

Polo appeals to more than princes



Let's face it, mention the word "polo" to the average Canadian and images of swimming pools, explorers or Prince Charles will likely come to mind.

But for many Canadians, polo is synonymous with horses and the two go back a long way. In fact, polo could very well be the oldest team sport known to man.

According to the United States Polo Association, the governing body for polo in the U.S. and Canada, the sport dates back about 2,000 years when it was likely first played on a barren campground by nomadic warriors. It served as valuable training for cavalry and, by the Middle Ages, was played from Constantinople to Japan.

In the early 1800s, British tea planters in India witnessed the game and, by the 1850s, the British Cavalry drew up some rules. Polo was well established in England by the 1860s.

Then in 1876, James Gordon Bennett, a noted American publisher, balloonist and adventurer, was captivated by the sport and brought it to New York, where it caught on immediately. Within 10 years, there were major clubs all over the east, including Newport and Long Island.

In the early 1900s, polo took on Olympic status. George Dupont, executive director of the National Museum of Polo and Hall of Fame in Lakewood, Fla., says the first Olympic game was played in Paris in 1900, followed by London in 1908, Antwerp in 1920, Paris in 1924 and Berlin in 1936. Sadly, polo hasn't seen another Olympics since, but there's a group working on trying to reinstate it as an Olympic sport.

In Canada, polo was a cowboy sport in the West long before the advent of organized rodeo. In fact, says Calgary author Tony Rees in his book *The Galloping Game*, the game was introduced in the West some 20 years before Britain caught on. From the first match in southern Alberta in the 1880s, the game's popularity spread like wildfire through the foothills ranchlands and it made an impact across the county, too.

Canada is now an international polo contender, too. Team Canada has competed at Federation of International Polo (FIP) tournaments. And in 2004, Polo Canada (comprised of the Canadian Polo Association and the Polo Training Foundation Canada) hosted a junior Australian team in Calgary and Toronto, while Canadians were hosted by South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. Later this summer, a junior Canadian team is off to England as guests of the Hurlingham Polo Association and the Pony Club Polo.



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