



CHINESE CHUCKAS

TIANJIN RECENTLY HOSTED THE COUNTRY'S INAUGURAL SNOW POLO TOURNAMENT WITH A STAR-STUDDED ROSTER OF INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS. **DIANA D'ARENBERG** WAS THERE TO WITNESS THE MAINLAND ELITE'S LATEST OBSESSION

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KALUN LEUNG

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IANJIN, IS THE LAST place you would expect to find a world-class polo ground and clubhouse. The setting for the next *Terminator* sequel, perhaps, but host city of the so-called game of kings? Driving past row after row of uniform concrete buildings on this grey industrial plain where the horizon is indistinguishable from the smog-cloaked landscape, the sight of white marquees and artificial snow in the distance is jarring and somewhat surreal. Welcome to Tianjin Goldin Metropolitan Polo Club, home to China's largest polo club and the country's first snow polo tournament.

The game was first played on snow at St Moritz, Switzerland in 1960 and the St Moritz Polo World Cup is one of the highlights of the European winter social season for the upper crust. No doubt China's fifth-largest city hopes some of that glamour will rub off and Tianjin will become a regular stop on the social calendar for polo aficionados and the attendant perma-tanned jetset. To that end, the developers have built a five-star hotel decked out in obligatory marble and gold, luxury villas, health spas and fine-dining restaurants complete with a 10,000-bottle wine cellar.

The club, which opened in November, is the fourth in China – there are two in Beijing and one in Shanghai – and has two international standard polo fields, an indoor schooling arena and 150 plushly appointed stables. Sixty import-

THE MANE EVENT
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
The Tianjin complex has stables for 150 horses; a match official; Argentina on the charge; the polo club is linked to a luxury housing development



ed thoroughbreds are under the care of the club's director of stables and former Australian team captain Derek Reid, and another 20 are on the way. Training and care of the horses is overseen by a professional international management team that includes Reid, general manager Paul Stevens (former manager of England's Guards Polo Club) and director of operations and current England player John Fisher.

The February tournament brought together professional teams from Argentina, England, Australia, France and New Zealand, with some of the game's biggest stars – Frenchmen Brieuc Rigaux and Pierre-Henri N'goumou, England's

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With one of the highest GDPs on the mainland, the city is emerging as a key economic hub. However, one prominent Hong Kong polo player pointed out that recent attempts at establishing clubs in China were driven “not so much by a love of the sport but by an ancillary facility to sell real estate. Attached to housing estates are golf courses, sometimes marinas and, now, polo clubs. This all makes for higher property prices and better secondary markets.” Metropolitan clearly falls in to the same category with its high-rise apartments and villas, but the level of expertise gathered to manage the polo club might be just what is needed to revive Chinese interest in the sport after a 1,000-year hiatus.

First recorded in Persia in the fifth century BC, polo spread across Asia and became a popular pastime of nobility during the Tang dynasty (AD617 to AD907), although it died out shortly after. This association with wealth and nobility has made the sport desirable among China’s growing elite who are attracted to its aura of exclusivity. Wong says, “The kind of people we are attracting have travelled, they’ve seen the world, so they’ve had some sort of exposure to polo. Many see the association with royalty, but they’re really concerned about the next generation, their heritage and the idea of building a new dynasty. We had a rich horse culture in China once upon a time and it was disrupted, but now I think it’s coming back.”

Polo is a game that sorts the wheat from the chaff, the dedicated from the dilettante. The club’s ponies, trained on firm ground, had limited

experience on snow and many of the players had also never competed on it. Galloping in those conditions requires strength, concentration, finesse and endurance from both rider and pony.

After a couple of days, the guests began to embrace the spirit of the game, largely abetted by mulled wine and other beverages, as the lively commentary and banter from the Hong Kong Polo Association’s Paul Chow and Australian Jim Hilston shows: “It’s not all Pimm’s and champagne. It’s blood and guts and gore. It’s passion.” With spectators much closer to the action than at other events, snow polo is an engaging and exciting game to watch. By the time England and Argentina contest the final, it’s fair to say that all eyes are on the action. Although, mind you, Argentinians in tight white jodhpurs on horseback is enough to elicit a frenzied response from a sizeable section of the crowd. Just for the record, England won the four-chukka final 7-6.

The week was a thoroughly entertaining introduction to snow polo for China. But as Australian national team captain Glen Gilmore explains, it will be some time before China makes an impact on the sport internationally. “It’s too late to start playing when you’re 30 or 40,” he says. “You have to begin at a very young age. It’ll be the younger generation that will get into polo. It takes a long time to build up the skills and technique to be a good player. The parents will sign up their kids, and then the kids will get hooked. That’s when we’ll see a generation of polo players in China. But it’ll take some time.”

FRESH HORSES

FROM TOP LEFT Team England players; polo ponies are rugged up and hand-fed in the stables

OPPOSITE

FROM TOP The state-of-the-art stable complex; Hong Kong do battle with England during the week-long tournament; applying some pre-match strapping

A Rare Breed

FROM ITS OBSCURE ORIGINS more than 2,500 years ago in Persia or China, polo is now played in 77 countries worldwide. You’d be wrong to dismiss the game as the preserve of well-heeled British toffs or louche Argentinian playboys. Today, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and China are all making inroads into the sport. Like Argentina’s Haguys and Pieres, and Mexico’s Gracidas, Malaysia has its own polo dynasty in the shape of the Beh family. The Behs’ passion for polo is in the blood. Patriarch Dato Beh Chun Chuan, his three sons and daughter play under the BP Polo family banner.

While Hong Kong enthusiasts lament the lack of a polo club in their crowded city, it hasn’t stopped a new breed of players joining the game’s international ranks. Shanghai Tang’s Raphael le Masne de Chermont has been a pioneer of the sport in Hong Kong since he moved to the city 16 years ago. He started playing polo at the age of 13 in France, and today he is a well-known international competitor. He has spearheaded three tournaments in Asia, including the Shanghai Tang International Women’s polo tournament in Singapore, and sponsored the Shanghai Tang Polo Cup in Mongolia. Aron Harilela, an avid rider since the age of 18, is another notable Hong Kong player. He developed a taste for the game 10 years ago and plays mostly in Singapore and Thailand, where in 2010 he led his team, The Next Level, to victory in the Princess Cup at the Thai Polo Open.

China’s polo scene may be in its infancy but Beijing-based Liu Shilai, who opened Tangren Polo and Equestrian Club late last year, is helping to build its profile. Liu is one of the few Chinese players with an international handicap and he spends a lot of time in Argentina developing his skills and spreading the word about Chinese polo culture.