (the Argentine Polo Association, the Argentine Polo-Players' Association and the Argentine Association of Polo Referees) as to what I was doing. I wanted them all to participate, one way or another; that they should all feel part of it. I don't mean part of a change, but part of a trial to see if by means of some alterations in the rules we may be able to preserve certain characteristics pertaining to Argentine high-goal polo that are beginning to disappear.

What follows is the result of all the meetings I held with current players; former players; referees; management; spectators; specialized journalists; horse breeders; veterinarians; etc. Many have provided me with some valuable ideas, opinions and points of view. In order to avoid suspiciousness; prejudices and other such evils, I have taken the

liberty of not mentioning any names or saying who suggested what, or who thinks that a certain change in the regulations is called for, or who does not. I believe that it is a way of being able to appreciate and analyze the idea itself and that that idea should not be conditioned by who might have suggested it or by who is for or against it.

I wish to thank everyone with whom I spoke for their time; for what they have taught me and for the ideas they contributed. I hope this may turn out to be of some use.

1. EXISTING CIRCUMSTANCES

What is High-Goal Polo?

High-goal polo is a game that so far is only played in Argentina between the months of September and December. It is composed of three main tournaments: The Tortugas Open; the Hurlingham Open and the Argentine Open which make up the Triple Crown, and second to these are the San Jorge Open; the Jockey Club Open and the Cámara de Diputados Cup. These tournaments are unique—not only in Argentina, but the world over—in that they are open. This means that there is no handicap limit. This tells us two things: firstly, the teams are not made up with the idea of trying to get the player who best plays a certain rating (because there is no limit), and secondly, there are almost no patrons, (or if there are, at least their level of play is high).

This is what I consider to be high-goal polo. All the rest, i.e., the US Open, the Queen's Cup and the UK Gold Cup; Sotogrande; Deauville; Bridgehampton; the Ellerstina Gold Cup, etc. I will consider as medium-goal polo for the purposes of the considerations discussed herein. By this I am not looking down on these tournaments, (very far from it!), since thanks to the polo played in the US and in Europe we have patrons, who in turn give rise to the polo industry in Argentina. So when I refer to high-goal polo, I will only be referring to the first mentioned.

In my mind, there are three basic characteristics that define a high-goal player: anticipation; horsemanship and skill at handling the ball.

Anticipation: This is not only the capacity to anticipate what will happen, but also the speed with which one makes a decision in the shortest possible time. It is also what is normally known as having a good “head” for polo. It is related above all with knowing how to position oneself on the field; with being “in the right place at the right time”. This variable is defined by what we could call mental speed.

Horsemanship: The player who best manages and controls the horse will be he who is the quickest at positioning himself correctly, or rather, who manages to do what he has planned to do the fastest. The clearer—and more precise—the order that the player gives his horse, the sooner will he arrive at where he wants to get.

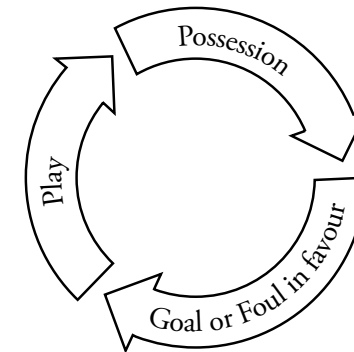
Skill with the ball: This is basic and is closely related to speed: it is not that the average polo player is not skilful when handling the ball, but there is a certain speed at which the latter no longer hits the ball, and the high-goal player continues doing so.

I consider these to be the three variables that distinguish a high-goal player, and they are closely related to one another. It is unlikely that anyone may go beyond the 7-goal barrier if they are weak regarding any of these factors. I have not included other important attributes such as a good stroke; passing the ball correctly; having good aim when hitting towards the goalposts, etc. There are players who have reached a 10-goal rating and who do not possess some of these qualities. I mean to say: they are important, but not indispensable. Whereas the other three qualities (anticipation, horsemanship and skill with the ball) I do consider indispensable and are closely related to one another. And as we have observed, there is a common factor that is present in all of these: speed.

And that is precisely what I believe we are losing. Speed.

Speed is a variable that becomes the determining factor when indicating the level of play. This is so not only in polo, but in any amount of sports: car racing; horse racing; tennis; athletics; swimming. The level of play is defined by the speed at which the action takes place. The greater the speed, the greater the excitement; the greater the degree of difficulty and consequently the greater the level of play.

This has always been so in polo up until today when it would seem that it is more efficient to go slow. So that speed is no longer an absolute value and becomes a relative value. And this is precisely where high-goal polo starts to look like medium-goal polo which is played all over the world. It would appear that a vicious circle has been created that we could describe as follows:



So, since by taking possession of the ball the chances of making a goal or causing the opponent to make a foul increase, so to say, when I get hold of the ball, I reduce my speed in order to ensure that possession of it.

This change in the system of play—in my opinion—is caused by two things: the skill developed by the players to keep and maintain control over the ball on the one hand, and a change of criteria by referees on the other.

A New Era

I would like to go back to the exact point in time (if there was such a thing) in which polo became truly professional: the early eighties.

Patrons appeared on the scene and in most cases with the following identical characteristics: 1. They were very wealthy and willing to pay a lot of money to have the high-goal players on their team 2. They were very bad players, and 3. What they wanted above all was to win. This meant that the professional player, in order to obtain point number 1 (money), had to achieve point number 3 (to win) having to put up with point number 2 (a very bad player on his team). Thus, the polo player realized that instead of moving around at full speed and hitting the ball hard, it was much more profitable to keep the ball more under control.

They say that Eddie “Gordo” Moore was the first player to realize that having an opponent in front of him, if he hit the ball towards the right of that player and pulled up his horse, the opponent could not take the ball from him without committing a foul. I say this because there are probably 20-year-old players who are reading this and cannot believe it, because they think that polo was always played as it is today. But the truth is that up until not long ago, players did not hold on to the ball because nobody played “inwards” as they call it nowadays.

And the reason why a player—when polo becomes professional—favours taking possession of the ball above all else is very simple and is associated with the regulations: the rules are such that when one is in possession of the ball, the chances of causing the opponent to commit a foul are infinitely higher than when one is not in control of the ball, and this is so because the regulations in item 2 of the Field Rules stipulate the following:

“No player shall cross the player who carries the line of the ball except at such a distance that not the slightest risk of collision or

danger to any player is involved.”

In other words: There is a Line of the Ball. Whoever crosses the line of the ball commits a foul. The player who is in possession of the ball is the one who determines which the line of the ball will be each time he hits. “No player shall cross the line of another **who carries** the Line of the Ball”. The player carrying the ball has the Right of Way.

This style of play, applied first in the US and later in Europe, turned professional polo into something that was different from the polo that was played in Argentina, and proof of this is that many Argentine high-goal players in the 70’s and 80’s (either because they didn’t feel like it or because they weren’t able to) were not successful at this kind of game. Abroad, the open, fast style of polo was not productive. They would hit a ball forward, but of course, the patron would miss by half a meter and the ball would return. So a generation of players who understood the game differently started to emerge, and so the technique of individual play became increasingly relevant; short strokes and skill at keeping the ball under control.

Naturally all these skills and this style of play were useful when playing abroad, but here in Argentina the open, fast, strong-hits polo was still dominant.

In the mid 80’s La Espadaña was the first team to try out a variable which in time became known as “el trencito” (small train or ‘follow-my-leader’), wherein a player, instead of making a passing shot, opted for individual play while his team mates followed behind him at close quarters as an alternative in case he missed, and so as to be positioned exactly in line with the line of the ball, aiming thus at provoking a foul by an opponent.

I don’t believe that this play was determining or essential to all La Espadaña’s achievements. It was a team with 4 superb players—Gonzalo Pieres among them—, who at the time was the best player in the world. But this helps us to see that even then, in the late 80’s, high-goal polo was tending towards becoming more individualistic.

The 90's: Talent Explosion

Although the first player that I can remember who displayed superlative handling of the ball was Benjamín Araya in the early 80's, it is in the 90's when the individual technique and stick-and-ball virtuosos started appearing on the scene: as well as Benjamín, the Piereses and Carlos Gracida, we had Marcos, Bautista and Pepe Heguy; Cristian Laprida; Pite Merlos; Piki Díaz Alberdi and others, and some time later, he who would become the best polo player in the world, a title that today, 15 years later, he still holds: Adolfo Cambiaso.

An impressive player who revolutionized polo in various aspects on and off the field, his period on the Ellerstina team was simply spectacular, and in my opinion that was when he showed—I can't really say 'the best of himself'—but certainly what was most wonderful to watch. Between 1994 and 2000, the matches between Chapa I; Chapa II and Ellerstina were always spectacularly incredible, because added to what had always distinguished Palermo polo itself, these players contributed incomparable individual skill.

As I say all this I realize that my aim—when I say that polo must go back to what it was before—is not to return to the Venado Tuerto and El Trébol polo, or to Suárez and Santa Ana, because the players' skill nowadays is much greater and I believe that we have to make the most of that; it is a sign of evolution. To my understanding polo has become enriched; players today are more complete. That is why they must be given a set of rules that will demand that they display their skills in order to win, and at the same time protect them against danger.

There is a very important aspect of the game that is worth mentioning now, because it will help us a lot from now on: imbalance. By this we are to understand it to be when a team or a player carries out an action which clearly results in the game tilting the scales in favour of that team. Naturally, the objective of imbalance is always the goal.

When the opposite team tries to balance the game once again (i.e. stop the other team from making a goal), it has to do so following the rules, otherwise the game will be stopped and the team involved has the chance of causing imbalance by means of a penalty shot. Up until the time when Cambiaso appeared on the scene, there were many ways in which to put the game out of balance favourably, but they all had something in common: they required team-work. For example, the number 1 was quick to turn and would position himself up front; his number 3 had the ball; would see him up front and would hit a long shot which would reach the number 1 up there alone, who would in turn take it up and race towards the goalposts. It was almost unthinkable that anyone could cause an imbalance on his own. Until Cambiaso appeared.

The "Pasadita"

I don't know whether Cambiaso has ever given rational thought to this at any time, but I imagine that around about '97 or '98, when he was playing for Ellerstina, he must have become aware of something that was quite clear: he was capable of developing a play that none of the other 7 players on the field was able to carry off successfully. The outcome of this play, as we shall see, tipped the balance tremendously in favour of his team. The play in question was the famous "pasadita" or 'overtaking', which was no more and no less than overtaking the opponent from behind while holding the ball under control. Whoever has attempted this at any time knows just how difficult this is, much more so when, at this level of polo, the person one is overtaking is

always a 9 or 10-goal player, no less.

Most of the secret of this play is in the timing, since he must first speed up his horse and then hit the ball, whereby, when it comes to hitting the ball he already knows whether he will manage to overtake the other player or not. This may seem easy, but it is a very difficult play. In fact, he is almost the only player who is successful at it most of the times that he attempts to do it.

This play was vital to the development of the game in the future, because for the first time a player could provoke an imbalance on his own, so If the other three players on his team were riding off the other three opponents once he had overtaken his, the way towards the goal-posts was clear. Conclusion: As from the creation of La Dolfina in the year 2000, the three players who accompany Cambiaso on the team start becoming functional towards him and to see to their man in order to clear the field instead of standing apart in order to receive a passing shot. And this is where a new modality, which is in some way related to this play, appears and which has become the principal cause of polo quality impoverishment today: blocking.

A Perverse System

If we watch videos of seasons past, we will notice that little by little Adolfo started leaving off doing the “pasadita” that he used to perform many times during a game, because he realized that in order to risk losing the ball less, it was preferable to use a team mate to block off the opponent instead of overtaking him, and in this way he is left on his own with the ball with no one following him, as occurred in

the previous case. This play, which requires much less skill, was imitated by almost every team and this is where we reach the core of the problem and the main reason why high-goal polo has become increasingly slower. Nowadays, due to the tremendous skill of players to retain possession of the ball, and where it is increasingly difficult to take the ball from them without committing a foul, and taking into account that the rules are such that possessing the ball is equal to making goal or provoking a foul by the other team, there is nothing more effective than going slow when one has the ball, because in that way you run less risk of losing it.

The classic play today would be like this: a player on the white team arrives at the ball first. He comes almost to a standstill. A blue player comes up to mark him. Immediately another white player appears and blocks off the blue, but then another blue player approaches to try and stop the white from blocking his mate (i.e. an anti-blocking); all of this at a short gallop, of course, and when finally the white player who is in possession of the ball realizes that he can't continue to advance because there are so many blockings and anti-blockings going on in front of him, what happens? Does he hit? Does he make a play? No, what happens is that at that very moment (if the umpires have as yet not called a foul, which is quite unlikely) a white player turns up behind him to say “pass” and that is when the play becomes re-organized: the white player who had the ball before, now becomes a blocker. The one who before was blocking the way now places himself behind the man with the ball, like a merry-go-round... All this, of course, with the accompaniment of shouts; raised sticks; insults; etc. where the umpires have to watch not two or three players, but six or seven in order to determine who is committing a foul (for this reason it has become increasingly difficult to referee).

But I don't want to steer from the point, because quite apart from the ugliness of this type of play, the main weakness I see in blocking the way is that it is a play which causes NO IMBALANCE. Because if I

am a white player and in possession of the ball and I use a team mate to get rid of the man who is marking me, mathematical logic tells me that in that play where whites are in possession of the ball, there are 2 whites and one blue taking part, which means that outside that play there is a blue player on the loose, and unless he is stupid, he will always position himself between whoever has the ball and the goalposts where he is to attack; never behind.

It is as though it were the reverse play to the 2 to 1 which we may observe not only in polo but also in many sports, which is when one player is so good that he requires that two opponents mark him. In that case there is an imbalance, because the player with the ball is taking two to mark him, and by simple mathematical logic, there will be a team mate somewhere on his own who he can pass the ball to.

I wish to be clear about something: I don't want it to seem as though I am being critical of the players: it is not their fault; they play that way because it has been proved that it is the most effective system there is today. I think that there has been an evolution in polo but that the regulations are not accompanying that evolution. Polo is being played in 2009 with a set of rules created in 1886. There is nothing wrong in reviewing the rules; in thinking about how to change and how to improve them, and once a certain consensus has been reached, to try them out and see what happens.

These are the same players who 6 or 7 years ago delighted us with a fast, open polo; playing to the hilt; unique the world over. Nowadays high-goal polo presents us with more and more moments in which it would appear that one is watching 20-goal polo, and that is what I think dangerous, because Argentina was famous for playing the kind of polo that was not played anywhere else in the world. And 20-goal polo is played everywhere.

2. THE CHANGES

A New Variable

Up until not so long ago, after any high-goal polo match there were only two variables which would determine whether one had been watching a good match or a bad: parity, on the one hand, and rhythm (i.e. how many times the game had been stopped due to a foul; a fall; etc.), on the other. The ideal, of course, was to watch an even match with few interruptions, which not always occurred. But the absolute truth was that outside those two variables, there was nothing else that could ruin the spectacle, because when the ball was rolling, what happened on the field was always something pleasant to watch. (Naturally there are other variables that have a bearing on the game such as the condition of the grounds; if one player or another is performing to disadvantage in handling the ball; if there is a lot of wind; if the horses are heavy, etc. But I do not consider these absolutely relevant separately to the extent of them turning a good match into a bad one in themselves, or vice-versa.)

Nowadays this is not the case because the modality of the game which I presented at the end of the previous chapter, with blocking; anti-blocking; merry-go-rounds; dribbling, etc., brings forth a new variable which depends exclusively on the tactical plan that the teams choose to play by: *closed play* or *open play*. Before it was not possible to close in the play. Nowadays it is. Not only that, but it would seem that it is more effective, independently from the category level of the ponies

(e.g. Ellerstina at the last Open final).

Therefore, if before we could say of a certain match that it had been “even or uneven” and had “good rhythm or was cut up”, we must now add another variable: “open or closed”.

Since it is impossible to have any kind of influence over the parity or disparity of a match, what follows is an attempt to imagine rules that may have a positive bearing on the other two remaining variables, that is to say, that will attempt to get all matches, as far as possible, to show “rhythm and openness”.

So here we have two great issues to take care of: 1. Try to make polo more open and 2. Put more rhythm into it, which is equal to saying that there be less fouls. Although at some point of our reflection these two variables will relate to each other, we shall begin by dealing with them separately so that the main concepts don't get mixed up, and we will begin with point number 1.

Danger vs. Danger

Polo is an extremely dangerous game in which there are eight players mounted on ponies that move at over 37 miles per hour, circling around in different and opposite directions, hitting a ball that can travel at over 120 miles per hour on a field of almost 68,400 yards². It wouldn't be surprising if when deciding to set down the rules for this game, the priority should have been to avoid danger.

Not only the priority: for a long time, all the rules of the game were

made to avoid danger. I may be mistaken, but the only rule I know of that is in no way related to danger and has been set down simply to speed up the game is the walking rule, established about 10 years ago, first in the US and then here and in the rest of the world. This rule reads that the player with the ball may only spend 4 or 5 seconds walking, not more, after which he must resume at a gallop or hit the ball, otherwise the umpire may blow the whistle and declare it a throw-in.

If we look into other sports, many of them have rules to that effect. In football, apart from the off-side rule, the goal-keeper may not catch the ball with his hands when a team mate passes it to him, and after 5 seconds he must kick it, otherwise the opposite team is entitled to an indirect free kick. In the case of rugby, which is a dangerous game with great friction, there are any amount of rules that seek not safety for those who play it, but the quality of the spectacle: the knock-on; the forward-pass; having to free the ball when tackled; the off-side, etc. The same goes for basketball: a player is not allowed to take above three steps without making the ball bounce, and if after doing so he catches it with both hands, he must pass it whether he likes it or not. A player cannot be within the painted area for over three seconds and when a team has possession of the ball, it must take a shot at the ring within a time span of 24 seconds.

I have explained each of these rules (I may be forgetting others), because I think it necessary that we become aware that other sports have already taken steps in this direction: in improving the spectacle; in making it more entertaining for the spectator; easier to understand, and I think this is one of the reasons why those sports are so much more popular than polo these days, with all the benefits this implies and which it is not worth going into in detail.

Likewise, since I too was a player once and know what it is like to be on the field, I think that to imagine new rules that could make the game more entertaining to watch, would also mean that they should also make polo more fun to play. I think that both these factors go

hand in hand. It would be a grave mistake to suppose that the solution is to turn Palermo into a Roman Circus wherein the spectators take pleasure in watching how the gladiators kill each other or seeing how the lions eat up the dying. When the time comes for imagining one rule or another, the first thing one has to bear in mind is the safety of the players and whether it contributes towards making the game more fun and more agreeable to practice.

I don't know if you've noticed, but the great majority of high-goal players almost never go to watch polo on the days that they are not playing. One of my first questions when I got together to speak with them was "Do you enjoy watching today's polo?", and they all answered that they didn't. And as I thought that to ask them the obvious question that should have come after that was going a bit too far and violating their intimacy, I didn't ask. But I suspect that they would all have answered in the negative as well, that they not only don't enjoy watching it, but that they don't enjoy playing it either.

The English Rule

I understand this rule to have been put into practice for the first time in the US 5 or 6 years ago, but later—I don't know for what reasons—it was eliminated and not applied any more there (or only sometimes). The fact is that it appeared in England last season (2008), and set a lot of tongues wagging, many in favour and some against, but at first glance it would seem as though it solves an important part of the problem.

The rule stipulates that when there is an opponent in front of the

player who is in possession of the ball, the latter may only touch the ball once and must then hit or make a play. If the player touches it once and leaves it to a team mate coming up behind him, this player must hit it or make a play. I spent a week-end in Cowdray in 2008 while the Gold Cup was being played and was able to watch four polo matches; all of them very reasonable. The Piereses were playing; Adolfo; Piki; Bautista; Ruso; Nachi; Juan Martín Nero; Miguel Novillo; Pablo Mac Donough; etc. That is to say, the main actors of the Argentine high-goal season scenario, and each one of them seemed to understand clearly what the rule entailed.

In Argentina once, while speaking to several players, I noticed that they were a bit skeptical about the possible success of this rule in the future. "They'll soon find their way around it", was the opinion of some. "They are starting to turn around towards the rear and start the play all over again". It is curious how much importance they attribute to being in possession of the ball. Any resource is valid to continue holding it, come what may. And I, to some extent, share their skepticism, because I know that if the rules remain as they are, they are going to find a way around it. Because the almost certain outcome of having possession of the ball is a foul in favour of the team who has it. And as long as this continues to be so, possession of the ball will continue to be the supreme value.

To begin with, blocking will be perfected to the point that it will become almost automatic, which means that as soon as a player comes up to mark whoever is in possession of the ball, there will already be one to cancel him out, and what will happen is that in 20-goal polo, the 2 high-goal players on the team are going to be playing increasingly closer to each other to be able to pass each other the ball, thus avoiding this new rule and at the same time not losing possession of it.

At Full Speed or at a Gallop

While analyzing videos from the past to date, I realized that for a long time high-goal polo was played at only one speed (full tilt), and that in time, players began making a pause; raising their heads to look; holding the ball; waiting for a mate to pass; etc. Nowadays, if we observe closely, there are too clearly defined speeds: full tilt or at a gallop. Players go at full speed when their situation is clear and in their favour (if one is at an advantageous point on his own or if there is a numerical advantage) or when the ball is divided and they need to arrive at it before their opponent to take possession of it. But once a team gets hold of the ball and there is no clear imbalance, the most likely situation is that the game will take on a slower rhythm until the player hits or makes a play, and only then will the game pick up speed again until the next pause.

It occurs to me, therefore, that if we want to tackle the problem from its roots, and if what we see is that increasingly polo is being played at a slow pace most of the time, what must be penalized is precisely that: *slowness*. Independently from how many times the player touches the ball; from whether he leaves it to a team mate; whether he turns around; let's give him the freedom to do what he likes, but under one condition: after so many seconds of a team having possession of the ball, the game must pick up speed. If referees criterion nowadays is to apply the "walking", why won't they be able to apply what we could call the "galloping"? If the "walking" penalty is "holding of the ball while walking", why can't we implement one that reads "holding the ball at a gallop"? And how long would the permitted time span be for a team having possession of the ball to speed up the game? 5 seconds? 8 seconds? We would have to see. It should be sufficient time for the player to be able to ensure his control over the ball; raise his head and get a clear picture of what is happening on the field, and so see where his team mates and opponents are positioned.

Also, what will happen is something that already occurs with the English rule, which is that the opponent does not become desperate to take the ball from the player; he simply marks him so that he has to get rid of the ball or make a play at high speed.

An End to Blocking?

It is my belief that by applying this rule properly, blocking will almost make no sense any longer, because the team in possession of the ball will be obliged to speed up the game whether he has someone in front of him or not. However, we must also ask ourselves whether it's not worth applying a law that prohibits blocking altogether, mainly because it is a play in which there is no imbalance, and I think that if the idea is to imitate other sports and implement rules that promote action: risk (not physical, of course) and unbalance, I think it would be a good idea to try out a rule that penalizes blocking, which could come within the framework of one that already exists and which is called 2 to 1 (which is when two players are riding towards a ball—whether simultaneously making a play against each other or not—a third player may not mark the line of the ball while coming to meet it from the opposite direction). I think this is a rule that was added not very long ago and in my opinion well applied, because that was a play that could be dangerous. In the case of blocking, it doesn't generate danger, but by banning it I think the game would become more agile and it would contribute towards all players (particularly the younger ones and with lower handicaps) learning to play polo and hitting the ball instead of spending most of their time blocking people off.

The Robots

We've already spoken about how the teams in 16 to 22-goal tournaments are generally made up in the rest of the world and in Argentina (Ellerstina Gold Cup; Diamond Cup; Julio Novillo Astrada Cup, etc.), commonly known as "patrons" polo. Most of these teams are composed of two high-goal players, the patron and a "third player", who is usually a young low-handicap player. This has been so for a long time. Ever since I can remember, foreign teams and large organizations have been out to catch these "pistoleros" (ringers); youths that they used to take to Palm Beach and who could actually play 2 or 3 goals more than what figured on their official ratings. The associations and clubs naturally took no time at all to realize what was going on, and so rules were made to protect themselves: the T (temporary handicap) in US; the 5-goal limit for a foreigner to be able to play the high-goal tournaments; the limit of two players not belonging to the EU for each team in the UK, etc.

Almost all the players who today play 9 or 10 goals were at some time third players: Mariano Aguerre; Bautista; Nachi; the Novillos; the Merloses; the Piereses; Lucas Monteverde; Juan Martín Nero, even Adolfo, who at 15 won the Rolex trophy at Palm Beach with Ernesto Trotz and Luisito Lalor in Cellular One, and the same year won the Gold Cup in England playing with Carlos Gracida (he went from third man on his team to second, and from second to first in one same season, obviously). The high-goal players in those days would take them over to play polo, and that's what they made them do: they would pass them the ball; they would make them come and go; run around; mark and unmark so that they would become a good option for a passing shot. Nowadays the third players are only asked to do one thing: to block.

I think it was the Gracida brothers in the early 90's at Palm Beach who realized that instead of passing them the ball, it was more profitable to

use this third player to mark the two high-goal players on the opposite team, and thus the "Chuy Baez" appeared on the scene: guys who were very good horsemen; rustic and with poor handling of the ball (it didn't matter). And the refereeing of these matches—for one reason or another that is of no interest to us here—started functioning according to this kind of play.

Today this is all we see, and the third players who have a job are those that do what they are told to do best. There is no longer any vacancy for the fast players with stick-and-ball skill. Nowadays they are all robots who all they have to do is to take on an opponent; ride him off or block him out; curtain him away; collide with him; cancel him out; slap him around; flatten him out; or whatever other synonym exists that implies continuous and systematic cancelling out of the two best players on the opposite team.

And what about the ball? No, the ball is not for them. The ball is for those who know how to manage it (and look after it): They are not allowed to have the ball; their job is to open the way for the 10-goal players on their way to the goalposts.

This is a totally self-destructive attitude, because it goes against the basic principles of any activity, which is to encourage the budding player; pass on the technique and knowledge (which they, in turn, inherited from others), so as to uphold the level of polo at the level it was when they were taught it. Because these boys get to have 5 or 6 goals and when they have to show that they can have the team depend on them, they are not able to hit the ball more than twice running at high speed. How can they possibly hit, if they've spent the last 5 years of their lives flattening out; cancelling out; blocking and hooking sticks?

Is it the fault of the high-goal players then? No, absolutely not, because they in turn are under tremendous pressure from their patrons (and who, little by little, with the excuse that in this way they have more chances of winning, are also turning into robots, with the tre-

mendous physical risks that this implies), which is why they make their third players play that way, because it is more PROFITABLE. So if we all agree that we don't like it, what we must do is see to it that this style of play should NOT BE AS PROFITABLE as the style of play that we do like to play and to watch, and which the young players can learn from their betters and have all the resources which will turn them into as good a players as them one day. It is not impossible

Turning the Ball vs. Backhand

Turning the ball is probably the most stigmatized play in polo. Ever since I was very young I remember how our parents and polo educators berated my brother, my friends and myself when we made too much use of it, telling us (most reasonably) that it was much more profitable to hit a backhand.

Up until today. Nowadays it is more profitable to turn the ball than to hit a backhand, because however well you may hit a backhand, you will always risk losing possession of the ball, and by turning it you don't. That is why it is increasingly rare to see a backhand stroke and we see more and more turning the ball.

One of the first people I approached to talk about this was a former 10-goal player who was categorical: "Turning the ball must be forbidden. That would be the solution to everything". I smiled to myself, and subtly changed the subject. Some time later, another former 10-goaler, and winner of several Opens, suggested an idea that on paper appears fairly good and very easy to apply.

Just as the English rule requires the player with the ball to hit or make

a play when in attack (i.e. facing the goalposts where he is to convert the goal), we could make it mandatory for the player, when in possession of the ball and in defence (i.e. facing his own goalposts), to do the same. In this case, of course, the only play that we can compel him to perform is the backhand, but with a very important consideration: in order for this rule to be applied, an opponent must be behind the player, marking the line, less than one body length away, or playing off the player at the time he reaches the ball. Why this? Because otherwise, knowing that the player in defence is forced to play a backhand whether he likes it or not, he would check his horse and turn towards the tail or open end of that backhand.

This means that when a player reaches the ball in defence, he can only turn the ball if he does not have an opponent less than a body length behind him (on the line of the ball, of course). This is, no more and no less, a legal imitation of what was occurring up until not so long ago: when a player had an opponent catching up on him, he would hit a backhand. If he had enough time, he would play it out.

This rule is also good in that it rewards anticipation, and together with the English rule, it imposes obligations on the players but only when they have an opponent close by, which aims at their circulating at greater speed around the field in order to leave their marks and arrive at the ball before, so that they can then do as the like (touch the ball as many times as they like; play it out, etc.).

Philosophy of the Foul

We shall now look into the second variable that makes for a good or bad polo match: the fouls. When we go to Palermo some afternoon to watch an Open match, on average it will last 2 and a half hours. Simple mathematics tells us that 8 chukkas at 7 minutes each make 56 minutes of play. This means that in the course of that afternoon we are going to spend more time seeing how the game is stopped than actually watching polo played.

Statistics provide us with a conclusive fact: 40% more fouls are committed nowadays per game than 25 years ago. And to discover the cause of this, we must delve around in the philosophical aspect, though it may seem strange, and understand the changes in human behaviour over time.

I will go back to football: about 20 years ago (I don't remember when exactly) the FIFA imposed a rule that read that when a goal keeper passed the ball to a team mate and the latter returned it, the goal keeper could not catch it with his hands. This rule was made to make the game more dynamic and, of course, to avoid that the team that was winning should try to stretch out the time, right? The question is: why was that rule enforced in the late 80's and not before? Why did the people who laid out the football regulations not take that into account in 1880?

The answer is simple: because in 1880 and for a long time after that, it wouldn't have occurred to any goal keeper to try and make time because it was just 'not done'; it was dishonourable; a moral and ethical flaw. If we transfer this to polo, and specifically in relation to fouls, we could say that it would never have occurred to Mr. Luis Lacey or to Mr. Jack Nelson to have committed a foul knowing that it was a foul but understanding that it suited them to do it for tactical reasons. For a very long time, the player who committed a foul did so either

because he miss-calculated or because he was convinced that that was his line. It would have been unheard-of to have done it on purpose.

Nowadays values have changed the world over, not only in polo but in all activities in life, and we have to live with that. That is why we have to adapt codes of behaviour and coexistence to what man is today, not to what he was 100 years ago. We are playing polo in 2009 with a set of rules laid out in 1880, that is, 130 years ago (slavery hadn't even been abolished in America then!).

Apart from the fact that many may believe (quite rightly) that the amplitude of polo regulations allow for a variety of interpretations and that if the referees applied the same criteria that was applied 30 years ago the games would be the same as 30 years ago, the fact remains, that in certain situations during a game, making a foul is a good move, and that is something that we can start by correcting.

Just to clarify this a bit, while I was watching videos of matches of the past, it occurred to me that I could divide the fouls committed into two large groups: fouls while in defence and fouls while in attack.

I considered fouls in defence to be all those that result in a 60, 40, 30 or from the Spot penalty between the 30 yards and the goalposts, against the fouling team. That is to say, those that a team commits when it is defending and the ball is almost always between mid-field and its own goalpost. And I considered fouls in attack to be all the rest of the fouls.

The first thing I noticed was that there was an enormous difference between these two types of fouls, and this was related to what we saw before about unbalance. The outcome of a foul while in defence is that the offended team (as it is described in the Rules) has the concrete opportunity of unbalancing by means of a direct shot at goalposts and with the ball still and well placed on the ground, at a gallop, from a distance no further than 60 yards, whereas in the foul committed in attack, the offended team does not have any chance of unbalancing, because the player that resumes the game has his 4 opponents between

him and the goalposts he is heading for.

My conclusion is that the foul committed in attack is a very low-cost foul, and that is why they are committed more often.

For example: In a play in which my team is attacking, if an opponent is going to hit a backhander and I cross on the near-side at a fairly wide angle in order to take the ball from him and make a goal, considering how penalties work nowadays, I should have no doubt in my mind as to whether to go for that ball or not, because, in the best of cases, the umpire might not blow the whistle, and I may make the goal. And what if he does blow the whistle? How is the game resumed? With a play of perfect balance, where I have all the time in the world (I can even go and change my pony) to get reorganized; mark my opponent; make sure that my team mates are each in their position and only then does the umpire call for the game to resume. And the most likely scenario is that once the player on the other team starts the ball rolling, my team may again recover the ball: at least that is what the statistics show.

We could say, then, that in most cases making a foul when in attack is a good play, because should a foul be called, everything goes back to block one, and if you look closely to what happens within the field you will realize that the players are increasingly less aggressive towards each other when this kind of foul occurs (although they do complain to the umpires so as to try to get them to change their ruling).

Curiously, in the last version of the AAP Regulations (2002), in the section under the heading of GUIDELINES FOR THE UMPIRES there is an item that reads “*Criterion For The Application Of Penalties*” which in one of its paragraphs states the following:

“...in order that the penalty be fair, the fouled team must be placed at least in the same situation as it had been when the foul was committed, because otherwise the damage suffered by that team would not be repaired.”

This means that the regulations include a rule that is rarely enforced, since with a foul committed in attack the fouled team is never placed in the same situation in which it was when the foul was committed. And the next paragraph of that same section of the Rules states something that is very revealing:

“... This should be the criterion that umpires must follow in polo played by gentlemen, where fouls are inherent to the speed and violence of the game rather than a result of the bad faith of the players; without this meaning the admission as an absolute rule that all fouls are involuntary, but that, in the desire to try to obtain an advantage over or stop the opponent from gaining it, the violence of the game itself leads towards committing actions that are contrary to the regulations, and which procure illicit advantages. For this reason it must be penalized.”

There is more. And I quote as follows what we can read on the first page of the 1954 AAP Rules for Polo.

General Conclusions

“...a match is no longer interesting when it is frequently interrupted to penalize fouls. It is therefore the duty of the players not to commit them so that the game turns out agreeable.

The members of a team, particularly the Captain, must avoid his mates playing incorrectly; and when one of them commits a foul, must request that he apologize to the player fouled and to the umpire –unless he had already done so spontaneously–.

The work of an Umpire is work involving responsibility and no fun at all or any satisfaction other than having placed his good will at the disposal of the game. For this reason he deserves every respect to himself and to his rulings even when he may be believed to have been mistaken in any of them.

Playing polo is a pleasure; but it will no longer be so when fouls are committed continually or there are discussions that perturb or

distort the atmosphere of cordiality that should reign among those who practice this sport and enjoy it.”

Unfortunately, these are concepts of the past; of when polo-players were big time farmers who played polo only on week-ends and during the European summer... Nowadays polo is a job to these players; their way of making a living; this is a working environment just like any other. This does not mean that they are not considered gentlemen, of course, because I can assure you that most of them are decent people, it is simply that in no other working activity are the rules laid out taking for granted that they are all gentlemen. What is the case of businessmen; lawyers; engineers; architects? Are they allowed to act freely because they are considered gentlemen? No. They must conform to the laws, no matter whether there is good or bad faith and he who breaks the law is penalized. That's it.

And Rules must conform to modern times, and the people who tailor them must take into account that apart from regulating a game, they are regulating a profession where each match that is won or lost has direct and real repercussions on the income of many people. And this is not the end of the world: the fact that this is a trade does not mean that it is not a magnificent sport to watch and to play.

An Original Idea

I was disposed to reflect on this question of the fouls when in attack that I had just discovered, and was thinking about what could be done to improve it, when it occurred to me to list on a separate page and

in one column all the plays or actions that I liked about polo, and in another, all those that I did not like (they are not listed in order of priority).

ACTIONS I LIKE

- *Fast, open polo*
- *A goal made at a run*
- *Shots at the goalposts from a distance*
- *Sharp angled shots at the goalposts*
- *Striking the ball in mid-air*
- *Long passing shots*
- *Plays that require team-work*
- *Short stick-and-balling at high speed*
- *A LAWFUL good play against another player at high speed*
- *An impressive turn by a pony*

ACTIONS I DON'T LIKE

- *Closed, cut-up polo*
- *When fouls are called*
- *Blocking*
- *Low speed "trencito" (follow-my-leader)*
- *Untimely rough play against another player*
- *Line changes*
- *A player asking for a foul to be called when it isn't a foul*
- *A foul called which is not a foul*
- *When a player is injured*
- *Throw-ins*
- *When a pony is injured*
- *When they take a long time to resume the game*

I would imagine that these two lists are fairly universal, with a few exceptions, perhaps. Apart from the fact that someone might like to watch a spectacular fall, I think it is in pretty bad taste to wish it to happen. I came across people who after the “Battle of San Jorge” (which I was fortunate enough not to have seen) talked to me about the match, a glint in their eyes, gloating over what they had just witnessed. I am not taking them into account in this essay.

The first thing I became aware of was that in the case of fouls when in attack, in order to reduce the number of fouls per match, the penalty needed to be tougher; that is to say, the foul should cost the player making it more, so that in this way it is not good business to incur it. I took a second look at the two lists I had made, and in the list of things that I liked I stopped at the second item: a goal made at a run. If truth be told, from the point of view of the spectacle itself, there is probably nothing more beautiful than watching a player get away on his own racing to make a goal, with the opponent following on his heels. I don’t know why it brought basketball to mind, which has a penalties’ system in which the player who takes the free shot is precisely the player that was fouled, and I wondered what would happen if someone who is fouled, once the game is renewed, is made to stand with the ball but with the other seven players—instead of standing between him and the goalposts—made to stand behind...

What would that player do if the umpire calls out “play” and he realizes that there is no one between him and the goalpost where he is to convert the goal? He would start running at top speed, don’t you think?

I went on thinking and realized that in order that it should not be such a clear advantage, one player from the other team should follow him closely. And—going back to basketball—who better than the player who fouled!

This idea is based on simple reasoning: the fact of having to stop the

game to penalize a foul does not mean that we can’t renew the play as best suits us. We take advantage of the game being stopped so that it is renewed with one of the most beautiful plays to be found in polo. The result: the players are going to take good care not to make fouls in attack, because the cost will be too high, but if, in fact, they continue doing so, for each foul committed there will be a player running at full speed towards the opposite goalposts to make a goal, with an opponent following him at close quarters. What’s so bad about that?

I don’t see anything bad about that: I think it is a very good idea to try out, but I am realistic and know that many will think this crazy. The polo world is known to be very conservative and I am not against that. Quite apart from this rule, my overall intention and the reason why I am writing this is precisely this: to preserve the level and the quality of the polo that we’ve always had. So I am being the most conservative of all, but for one detail: my attitude would be that of a reactionary in this way, which in its simplest definition is “he who changes so as not to change”. That is what I am seeking. To change the rules so that polo does not change.

I therefore beg everyone who is reading this—who for the simple fact of having reached this point of my story show that they understand and that they appreciate polo—to put aside all pre-conceptions and try to imagine this idea which will most likely need some polishing; perfecting and above all, careful trying out for quite a long time, to see how it works. But the original idea, I repeat, is the concept that **WHEN THE GAME IS STOPPED, THERE IS NOTHING WRONG ABOUT RENEWING IT WITH A BEAUTIFUL POLO PLAY.**

Fouls While in Defence: The Fair Price

The main obstacle in the way when it comes to modifying the value of a foul is that if we toughen the penalty too much, the teams will start to seek the foul because it will suit them; and if, on the contrary, we weaken the penalty too much, the teams are going to make more fouls because that too will suit them. A former high-goal player, winner of several Opens suggested a change in the rules last season: what he proposed was that the goals made during play should be worth double what a goal resulting from a penalty shot were. Although the intention is good, it was not viable, because the team in defence, seeing a danger situation near its goalposts, will always commit the foul because in that way it will avoid having 2 goals scored against it rather than one.

Before going any further, I ask myself the following question: Is it possible so seek a foul? Can a player force another to commit a foul? The answer is “no”. For a foul to occur, the player has to make a mistake. The thing is that if the refereeing is bad, it is possible to play at making a foul occur, because the bad umpire is the one who can't tell the difference between a made up foul and a real one.

There is a situation that crops up in polo quite often and which most likely we have all experienced at least once, which is when our team is winning, let us say, by two goals during the last minute of the match. We know that the only way that the other team can catch up with us is through a foul committed in their favour, because in that way the clock is stopped. What do we say to our team mates in that case? “DON'T MAKE A FOUL!” And what does the opposite team do? It tries to provoke a foul, because it knows that that is the only way they can make two goals in less than one minute; so they throw the ball under our horse's legs and raise their sticks, and that is when the good umpire does not call that made-up foul and the bad umpire does.

Conclusion: Good refereeing makes it possible to toughen penalties

because the players are not going to be able to make up fouls. And it also works for the case we mentioned before about fouls when in attack, with the idea of racing towards the goalposts. I know that most of the umpires refereeing high-goal polo are perfectly capable of distinguishing between a made-up foul and a real one.

In the case of fouls committed in defence, (60, 40, 30 yard and from the Spot penalties) I think the penalty is hard enough as it is and doesn't need to be made any tougher. But there are three ideas that some people have suggested to me that seem interesting.

Idea 1. Goal Bonus After 3rd. Field Goal

Counting from the beginning of the match, for every three field goals scored by a team, they will receive an extra goal automatically. Of course I am saying the 3rd. goal, but it could be the 4th., 5th., or 2nd. That depends on how much of a prize we want a field goal to be. The idea I mentioned before is the same as this, but the difference is more subtle between a field goal and a penalty goal, so that the team defending doesn't find it so tempting to stop the opponent from making a goal by incurring a foul. This is a rule that I think is good, above all in cases in which the attacking player is in possession of the ball within 60 yards of the goalposts, and the most usual procedure is that he will not shoot direct, but instead will go towards the goalposts headlong together with the ball, because he knows that in this way his chances of being fouled are high.

Idea 2. A Goal is Worth Double if Made From Behind the 60 Yard Line

This idea has been suggested to me by several people, and obviously aims at the same objective as the one before. It is based on basketball, where a shot from outside the semi-circle is worth triple. It isn't a bad idea, taking into account two things: the beauty of seeing a shot taken from afar and how well high-goal players take these shots. The only snag that I see about this is that the umpires will have to follow the play very closely to be able to see whether the player is in front or behind the sixty yard line.

Idea 3. For Every 4 Fouls Committed in Defence, One Goal is Taken from Them

When a team commits its 4th foul (or 3rd, 5th or 6th) in defence one goal is automatically counted against it. This is interesting because the penalty transcends the play itself. Nowadays, when in the middle of a play, a player committing a foul knows that the worst that can happen to him is that that one goal be counted against him, and he will speculate accordingly. This rule would toughen the foul's penalty, but I think it could be compatible with Idea 1. That is to say: we are providing a team with the incentive to make field goals on one hand, and we are penalizing the defending team more severely if it commits a foul.

This idea is based on what in other sports is known as "penalty through accumulation of fouls", and the most visible example of these are the personal fouls in basketball.

Although implementation of these rules would not be a problem in high-goal polo, I'm not all that sure that it would be viable in the rest of the polo played, because in matches where there is only one umpire

the latter would have to write down the field goals; the fouls made by each team, etc. It is not easy, but neither is it impossible. The ideal situation is to find variables that may be applied to all the polo played in Argentina, so that it continues to have one set of rules for everyone, and so that umpires see that these rules are complied with equally at the low, medium and high-goal level.

I think that these are three very good ideas, and although, as I said before, I prefer not giving names, the people who suggested them to me were or are fantastic players; 10-goalers; winners of the Open; men whom I respect, on and off the field, and to whom I am very grateful for their cooperation.

The Snake Killer

There has been talk for a long time of getting rid of the throw-ins, adding that it is food for various evils; fouls; accidents; insults; injuries to players and ponies, etc.

Let's take it by parts: to start with, statistics indicate that about 20% of fouls in a polo match occur as you get out of a throw-in, but to say that by eliminating the throw-in we would get rid of 20% of the fouls made would be a mistake, because any play that could replace it will carry the risk of some player making a foul, just like any other play of the game.

Unfortunately it is not possible to analyze throw-ins in detail by watching videos, because ESPN always shows the goal that has just been made repeatedly, and when the transmission begins again the

throw-in is over.

We will practice a little exercise of the imagination which will help us to become aware of something important: what would happen if we asked a group of polo players (regardless of handicap or age) to imagine and to describe a play in polo that they like from inside the field or watching it from the stands? One would probably say “a guy on his own racing towards the goalposts”; another might say “a 100-yard passing shot”, another “an under-the-neck goal from 50 yards away”, etc. What if one of them says “I imagine the eight players in a heap, standing together with the ball in their midst”? It would make us laugh, and we would immediately imagine the famous expression “Snake Killer” which occurs in polo played by kids and in very low-goal polo.

But let’s not laugh too loud, because that hypothetical player simply imagined a throw-in, which is a play that occurs no less than 40 times per match.

So, on a field of play that measures almost 12 acres, with ponies that can run at 37 miles per hour, we purposely make them heap up, all of the 8 players, in less than 12 square yards and when we are sure that they are STOPPED, we throw the ball in their midst. And we don’t do that 3 or 4 times in a match; no, we do it 40 times in each match!

This reflection in itself deserves that we attempt to seek an alternative which—should we find it—I think should come within the framework of the criterion I have described before in that when for any reason the game is stopped, there is nothing wrong in renewing it through an attractive polo play.

The Curious Sidelines’ Rule

In most sports that are played using a ball on a limited surface, the most usual way of preventing that the ball go out of limits from the field of play is by penalizing the team that throws it out, that is, giving possession of the ball to the opposite team when the game is renewed. This rule responds to unquestionable logic. I think that the answer to why this is not so in polo is to be sought in the past.

As far as I know, for many years polo was played first in Pakistan and India and later in England and the rest of the world, on fields that did not have boards. This, plus the lack of technique by the players and the bad conditions of the fields of play (paddocks, almost), must have influenced the implementation of the rule that states that when a ball goes out from the sides, the game is resumed with a throw-in. What we may infer from this is that for a long time it was unfair to punish the team that threw the ball out because it was something that happened very easily and the players did not have control enough over the ball to be able to keep it inside the field of play.

Nowadays this is not the case. For a start, 95% of the fields around the world have boards. The technique and control over the ball that players show today is infinitely superior, and the grounds, apart from being slower, make hitting the ball much easier, reason enough to TRY OUT a rule by which the game is resumed by the opposite team to the one that threw the ball out, as occurs in football; rugby; basketball; hockey, etc.

What is the immediate effect this rule will have? The ball will go out less times because it won’t suit any player in possession of it that the ball should go out of bounds, because in that case he will lose that possession. It’s as simple as that.

The way in which this rule could be implemented is as follows: as

soon as the ball goes out, the umpire announces clearly and in a loud voice what team is to renew the play. He is the person who should throw a new ball and make sure that it doesn't land in a hole, 5 yards away from the boards (nobody else should be allowed to place it). Renewal of the game should be by means of a non-direct shot, like in football, where the player renewing the game cannot hit it a second time before another player hits it, and above all so that he cannot make a goal (when the side shot occurs at a distance that could reach the goalposts) because having the chance of a shot at the goalposts as a result of a ball going out from the side would be unfair.

Another thing that could be tried out is that both TEAM MATES and opponents should stand at least 30 yards away in order to avoid that the striker should hit a short pass to a mate. The idea is that if the person initiating the play is obliged to hit a long shot, the game will start up at a good pace. This proposal was suggested to me by a player who has been playing the Open for 20 years, and it could be applied to all penalties (except the 60; 40 and 30 yard penalties) and to the shots from behind the back line.

In this way we would be eliminating approximately 25% of throw-ins that occur in a polo match because we have come up with a rule that contributes towards the ball going out less and thus matches would display a more heightened rhythm.

Another alternative—if eliminating the throw-in is not found to be acceptable but it is considered a good idea to punish the team that throws the ball out—would be that only two players from that team should be allowed to line up in the throw-in, the other two having to position themselves 10 or 20 yards away. This would be similar to the rugby line-out, in which both teams have to line up, but the ball is thrown by the team that did not throw it out (except in the penalties). This does not mean that they take possession of the ball directly, but they do have a marked advantage over the team that threw the ball out.

After the Goal: Like in Practice Matches

Over 70% of throw-ins in a polo match occur in mid field after each goal. This means that if we want to reduce the number of throw-ins per match, we must find some alternative for renewal of a game after a goal. The best, in my opinion, is the simplest: to do as we have always done in practice matches for as long as I can remember. i.e. The team that converted the goal hits in from the back line. And to justify this action, only one question is needed: if it works perfectly in practice matches why can't it work in official ones?

With these two alterations we will have eliminated almost 95% of throw-ins in a polo match, with the exception of the one at the beginning of the match; when umpires consult the referee and the latter decrees that it was not a foul; broken ball; fall; injury, etc.

A half-way option is to apply the rule imposed in England last year, which in the opinion of several players improves the throw-in, and which establishes that there may be no contact between players of both teams, but that these should line up leaving a channel in between. This allows players to be freer to start off the play. There is no doubt that this would improve the situation quite a lot, but I think it worthwhile to at least try out the alternatives mentioned above, because they would eliminate the problem completely.

The Second Clock

This was an idea that was suggested to me in order to speed up the game. There has been talk for a long time about placing a rubber tee for the 60-yard penalty shot so that less time is taken up putting the ball in place; that circling twice around should not be allowed when executing this shot; that hit-ins from the back line should be sped up (very often back-line strikers take their time so that their team mates have time to change horses), etc.

In order to get rid of this problem completely, placing a second clock (on the score board, beside the clock that marks the duration of the chukka) could be tried, so as to mark the dead time and thus oblige players to resume the game before the time is up (which that clock would indicate), after which, if the game is not resumed, a siren will sound or a bell will ring and the umpire will penalize this action with a throw-in or a penalty against the team that didn't resume the play in time. In this way all subjectivity is done away with, as well as all the details. Let's say, for example, that a team is awarded a 60-yard penalty shot. From the time when the umpire throws the ball on the 60-yard spot, the second clock starts running. If the game has not been resumed 45 seconds later, the umpire blows the whistle and there is a throw-in. The striking team must administrate those 45 seconds as it likes: it can circle around once, twice, four times; it may put the ball in place in three seconds and go and change his pony, whatever. But what is mandatory is that before those 45 seconds are up, the game must be resumed.

The same could go for hit-ins from the back line. Obviously the time granted should be less, since there is no need to put the ball in place. It could be 20 seconds; it's a question of trying it out.

This idea originated in the three minutes that exist between one chukka and another. Before, this did not exist, but as the players start-

ed to take their time in returning to the field, now those minutes are counted, and after three minutes on the dot the game is resumed with whoever is there. Of course there are some umpires who apply it and others who don't, but that is another problem. The rule has been correctly established; whether it is applied correctly or not is something else, and of course this must be seen to.

Hooking the Backhander

Hooking the off-side backhander was banned I think in the early nineties because it was considered a dangerous play in which the arm of the player involved could become injured. The fact is that I never saw a player become injured as a result of a hooked stick in an off-side backhander. I mention this because there were some players (and former players who played for a long time without this prohibition) who told me that they thought that if hooking this backhander were allowed, the game would be more open, that is, players would use this stroke much more (which seems paradoxical). The explanation is that a player who is trying to put pressure on the one with the ball and is in defence, would have one more resource in order to pick up speed to stop the opponent from hitting. I am not so convinced, and also, if the rule establishes that hooking is allowed when and if the head of the stick doesn't go above shoulder height, this is very difficult to measure and would give rise to considerable controversy; discussions; fouls resulting from hooking from above, etc., which would mean taking a step back in our aim of giving the game more rhythm.

3. THE HORSES

The Soul of the Sport

From whichever angle you look at it, there is no doubt as to the importance of horses in polo. It is they who make up this sport; their capabilities have a bearing not only on the quality and level of the game, but are decisive in determining an advantage when a minimal difference in ponies exists between one team and the other. “Polo is played on horseback”. This is a phrase we have all been hearing since we were born, and every day that passes it seems as though there is nothing truer. On the other hand, there is the emotional factor, which I find even more important, which shows us that all over the world there are a lot of people who play polo only because it is played on horseback; because the relationship that can exist between this animal and man can become very intense and very gratifying.

And lastly, taking into account the economic aspect of this sport, there is no doubt that the ponies are the most expensive item by far. There are those who consider them an expense; others, and investment, because the price paid includes their genetic value, etc. But this is an issue which at this point and for the purposes of this essay, does not concern us. I only wish to emphasize, for various reasons, that the ponies are the most important thing in polo, and that is why, if we are in the process of reviewing the rules, we must think about the horses, because by thinking of them; in their evolution over time; in their physical constitution, etc. we are also going to find answers to certain

questions regarding the quality of the polo that is being played today.

Most of the people I have spoken with agree that the horses nowadays are technically better than those played in the past. We can tell simply by looking at a video of the 80's or before. But on the one hand, they last less than they did before. Most of the good mares belonging to players of the 80's lasted 7 to 8 seasons on average. Nowadays the average is 4, with luck. Naturally there are different ways of handling them (a light hand or not) and of taking care of them: I'm not going to give any example in particular. Good and bad pilots have always existed, and the rating they have as polo players has nothing to do with this.

And by stating that the horses nowadays are better than those played in the past, I think what we are saying is that the difference is to be found in what a player demands that his horse do nowadays and what he expected from him before. Nowadays a horse has to do much more complex things; take orders and counter-orders within micro-seconds; run; stop; spin around like a coin; shoot forwards and after two gaits stop dead again...

The point is that for this and other reasons, more horses become permanently injured than they did before, and for corroboration we may ask vets, whom I consulted so that they would tell me a bit about how they saw the situation today. The Argentine Association of Polo Pony Breeders has been publishing a magazine since 1990 which is distributed during the Palermo Open, where the names of all the ponies used each year by the players is listed. This in itself is a document that can be used as proof of this. As each year goes by, repetition of horses decreases. Of course there are other factors that contribute towards this: polo abroad is increasingly competitive, which requires that players be very well mounted there too in order to be able to keep their jobs.

After having spoken to almost all the parties involved, the general opinion is that nowadays horses must put up with much more wear and tear than some years ago, and I believe that in order to find the reason why, we must ask ourselves not one, but many questions.

A Bit of History

One of the first questions I asked myself was why chukkas last seven minutes. Was it always so?

Apparently not. The first set of rules made in England in 1874 does not mention the duration of the matches. But in 1888 the following rule was enacted: "The duration of a match will be of 1 hour and 10 minutes, with an interval of 5 minutes for every 20 minutes of play". The permitted alternative was the four 15-minute chukkas option, with an interval of 3 minutes between each one.

In the United States they started by using a system by which the winning team would be the one that scored 2 goals out of 3 or 3 goals out of 5, with no time limit.

In Argentina, in the first matches played at the Negrete estancia, the winner was the first team to score 3 goals.

Later on the duration became standardized in all the world:

1898: Four 15-minute chukkas

1905: Six 10-minute chukkas

1913: Seven 8-minute chukkas

1950: Eight 7 ½ minute chukkas (current duration)

This would be clearly indicative of the fact that as demand on the horse increases (and precisely for that reason), duration of the chukka diminishes (just imagine how one would have to play a pony today for it to last out 20 minutes running!).

And quite frankly, although a chukka officially lasts 7 minutes, we should admit that nowadays it lasts half of that, because there are very few players today who do not change horses half way through a chukka.

This modality first cropped up in the early 90's, in polo played abroad (like all else) and the reason for this was fairly logical: in the case of

mares that were to play two chukkas in one match, if it was possible to avoid that they play the last two minutes of their first chukka, the mare would then be in better shape for her repeat later. Training started catering to this system, and at the same time the game started to close in more, and it is not by chance that this change in the training of the ponies should coincide with the appearance on the polo scene of race-track veterinarians towards the end of the 90's.

What happened then may be explained more or less in this way: aerobic capacity is put to one side and greater muscle mass was sought through training, diet and/or anabolic steroids. But the heart (the only muscle that cannot increase its size) does not manage to pump out the levels of blood needed to provide oxygen to all muscle tissues, which is why they started to get cramp or stiff legs at some point during the chukka.

The easiest thing to do under the circumstances is not to change the training, but to change the horse when it gets tired. This is the adequate training for a horse that must run 2,300 mts., but not for one that has to run 7 minutes in a row.

Nowadays when we speak of a certain horse we say that it has “explosion” or that it is good in the “short run”; expressions that we didn't even know the meaning of 15 years ago.

If we watch videos of the 80's we will notice one thing: nobody stopped completely dead. They ran all the way through the chukka. At the only time in which they slowed down was when they got into position to hit a backhander or go towards the boards. So we would be perfectly right in saying that what wears the polo pony down most is not running but stopping (and starting again, of course). The mechanical explanation for this is rather complex, but worth describing: the horse has a muscle called the brachio-cephalic muscle that runs all the way down its neck from its jaw to its chest. When the horse runs, this muscle—together with others—does two things: it balances the horse's neck by moving it up and down and it contributes towards

opening the lung cavity to allow a greater amount of air into the lungs and to better oxygenate the blood. When it doesn't run, this muscle is not active.

On the other hand, when a horse runs rhythmically, the foreleg stroke and the cardiac frequency become synchronized achieving greater efficiency in its cardio-respiratory system. We could therefore state that the longer a horse spends running, the better its aerobic capacity and therefore the less chances it has of tiring.

The change half way through a chukka also brought about a new variable: knowing that if he needs it, a player can have a fresh pony in less than 10 seconds, he no longer needs to administrate the horse he is riding. Before, a player would mount his horse and think “it has to last me 7 minutes”. Now that is no longer necessary, one can demand and demand and demand and when that horse can no longer respond, you change it for another.

Of course we should not generalize. I am not saying that everyone does this, but it is just another variable that explains the shorter useful life of polo ponies today.

Possible Variants

There were quite a lot of people (current high-goal players among them) who suggested the idea of banning the changes of pony in mid chukka to avoid what we said before and also so that the game should become more of a group game, because that would mean that a single player could not spend all of the chukka with the ball (no horse would

endure that). It would be a way of returning to the past, with everyone running more; stopping less; passing the ball and hitting it straight off as well as regulating the horse so that it arrives in one piece at minute N° 7.

A beautiful utopia. Because although I think it would be a magnificent idea, the players are never going to want to even try it out. Also, it would be difficult to implement, because what would happen when a horse gets cramp, for example? They could put on the identification band which indicates that it may not re-enter the field of play, but if it is playing its last chukka, what use would that be? That horse would not come back anyway. It is very difficult to implement because, as we said before, no rule can work that must be based on the ethical and moral behaviour of the polo player, that is, on his good faith.

Following the maxim that every law has its loophole, and taking into account what polo ponies are worth, no umpire is going to be willing to risk not allowing a horse off the field just because he doesn't think it has cramp at all, for example.

All the same, this idea will come in handy to deal with an issue which occurs in other sports and which is related to self-limitation. We have been able to observe the most recent case in car racing; in F1 to be precise. Towards the end of last year, all the motor-racing teams agreed that each pilot would be able to avail himself of only one engine for every 2 Grand Prix. The thing was, that in order to win, pilots made such excessive demands on their engines that they were using an average of two per Grand Prix, and this was costing the teams a fortune. Additionally, they incorporated a rule by which if they damaged an engine in the qualifying round, they were put back 10 positions on the starting grid.

This means that they decided to limit the number of engines per season, thus obliging their pilots to do something that until then they hadn't needed to do: administrate their performance. People who I consulted and who know about car racing told me that they don't

believe that this rule will pose a threat on the spectacle itself. So that the spirit of the sport will be maintained intact and it will be cheaper for everyone involved.

In the case of polo, we could say that in most cases the pilot and the organization are the same person, because all the players own the horses they play, save a few exceptions. So I think that if we manage to implement something that could have a positive bearing on not only the quality of the game but also on the health and useful life-span of the horses, the first ones to benefit would be the players, who know better than anyone how expensive and difficult it is to be well mounted.

And I repeat: this is called self-limitation, and it is an alternative that is not detrimental to the spectacle itself. But we must find the precise rule that will function for that, which is not easy.

What would happen, for example, if we applied a law that read that each player must present a list of 14 horses before the first match of the Triple Crown? What would happen is, that knowing that they have those 14 horses (and no other) they would most likely look after them more and would soon realize that the way in which to do so would be not going more slowly or running less, but the opposite. Playing as a team; running; not stopping-and-starting so much or blocking; administrating their energy not only during the match, but during the whole season, so that each of those 14 ponies can give their best.

And there would be no room for tricks or bad faith, or anything of the sort there. There would be no suspicion as to whether a horse has cramp or not; if it has gone lame or is choking. Each would be free to play his ponies as he likes, for as long as he likes; change them when he likes and for whatever reason. But he must do so only if that horse is one of the 14 on his list for that season. (Of course I say 14, but it could be 12; 13; 15; or whatever is considered most convenient).

I know this is a very crazy idea, and I don't think players will ever accept it, although I think they would be the first to benefit by it.

The La Lechuza Drama

Unfortunately, in mid-April this year, we were all horrified by the news of 21 horses from the La Lechuza Caracas team poisoned to death as a result of a badly prepared vitamin complex. And the last straw was that it happened minutes before the Sunday Game, which attracted the attention of the whole world.

Before we go any further: it was an accident. We cannot, as from this incident, ask ourselves whether there should be Doping Control or not, because this has nothing to do with it. Let us imagine a horse trailer pulled by a truck; there is brake failure and the truck turns over killing the 21 horses it was carrying. Would we be asking ourselves whether transporting horses in a truck should be banned? No. This was one case in ten million; it was a tragedy which, let's hope, will never occur again, but we cannot consider it when debating Anti-Doping issues.

I think that each player knows very well what he may or may not give his ponies: how much it improves their performance and how much damage it could cause them health-wise and clinically. There is a peculiarity about the polo pony as compared to the racehorse in that whereas a racehorse must run a straight race, the polo pony has also to run, stop; turn around; gallop; walk; go full speed, etc. What I am trying to say is that in polo it is not that easy to "dope" a horse, because one has to be able to control it.

I think that the real abuse and danger to horses to be had in polo is related to everything that is done in order to erase pain and get the horse to play when it is injured. I would say that it is the number one cause of permanent damage, because pain acts as a defence mechanism, and when there is no pain then there is no defence.

All the same, each player knows to what extent he wants to put his horse at risk. But it is a question that does not interest us in this particular case. I do not consider that doping has any bearing on the quality of the polo that is played, and this is the subject that we are dealing with now.

4. THE UMPIRES

Psychology of an Umpire

Before talking about polo umpires, it may be worthwhile thinking for a minute about what goes on in the head of an umpire in any sport when he has to direct a match. What is his aim? When one practices a sport competitively, the aim is clear: make more goals than the opposite team and in this way you win, right? But in the case of the umpires, what is their aim? To be fair? Yes, but who determines how fair they were while refereeing? The winners? The losers? The spectators? They themselves? I ask myself all these questions because I find it useful to reach this conclusion: the main objective of all umpires is, in the first place, to conduct a peaceful match and second, that when it is over he may not be accused of having tipped the scales one way or another. That is the worst accusation one can make regarding an umpire, (and it is what all losing teams do, of course). The polo umpires, who make a living out of this occupation (and there is no doubt about it: they are better umpires than the players are), are included in this maxim; all they want is a match without incidents; without yellow cards; without players that are expelled or having to inform the disciplinary sub-commission about what happened, and there are times when that objective runs counter to the real objective which should guide the work of an umpire: the accurate application of the rules.

One of the things I realized when reading the rules is just how broad they are. I thought I would come up with something much more spe-

cific. There are an enormous amount of situations or plays that are left to the umpire to decide. Therefore, when I approached many people to talk to them about this idea of restructuring the rules for polo, I was told that deep down there was no need to invent any new rule, but that we had to get the umpires to use the same penalization criteria as 30 years ago, which means to call few fouls (or, better said, to call fouls when there is danger, and a few others besides) and in this way the players, when they are no longer charged with a certain foul, will slowly let off asking that it be called.

I was talking to a high-goal player of the 70's and I asked him to tell me about Eddie (Gordo) Moore, and this is what he said:

“Gordo Moore was the first player who, when in possession of the ball, if an opponent came close to him and made a play riding him off by the side of the stick, would start asking for a foul. Nobody knows why, but one day umpires started to call that foul in his favour, and then and there others began imitating him and from one moment to the next that play turned into a foul.”

So much so that in the US they had to re-structure the rules and incorporate what was known as the new rule that establishes that a player may ride another off on the side of the stick “at any time except when he is performing the swing”. (This is not so in Argentina, where they are allowed to ride each other off at all times).

What is my point here? The point is that there is a belief that the polo leadership and the umpires are the ones who determine the criterion to be applied in making the rules, and this is not so. It is the players who, through their complaints and recriminations mark the criterion. In other words: if the eight players start requesting that a foul be called and complaining when it isn't, in the end the umpire will start to call it, because his principal aim is that the match should not get out of control; that the players should not insult him too much; not to

have to expel anyone; that no one may think he was biased and to be able to return home in peace. And his attitude is not all that far fetched.

I say this because I don't think this is a minor detail: it is the players who determine what should be called and what not, and that is not right. It is the Argentine Polo Association that should establish the criteria, because in this case, the umpire that does not follow the AAP's instructions will simply not continue in the job and that's it, and the umpire who does call the fouls according to the AAP criteria will keep his post, and when the players complain because he doesn't call a certain foul, the umpire may then answer “if I call that foul I lose my job, so you may go and complain to the AAP”. And if they then go and ask the AAP, their answer will be that the umpire is right because he has been instructed not to call that foul.

That is what is understood by backing. The umpires call the fouls that the players expect them to because either they do not have the support of the AAP or because they take no notice of the criteria imposed by the AAP for refereeing. I know it's not an easy subject, but it is not impossible to solve.

On the other hand, there is a recurrent criticism by high-goal players regarding the umpires that I think well founded: danger is not sufficiently penalized, whereas they are strict about insignificant or disciplinary fouls. We see a lot more yellow cards because players protest than for dangerous plays. By this I don't say I agree with the players shouting or complaining to the umpire, but I do think that in such a high-risk sport as polo is, a good umpire is the one who strongly penalizes all plays that imply danger, and who overlooks the thousands of fouls in which there is no possible danger involved, with the aim at maintaining the rhythm of the game and the quality of the spectacle.

The Foul That is a Foul But isn't a Foul.

This rather weird title is what best describes a play that occurs thousands of times during a match and which could be explained as follows: when two players from opposite teams run towards the ball, the one who arrives there first strikes. What does the one who arrives second do? HE CLAIMS A FOUL. This means that in polo, where anticipation has always been considered an absolute value, we see nowadays how the one with the verdict in his favour is he who arrives late, because this player, when he sees that he won't make it to the ball first, what he does is try to catch more line than the opponent who is getting there first. And what the umpire sees is that one player is hitting the ball and the opponent, who is slightly more in line than he, is asking for a foul to be called. Conclusion: He blows the whistle.

That is why I say a foul that is a foul but isn't a foul, because what is really happening is that the player who is arriving late is creating it because he knows it is the only resource he has left for the play to turn in his favour. Any video will illustrate this: the one who arrives first, hits the ball. The one arriving after asks for the foul to be called. This play is not a foul and I believe that it should not be called unless there is real danger of collision between the two players.

I think that if umpires could be clear about this play and award the foul correctly, the game would pick up more speed without having to re-write any rule. In order to do this we must re-value the concept of anticipation and consider that each time that a player reaches the ball, in that play in particular, he is the best positioned of the 8 players on the field, and precisely for that reason may enjoy a benefit, which is not having to be 100% in line with the ball's line. In other words: if there is no danger, the player who arrives at the ball first is allowed to be slightly across the line.

Another option is to imagine some system by which asking for a foul to be called is not the main resource by which to turn the play around in one's favour.

Discipline: The Players; Actors.

There is something that is quite clear about the issue of discipline. Whenever there are two umpires, and therefore a third man, it will suit the players to complain and question the verdicts, because it is the real, concrete way of influencing the result of the penalty. If one umpire blows the whistle and the other does not agree with him and (with the intervention of the third man) the verdict may be reverted, it is understandable that all the players on the fouling team should do everything possible for that to happen. That is the reason why—and there is no other—we see so much complaining during a polo match. If the verdicts were definitive, the players would know that there is no way in which to change them and they would concentrate on the next play.

There are several ways in which this may be changed, that go from the very simple to the more specific. The first thing that could be tried out is that no umpire may change the verdict of his colleague. If one says it is a foul, then it is, even if the other disagrees. This is so in many sports: American football; baseball; basketball; hockey; etc. And seemingly it works, since there don't seem to be that many claims by the players in these sports. Would more fouls be committed? Possibly, but notice one thing: the game would not be cut-up any more than it is today, because nowadays, when an umpire calls a foul, if the other disagrees, they consult the third man. If he does not give the foul, we have a throw-in, but what is annoying is that the game was interrupted. So with a definitive verdict by either of the two umpires, maybe there will be more penalties, but the game would be interrupted the same amount of times as it is nowadays.

The other alternative is to adopt a system like in football; tennis and rugby, in which there is only one on the field with two or more helpers to assist him, but who do not impose their verdicts or oblige him to sanction a foul. This could be tried out in Triple Crown tournaments,

I think, placing two linesmen on a tall chair (like the tennis umpires) at the 60-yard level, one on each side of the field and on opposite sides, (that is, diagonally opposite). Their function, I repeat, would be to assist the umpire; not to call fouls. This would add rhythm to the game, and more importantly, the umpire would be the main and almost only person responsible for the refereeing, which is not the case today and which I don't think is a good thing, because everything is shared, which has a negative influence over the umpire's concentration for the almost three hours that the match lasts.

Final Question: Are Today's Umpires Any Good?

Of course they are. I think Argentine umpires are by far the best in the world, and I arrive at this conclusion based on only one thing: they arbitrate between the best players in the world when they play against each other; without patrons or tournaments with handicap limits, and that is enough for them to be considered the best in the world at what they do.

Likewise, and based on this very equation, I think that the quality of arbitration deteriorates at the same pace as the quality of polo. Nowadays it is almost impossible to see good refereeing because it is also impossible to watch a good match. The umpires have to be looking attentively not at the two or three players going towards the ball, but at the one who has the ball; the one who marks him; the one who blocks him; the one who counter-blocks him; the one coming up from behind; the one who attempts to block the one coming up from behind; etc. This is the typical play we are likely to see: a gallop with 5 or

6 players heaped together in less than 24 square yards; one has the ball and he touches it with strokes that are not longer than 60 inches, and all the rest are playing each other off with their sticks raised. How can we expect the umpire to do a good job?

On the other hand, I think that when these same umpires who arbitrate the Open matches began to travel to Europe to work in Spain; France; Switzerland; Belgium; Italy; etc., the quality of refereeing here in Argentina deteriorated. They started to call the same fouls here that they did there, and by this I mean what is commonly known as "low-goal fouls". I think that almost all these umpires are capable of understanding that this should not be so, and that in polo above 30 goals there are fouls that should not be called because they are not dangerous and they go against the spectacle.

All the same, it is the Argentine Polo Association's responsibility, as the most important polo regulating agency in Argentina, to be in touch permanently with the professional umpires to see that they apply the rules correctly, and at the same time give them the support they need whenever it is required of them.

Lastly, I believe that being a polo umpire in Argentina is looked upon with disapproval. It would seem as though umpires are only those who have failed as players, or who did badly in other activities, or who "have no alternative", and this is an erroneous and unjust thought. As a result of working on this essay I have got to know several of them better and they are very capable people; polo lovers who care and enjoy their work as umpires. We must give more importance to their profession; give them the place they deserve; allow them to express their opinions on several subjects pertaining to polo.

There should also be a good school for referees and young people should be given the message that being a polo referee is something very honourable and a very decent occupation.

And it is even possible that some day former players may dare to

become referees, since they are the only ones who really know what it is to be out there on the field, playing that level of polo and if for no other reason, that would be deserving of the highest respect by players and spectators alike. Utopia? Surely not.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

How and When

I think the changes themselves are just as important as how they are brought about. Any idea, however good, will fail if no one pushes for it to work or if we mistake the way in which it is implemented. That is why all the changes proposed must have the approval of players, management and referees. And I repeat: it must be borne in mind that for the moment nobody is changing anything; we are only TRYING OUT one variable or another that may make this sport more entertaining to play and more enjoyable to watch.

As soon as there is consensus as to what changes are to be tried out, I think two or three tournaments could be assigned during the 2009 spring season (not Triple Crown tournaments, but those with the highest possible handicap rating) and two or three during the 2010 fall season so as to try out the new changes and at the same time give all the clubs who want to try them out at official and internal tournaments, freedom to do so. The more matches that are played trying out a new rule, the more tools will we have be able to decide on their use, and the greater the amount of players in a position to give their opinion, as well as the greater the chances of the change being a positive one.

The idea is not to go too fast. If we are changing something that was written 140 years ago, we must make sure that what we are inserting is better than what we are erasing.

This is my view on how these changes could be implemented. I may, of course, be mistaken, and there is probably some other method which is better; simpler or more efficient. The same goes for the ideas that I have presented in this essay: if none of them are of any use, but instead others are proposed that are an improvement on them, so much the better. The only thing I, like so many others want, is to be able to take my place on the stands and watch a good polo match.

Change as a Habit

A step forward that may be achieved by this exercise of reflection that we are practicing today is to lay the foundations for, and begin to activate a sub-committee that is included within the framework of the Polo Association, which is the Rules Of The Game Sub-Committee, currently made up of 12 former players, most of them former 10-goalers and winners of the Argentine Open. It would be a good move (and an honour) that it should be they who promote these changes.

In Rugby, the IRB (International Rugby Board), which is the governing body that brings together all the rugby associations in the world, created a Rules' Committee not so long ago with the aim of improving the spectacle, made up of people who watch rugby all year round and everywhere. They get together; watch the videos; speak to the players and referees, etc.

The rugby boom worldwide as a spectacle coincided with the work done by this committee. The European rugby leagues are broadcast live by the most important sports channels, and the IRB and its associations receive enormous amounts of money. But the television chan-

nels put pressure on them at the same time: they want a good show, and everyone in the rugby world understands that quite clearly. It is as a result of this that the rules' committee is dynamic, because as soon as they impose a rule, the players find a way to get around it. Or to put it differently, they try to squeeze the maximum efficiency possible from it, which is very often detrimental to the quality of the game.

But this exercise of continual change—which in rugby is not only considered a good thing but occurs naturally as well—in polo would appear to be somewhat traumatic, perhaps fostered by this conservative stigma prevalent in the polo environment. I insist: there are times when one must change to preserve, and I think this is one of them.

And as this comes to a close, there is something that many players asked of me and which I agree with 100%. We should put all the regulations in the world into just one. It is not possible that in one country you are allowed to go out to defend a 30-yard penalty and in another it must be left undefended; in one you can circle twice before you hit a penalty, etc. Because these are insignificant stipulations as well, and really there is no basic difference between the American and the Argentine rules, for example.

I know that Juan Badiola had been working on this for a long time and I know just how many hurdles he encountered along the way, particularly in the US. But perhaps all this reflection that we are indulging in here in Argentina may awaken the interest of the rest of the world, and so we may be able to standardize criteria and rules of the game. If we manage to create a set of rules which is common to Argentina, the US and England, I think that the rest of the countries would adopt it at once.

4. CONCLUSION

What is Cambiaso's Opinion?

Before I conclude, I would like to comment on something that surprised me. During all these months in which I have been talking about all this with different polo people, I was surprised about how curious they were as to Adolfo Cambiaso's opinion on all this. *"Did you speak with Cambiaso?" "What has Cambiaso got to say?"* I soon realized that many people think that this system of play—apart from having been invented by him—is the system that suits him best, and that therefore he will show certain resistance to trying out some of the new rules. And of course I heard many say *"It is Cambiaso who is ruining polo!"* or *"How boring it is to watch Cambiaso play!"*

I humbly believe that this thought is a mistake. For that matter, polo is ruining itself because the rules nowadays allow a lot of players to play imitating Cambiaso's style, despite not having a quarter of the attributes and talent that he has.

Also, I believe that the best version of Adolfo—at least for me—was the period when he played for Ellerstina and the first years of La Dolfinna, when polo was fast (and he was the fastest of all). He has been the best player in the world for many years (and one of the two or three best mounted), mostly because he has the knack of adapting to all the rules and to all the styles of play, and I don't think that this will be an exception. In the late 90's in the US, with each new rule that was added (walking; new rule; etc.) people said that it was anti-Cambiaso,

and every year he won more easily.

His relationship with the Nueva Chicago crowd first, and with Tinelli later show his intention of helping Argentine polo to grow as a spectacle, and so that increasingly more people should be able to enjoy it. I think that these changes all aim at the same thing.

And lastly, he is one of the few players (together with Lolo) who before looking to see if one rule or another, or one decision or other is convenient to them or to their team or not, they look to see if it is good or bad for polo, and are consistent in their actions. And nobody came to tell me this; I experienced it when my dad was President of the AAP.

Taking Care of What is Ours

“Argentine polo is unique in the world because of the speed it is played at, and that is what is beginning to disappear: speed”.

This is perhaps the sentence which summarizes the reason that lead me to write this essay and to generate a debate, regarding the rules and the kind of polo that is being played today, in which I included as many people as possible.

I also believe that all the possible variants that may arise from now on (and all those that have been proposed in this essay) aim at the same goal which is that the game become nicer to watch AND TO PLAY. Most of the polo professionals today are bored playing polo (they say so, not me). The fact that it is a job to them does not mean that they can't enjoy what they do. With new rules they are going to go on win-

ning and losing; that won't change. I don't think there is any rule that will make any player or team invincible, or the other way around.

Another of my fears regarding today's polo is that quite apart from the deterioration of the quality of the spectacle itself, this model has a negative impact on the breeding ground from which future high-goal players emerge. In Argentina, ever since the beginning of the XXth. century there was a model that made it possible for many more Argentine players to become excellent players than from any other country. There is no sport in the world in which one country shows such broad and obvious predominance over the rest. The reasons? Provincial and farm polo; the mix between criollo horses and thoroughbreds, the gauchos; working with cattle; the pampas; but above all, the opportunity young people have of playing against better players than themselves, which in the last instance is the only thing that other countries cannot provide.

It was my lot—during the years when my dad was President of the AAP—to be an eye-witness to all the clashes between players and the Association, because in those days I was an active player. Whilst listening once and a million times to the stands of one side and the other, I used to think to myself: “Why are there so many differences?” Until I realized that there was not an objective that was common to all the parties involved. There was the belief that what was good for one was bad for the other, and that is where the mistake lies.

To me there is a common objective, which is that our country should maintain the level of polo it always had over time and train high-goal players, which is the only thing that does not exist in the rest of the world. And this is more important for current high-goal players than

for anyone else, for a reason that is very simple: 90% of high-goal players, when they retire at the age of about 45, with a whole and active useful life before them, devote their time either to breeding or purchasing or selling horses. Who do they sell them to? To those who play and make a living out of polo; to the professionals (whose purchasing power will always be in direct proportion to their handicaps), and to the patrons, most of whom buy horses following the advice of their high-goal professional, who—in the hypothetical and undesirable case that from one day to the other (and as a result of this new style of polo, who knows) no longer spring from here in Argentina, but start budding in some other countries—, both these patrons and professionals will naturally spend their money and time buying horses and playing polo in those countries.

I know this is unlikely, but not impossible. That is why I think that current high-goalers must bear in mind that just as there were players who taught them and helped them reach the position they are in today, that they must do the same for those on their way up, above all for their own good, and much more so considering that generally those that are on their way up are their very own sons; nephews or the sons of very close friends. Family names invariably appear again and again.

I think it was two years ago that rumour had it that a 4-goal patron wanted to play the Open, hiring 3 of the 5 best players in the world. The AAP, quite rightly, put forward a rule stating that no player with a rating under 6 goals would be allowed to participate in Triple Crown tournaments. As far as I know, a meeting was held at the Polo-Players' Association to endorse this rule. The players voted almost unanimously in favour of this new rule, thus proving that they are capable of long term vision, putting aside their immediate economic interests. They realized that if patrons started participating in the Open, they would be killing the hen that laid the golden eggs, because behind this fist audacious player (who would not win, of course, but neither would he make a fool of himself), that others would take up the challenge and

do the same, and that in three or four years' time the Palermo Open would be exactly the same as professional polo that is played all over the world.

The debate that concerns us now regarding the rules, aims at the very same thing. To keep a hold on the best thing we have; that only the best may get to play that level polo and that they do it to the best of their capabilities, as only they can do, and in the way they best like to play it.

I know very well that the polo environment—like any other—is not a bed of roses. There are internal undercurrents; jealousies; resentfulness; conflicting positions; etc. But beyond all that—which is one of the reasons that drove me to writing this essay—is that I feel that we are all in the same boat, and when I say all, I literally mean ALL.

There is something that may sound rather broad and vague, but which is real, and that something is called Polo Argentino and it includes everything and each one of us. Polo Argentino is the Open; it is the N° 1 field in Palermo; it is Adolfo Cambiaso; the Piereses; the Heguys and the Novillo Astradas; it is polo's living history; it is Juancarlitos; Suárez and Santa Ana; El Trébol and Venado Tuerto; the Menditeguys and the Duggans; the Cavanaghs and the Alberdis. Chapa Uno; Chapa II; La Espadaña; Daniel González; Ernesto Trotz; Alex Garrahan and Benjamín Araya. It is the tradition of the Hurlingham Open; the Tortugas Open; it is all the grooms; tamers; farriers; helpers; leather workers. Polo Argentino is also the horses; Cuartetera; Jazz; Colibrí; Luna; Minifalda; Marsellesa; Birra; Pureza; it is Mariano Aguerre; Lolo; Lucas; the Mac Donoughs, the Merloses, Juan Martín Nero; it is the Olympic Oak and the '24 and '36 gold medals; it is the Alpi bar after the matches; it is Mary and Melito; it is Snoopy; it is

the La Nación special supplement; Polo Argentino is the memory of Gonzalo Heguy travelling at top speed on a Palermo afternoon; it is Alberto Pedro and his 20 triumphant Opens; it is the July Rural Exhibition; it is the AACCP and all its horse breeders; it is the Lady Susan Townley award; it is Juan Sauro; the Springbook Cup; the Metropolitano and República Cups; it is polo in the Provinces; it is the Salta Polo Club; Magdala; Chapaleufú; Guardia del Monte; Medialuna; Ascochinga; Washington; it is the fall tournaments; Charro Mejicano at El Trébol, the Balfour Cup in Venado, the La Bandera Cup at the Rosario Jockey Club; the Belgrano Cup in Suárez; the Campeonato Argentino del Interior; Polo Argentino is the Grenadiers on the day of the final; it is the Dorrego stands; it is Norita Heguy running across the field when one of her sons is injured; it is local and foreign patrons; the vets and the agricultural engineers; the horse pilots; the flagsmen and the truck-drivers; it is also the embryo centers; it is the Potrillos cup at Indios and the Inter-schools tournament; it is the Myriam Heguy Cup for women; the Estímulo Cup; Polo Argentino is the gauchos from all over the country watching the Open final on ESPN; it is the foreigners; the La Martina stand at Palermo; it is the Ellerstina Gold Cup; the La Dolfina Diamond Cup; the Polo Tour, the Spring Auctions; it is the almost 2,000 polo fields sprinkled between the cities of Pilar, Lujan, Cañuelas, Lobos and Monte. And Polo Argentino is, of course, each one of you who is reading this essay; your grandparents; your parents; your brothers and sisters; your wives and your children.

In this country, which suffers from an evil that is endemic, and from chronic economic and political instability through its corruption; grants in exchange for votes; mistakes in governmental agriculture and livestock policies; its infinite poverty spread out over all the National Territory; we have gold-dust in our hands in an activity that is solid and from which many families derive a livelihood and at which we are, undoubtedly, the best in the world. But we didn't create that; we inherited it from our parents; grandparents and all the polo lovers who are no longer with us. It is my belief that it is our duty to preserve it;

to look after it, each one from his own place, doing the best we can do, so that Polo Argentino continues to be the best polo in the world for a very long time to go.

Thank you for your time; I embrace you all.

J.T.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Juan Badiola
Adolfito Cambiaso
Jorge Tanoira
Ale Agote
Ernesto Trotz
Alvaro Pieres
Alex Garrahan
Pepe Heguy
Gonzalo Pieres
Marcos Heguy
Bautista Heguy
Miguel Novillo Astrada
Juan Martín Nero
Mariano Aguerre
Alfonso Pieres
Luis Lalor
Martín Zubía
Daniel Gonzalez
Lolo Castagnola
Pancho Bensadón
Cristian Laprida
Carlos Miguens
Ramón Franco
Estanislao Ramos
Alberto P. Heguy
Mariano Gonzalez
Silvestre Garrós
Santiago Chavanne
Horacio Heguy
Máximo Aguirre Paz
Cucho Garrahan
Sebastián Merlos

Julio Bensadón
Horacio Laffaye
Martín Haurie
Jaime García Huidobro
Delfín Uranga
Juanchi Lagos
Charlie Miguens
Santi Tanoira
Gonzalo Tanoira
Hernán Vidou
Claudio Cerviño
Xavier Prieto Astirriaga
María Bensadón
Martín Garrahan
Germán Zanelli
Gustavo Sgalla
Piki Díaz Alberdi
Agustín Merlos
Bill Buchanan
Germán Frers
Jorge Mac Donough
Ricardo Díaz
Bárbara Tanoira
Paco de Narváez
Daniel Boudou
Héctor Guerrero
Juan José Diaz Alberdi (h)
Daniel Meissner
Beto Goti
José Donoso
Sharon Chavanne
Sandy Harper

ANNEX

QUICK GUIDELINE OF IDEAS

For the purpose of putting all these ideas that have sprung from this essay in order, I have listed them separately, each under a separate heading, with a brief explanation and with what I believe to be the pros and cons. The page number on each belongs to the page on which you will find a broader description and the grounds for this rule.

I have divided them into two large groups: those that it is possible to apply immediately and those which may be applied in the future. The first are those that I consider could be tried out this spring in some of the high-goal tournaments. The second, because they are more revolutionary, I think will take more time. It would be a good thing if we could start trying them out on the children in the potrillos, inter-school and juvenil tournaments, etc. so that they start getting used to them and so that it doesn't become so traumatic when they have to change, as will be the case of the older players.

IDEAS THAT COULD BE APPLIED IMMEDIATELY

1. ENGLISH RULE

Proposed Rule: When a player in possession of the ball has an opponent in front of him less than a body length away, he may only tap the ball once and must then hit or make a play. If the player, after tapping it once, leaves it to a team mate, the latter must hit hard or make a play.

PROS:

- Provides rhythm and speeds up the game.
- Fosters anticipation.
- The player defending does not despair over taking the ball from him, and therefore less fouls are committed.

CONS:

- If blocking is not banned, it will increase.
- The two best players on each team are going to play closer together so as not to lose possession of the ball
- The players turn around towards the rear and start the play over again (could that be prohibited?).

(For more, go to page 20)

2. TWO TO ONE IN ATTACK (ANTI-BLOCKING RULE)

Proposed Rule: No player who is marking the player with the ball (if he is less than a body-length away from him) may be ridden off or obstructed.

PROS:

- It discourages heaping up of many players around the ball.
- It discourages slow play.
- It obliges the four players on a team to play polo and not that two or three of them spend the afternoon doing a job that is dirty, dangerous, boring and ugly for spectators and players alike.

CONS:

- I can't think of any.

(For more, go to pages 14 and 23)

3. MANDATORY BACKHANDER

Proposed Rule: If a player in defence (looking towards his own goalposts), has an opponent less than a body length away when he is about to arrive at the ball, he must hit a backhander whether he likes it or not. He may not turn the ball.

PROS:

- It adds rhythm to the game.
- It fosters anticipation.
- It fosters passing the ball to an unmarked player.

CONS:

- It would be difficult to determine to what extent a player is “heading towards his own goalposts”.

(For more, go to page 26)

4. NO CONTACT IN THE THROW-IN

Proposed Rule: Both teams must line up at a distance of 2 meters from each other. The umpire throws the ball along the channel formed in between.

PROS:

- It adds rhythm to the game.
- There is no rough horse-play and no shouts.
- It probably contributes to less fouls being committed in the throw-in (I’m not sure).

CONS:

- I don’t see any, apart from it not changing much.

(For more, go to page 39)

5. INDIRECT PENALTIES

Proposed Rule: All penalties (except 60; 40; 30 yard penalties or corners or from the spot penalties between 30 yards and the goalpost), will be taken indirectly, and a player may not renew the game and hit again if before that another player has not touched the ball. Team mates and opponents must line up 30 yards away from the player renewing the game.

PROS:

- Game renewal will always be a fast move.
- Because a team-mate is not allowed to be near, the player renewing the game has no alternative but to take a long shot.

CONS:

- I don't see any.

(For more, go to page 39)

6. HOOKING THE BACKHANDER

Proposed Rule: Hooking the off-side backhander is allowed, when and if the head of the stick is not above the height of the shoulder when hooked.

PROS:

- The player marking has another tool at hand, obliging the player with the ball to get rid of it.
- Some people maintain that we would see more backhand strokes (I doubt it).

CONS:

- It could cause injury to the arm of the player about to hit the backhander (I have my doubts about that too).
- It is difficult to determine if the head of the stick is above or below the players shoulder when hooked, which would cause complaints.
- We would be adding another foul to the list, thus providing yet another reason to stop the game when we are trying to do the opposite.

(For more, go to page 45)

7. DEFINITIVE VERDICT BY THE UMPIRES

Proposed Rule: When each of the umpires calls a foul, the other may not question the sanction or change the verdict by consulting the third man.

PROS:

- The players would complain less because their complaint would have no bearing on the verdict or the penalty applied.
- There would be no time wasted in consulting the third man.

CONS:

- Would the number of penaltys per match increase? Maybe, but the amount of times a game is stopped would not, which is what matters.

(For more, go to page 59)

8. A SECOND CLOCK TO MARK DEAD TIME

Proposed Rule: A digital clock for measuring the time allotted to taking a penalty; hitting in from the back line; changing an injured pony; an injured player; etc. shall be installed (located beside the clock which measures the duration of the chukka).

PROS:

- It adds rhythm to the game
- It avoids all kinds of suspicion (above all when a player striking a ball in from the back line takes his time so that his mates can change horses).
- It puts an end to discussions as to how many times you can circle before taking a penalty; as to how long it takes to position the ball and how long the preparation run is before a player hits.

CONS:

- Naturally it cannot be applied to polo outside the Triple Crown (because of a question of infrastructure). But in time, umpires will have developed a mental clock and will be able to apply it without the need for a proper clock (I think).

(For more, go to page 44)

IDEAS THAT COULD BE APPLIED IN THE FUTURE

9. HOLDING ON TO THE BALL AT LOW SPEED (GALLOPING)

Proposed Rule: When a team is in possession of the ball and the game is slow (gallop or slower), no more than x seconds may go by before the game speeds up again. Otherwise, the team with the ball shall be penalized.

PROS:

- The same pros as in the English rule, but more complete, because it attacks the problem from the root. i.e. It punishes precisely what one wants punished: slow play.
- The umpire need not worry about how many times the player tapped the ball or turned around towards the rear, etc. All he has to do is count x seconds and then blow the whistle if the game has not picked up speed.

CONS:

- The only doubt resides in whether the umpire will be able to determine precisely the time when he must start counting, and how does the player know how long he has left. (The umpire could shout “blue team, slow play!”, after which the n amount of seconds would start running).

(For more, go to page 22)

10. RUN TOWARDS THE GOALPOSTS

Proposed Rule: A player fouled when in attack will resume the play with a stopped ball from the spot where the foul was committed, aiming at the opponents' goalposts and with the rest of the players behind him. (The player who fouled him must be 10 yards behind him and the other 6 players, 30 yards from the latter.)

PROS:

- It punishes the foul in attack more, which aims at less fouls being committed and that the game be less cut-up.
- For every foul committed, the play is renewed by means of one of the most beautiful plays in polo: a player on his own racing towards the goalposts with an opponent close behind and in pursuit.

CONS:

- I don't see any, except for its being such a revolutionary idea that it will be impossible to impose.

(For more, go to page 32)

11. BONUS FOR FIELD GOALS

Proposed Rule: For every so-many field goals that a team makes during a match (3 or 4?), it will automatically receive an extra goal.

PROS:

- It discourages trying to provoke a foul in order to make a goal.

CONS:

- The team defending could make a foul on purpose so as to avoid a field goal (which could then result in Penalty 1)
- In medium and low-goal matches it would remain to be seen who keeps a count on the field goals. (The umpire? The score-keeper?)

(For more, go to page 37)

12. PENALTY GOAL AGAINST A TEAM FOR FOUL ACCUMULATION

Proposed Rule: Every so-many fouls in defence committed by a team (4 or 5?) a goal will automatically be scored against it.

PROS:

- It contributes towards less fouls being committed during a match.

CONS:

- It would foster the situation of teams provoking fouls. That is why this rule should go hand-in-hand with the one before (bonus for field goals) so that they don't play at provoking fouls.

(For more, go to page 38)

13. A GOAL FROM BEHIND THE 60-YARD LINE IS WORTH DOUBLE.

Proposed Rule: A line of whitewash marks a semi-circle 60 yards from the goalposts. All goals (except penalties) made from behind this line are worth double.

PROS:

- It directly rewards shots at the goalposts from afar, which is very nice to watch and very difficult to do.

CONS:

- It would be difficult for an umpire to determine whether the player taking the shot is in front or behind the 60-yard line.

(For more, go to page 38)

14. HIT-IN FROM THE BACK LINE AFTER A GOAL IS SCORED

Proposed Rule: When a team makes a goal, the play is resumed by means of a hit-in from the back line (at the same end where the goal was converted).

PROS:

- Throw-ins in a match—which many consider the cause of several evils—would diminish by 70%.

CONS:

- The team converting would be at a territorial disadvantage compared to what it is now, (but would be in possession of the ball, which is no small matter).

(For more, go to page 43)

15. A) INDIRECT PENALTY IN THE SIDE-LINE HIT-IN

Proposed Rule: When the ball goes out at the sides, play is resumed by means of an indirect shot by the team that did not throw it out.

PROS:

- It punishes the team that purposely or not throws the ball out, the aim being that the ball should not go out so often and that the game gain more rhythm.

CONS:

- It would cause complaints and discussion between the teams as to who threw it out.

15. B) TWO-AGAINST-FOUR THROW-INS IN THE SIDE-LINE HIT-IN

Proposed Rule: The team that throws the ball out at the side, lines up for the throw-in with only two players.

PROS AND CONS:

- The same as 15 a).

(for more, go to page 41)

16. CHANGING HORSES IN THE MIDDLE OF A CHUKKA IS NOT ALLOWED

Proposed Rule: Changing horses in the middle of a chukka is not allowed unless a horse is injured.

PROS:

- The play would be more open; faster, and the game would have more team-work, as it was before.
- The horses would have less wear-and-tear and would last longer (this opinion is not unanimous, there are those who believe differently)

CONS:

- With the training horses have today, it would be impossible to apply.
- Determining when a horse is injured (or cramped) is difficult and rather subjective. Wise-guys would be in clover.

(For more, go to page 51)

17. A LIST OF 14 HORSES FOR AS LONG AS THE TRIPLE CRWON LASTS

Proposed Rule: Players must present a list of 14 horses before the first match of the Triple Crown, and shall not be allowed to play any other that does not figure on the list for as long as the season lasts.

PROS:

- The same as the one before.
- It benefits good pilots and harms the bad.

CONS:

- I don't see any. But I suspect that those who would benefit most are those who are going to be most against this measure.

(For more, go to page 53)

18. ONLY ONE UMPIRE AND TWO ASSISTANTS

Proposed Rule: There shall be only one umpire on the field and two assistants sitting on a tall look-out (diagonally opposite to each other), at the height of the 60-yard line on either side of the field.

PROS:

- The Umpire's decision would be definitive, which would motivate less complaints by the players.
- His responsibility during the game would be greater, which would improve his concentration and his efforts towards doing a good job.
- Players would be able to identify the personal criteria of each umpire.

CONS:

- It would be difficult for the umpire to see each play from a reasonable distance away (the assistants would play an important role in helping him)

(For more, go to page 59)

INDEX

PREFACE	3
1. EXISTING CIRCUMSTANCES	7
2. THE CHANGES	17
3. THE HORSES	47
4. THE UMPIRES	55
5. IMPLEMENTATION	63
6. CONCLUSION	67
ANNEX / QUICK GUIDELINE OF IDEAS	75