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Polo Ponies

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Polo Ponies

Desired conformation and patient training required


Polo has been developed in speed to a point where it is second only to ice hockey. It is one of the roughest sports and certainly the one requiring the most skill and training on the part of the player and his horse. As a consequence the sport has been limited in the past to those with the means to purchase well trained stock and able to devote sufficient time to practice. Collegiate team members playing on army or university mounts, and local teams of cowboys and farmers have played much polo, though of a lower class.

Organized Polo

The least organized class of polo, that played by the local teams, has been built on the use of whatever stock the players happen to own or are able to borrow. The better horses used by the organized clubs and teams are derived from a wide variety of sources seldom originating with the player. Foreign polo ponies are usually of English or Argentine breeding. The former were bred for polo with Welsh Pony, Thoroughbred, Arabian, and numerous other types, interbred to create a desirable polo animal. Argentine breeders combined a base of native pony types, a leavening of Thoroughbreds, and an infusion of the best English horses to make some of the finest material known. They are much more thoroughly and leisurely trained and are the same quality of material but more highly developed than either the Americans or the English. These breeders were prone, in the past, to bring large strings up with them for the International Matches and sell most of them, using this as a means of disposing of excess stock. Most of our matches, however, are played not on foreign horses, but on American bred stock which is raised in several manners.

With some exceptions American ponies come from the small percentage of horses, which raised for other purposes, happen to be qualified for this work. Among the racers, hunters, and saddle horses of the East a few will be naturals. Of the thousands of horses raised by western ranchers a small number stand out for their speed, manners and the ease with which they are handled. Those few developed each year which are so exceptional that they are held for this purpose are among the finest polo ponies raised in America. A major factor in the improvement of western horses has been the influence of the remount stallions owned by the United States Government.

Some ranches, east of the Rockies especially, breed polo ponies as a business using females which are docile and have been proved at polo for the brood mares and the best Thoroughbred stallions available for the sires. Many of the resulting colts are well suited for the game and they are trained on the ranches for the action to come later. They are used in cow work until a sensitive mouth is developed and response to neck reining is fast. These ranch horses find their way to market either through the agency of dealers and interested individuals who make a circuit of the ranches looking for the best ponies, or by the ranchers shipping them to sales, dealers, and players interested in polo stock.

The Veterinary Student
Nearly all veterinarians are familiar with the accepted points of conformation and the qualities of body and limb required in a horse for almost any purpose. With polo it is perhaps more a question of what the pony can do. He has need of many characteristics not necessary for other fields of horse endeavor.

The fact that the horse possesses a short back, an intelligent head, fairly long legs, good constitution, and all the rest of the sought after physical points is not enough. He must, in addition, have the things which polo as a game calls for. He must be handy in stopping and turning quickly, showing the perfect and easy response to the reins that indicate a good mouth. The desirable pony has quickness and speed; the first meaning immediate response to orders including a fast start and a quick change of direction, the latter meaning the pace at a straight gallop. The polo pony is an animal doing things unnatural to him and is further handicapped in action by the added weight of a man on his back. He must have courage for meeting other ponies and to resist efforts to shoulder or bump him out of the play at a time when flight or stampede is the normal reaction. Then too, he must have the paces required by the game so he is the one that walks out, has a trot with good hock action and not too much bending of the knee, and his gallop is one without roundness.

**Conformation of Animal**

There are numerous considerations affecting the size and weight of the animal chosen. Although the build of the rider often determines the size of the horse, the choice may be made between a small, fast, well-mannered pony and a large, less finely mouthed one within the player's weight range. There has recently been a tendency toward larger horses of between 15 and 16 hands as those under that height lack speed for the modern game while those over this size are likely to be clumsy. This is quite a change from the 14.2 hand ponies of the early English game; yet in the Far West, smaller ponies of 14.3 to 15.1 hands are returning to prominence as the quest for a more open game continues. The common use of larger horses has been dictated by the large size of polo fields which necessitates the use of fast horses with endurance. The shock of hard bumps at dangerous angles gives the larger horse a mechanical advantage which is, however, lost when the game opens up. The use of more Thoroughbred blood allows the use of smaller horses ranging around 15.1 hands which provides some of the advantages of both the big and the small types.

If the pony is expected to start quickly and stop quickly from fast paces and to wheel about, he has to be powerful in front. Prompt and smooth action, coordinated movements, hardiness, and stamina are required to withstand the long chukkers of polo.

**Choice of Pony**

When choosing a pony, it is best to look the prospect over from a distance to gain an impression of his balance and conformation. Afterwards he should be inspected for the more minute points such as teeth and the set of his legs. The last and probably most important part of the choice is judging the animal's action and the manner in which he works in a trial. Trial is really the only sure way of knowing that the pony has what is desired.

A horse that is smart, yet docile enough to follow commands when it means being hit or injured, that has great speed and the ability to turn quickly, and has good manners is not easy to find. When one has determined what qualities the animal has, the most delicate judgment lies in the ability to choose the best compromise between the ideal and the available. Excellence in some points makes up for a deficiency in others; yet there are some qualities that have no substitutes. The real test of judgment lies in deciding between horses that have both good and weak points.

The worth of a polo pony lies chiefly in his training. Differences in performance may be seen which can be correlated with the origin of the animals. Argentine mounts are usually deliberately bred for the game and this is followed by ample schooling. Our ponies are misfits for...
some other purpose hurriedly schooled with less efficient training than that accorded the Argentines. Training is as important as breeding. The American method of a short intensive period spoils many otherwise good ponies.

The success or failure of training a polo pony depends on the ability, tact, and patience of the trainer. The ends sought in training a pony are few, but there are numerous means of accomplishing them. The method of schooling must be one of education, allaying fear and building confidence in the rider, and acquainting the horse with the equipment. If he is tense and out of balance his responses are to force alone instead of slight directions on the part of the rider.

During the early part of his schooling he is worked with the intention of creating a responsive mouth. He is taught to accept a light continuous “feel” of the bit, and to relax his jaw under pressure rather than reply with his head and neck, thus making him answer by action rather than by dodging and avoiding application of the bit. This jaw action makes him give results easily with almost no pressure needed to cause the reaction. In this early period of training the colt is worked over long distances in which he is made to acquire the fast, vigorous walk that is a requisite in a good pony. These prolonged workouts are used both for developing him physically so that he may carry himself and his rider in balance and comfort, and for practice in responding to the rider’s legs in starting and stopping.

Use of Bridle

After the horse has accepted the bit and habitually yields with his jaw this skill is used in effecting fairly smooth and prompt turns, then in changing speed and gaits, and finally in halting. When the horse is confirmed in turning to the left and right without slackening his pace the practice consists of changing the speed of the gaits and instilling the habit of shifting his balance from the front to rear and vice versa in response to the rider’s hands and legs. A pony has to be trained so that he may be rated without constant pulling on the reins as that prevents proper use of his head and neck in maintenance of balance. When he isn’t permitted free use of his head, smooth, balanced coordination of movement throughout a difficult polo match is impossible.

The attainment of reasonable facility to obey commands is followed by actual schooling for polo. The pony is taught still greater promptness in starting, stopping, and turning. He is drilled in making short, sharp turns rolling his weight back on his hind feet as he does so. He is compelled to do this turning at increasing gaits, close to a wall where he hasn’t room to be sloppy. This implies discretionary use of routine, but it must be done for proper training.

Final Training

Stick and ball work are begun at this point to accustom the horse to what is expected of him. The knowledge of when the horse has worked long enough, how fast he may advance in training and how to bring about the fixation of desired habits of behavior is the responsibility of the trainer. The pony is then taken into slow periods of polo during which the trainer must remember that he is training a pony, not playing to win. From here on he is an improving polo pony whose long training has served to confirm him in habits which are so necessary for polo.

While no injuries received in polo are specific to the game a few types are more common because the game creates greater chances for certain accidents to happen. Although they are usually unnecessary these accidents may occur in perfectly legal play as from bumping into each other at high speeds (enhanced by the use of heavier horses), from pulling over too close behind another pony and crossing legs, and from the use of neck shots instead of backshots which brings the mallet in contact with the pony’s legs. The use of sideboards on the polo field has caused many painful bruises and broken legs by horses forced over the boards, from spills, and from mallet contacts in the scrimmages which localize at the edge of the field. Traumatic injury to the shoulder from crushing contact results in contu-
sions of the muscles over the scapula which will make a pony lame for a time but may cause no permanent damage.

The common location of polo injuries is on the legs. Especially susceptible are the forelegs where swinging mallets, tangling feet and objects such as sideboards all exact their toll. These injuries are confined to the lower part of the leg and consist mainly of tendon damage which appears as tendosynovitis. The condition may be acute from sudden severe blows or may be chronic from repeated mild trauma. When the muscles are hit there is seldom any lasting damage though digital thrombositis and nerve injury may result. When the bone is struck, a periostitis is set up which, if severe, may develop into exostoses such as ringbones or sidebones.

**Injuries to Legs**

Injuries to the legs caused by repeated severe strain usually involve the bones and tendons of the lower leg, and infrequently, the foot. When a horse turns, his weight is shifted to the rear. If a polo pony is well trained the hind feet are his pivots, but many situations arise where the pony’s weight and pivoting are both based on the forefeet. This predisposes to comminuted fractures of the phalanges. The more familiar result is in ruptured and torn ligaments, sprains, and strains.

The constant pounding accompanied by twisting and excessive force make the foot and lower leg degenerate. There is a tendency toward navicular disease and dropped sole which, although not prevalent, is not amenable to treatment. Dropped sole is a condition which develops slowly and can be delayed by special shoeing, but once started it continues till it makes the pony worthless. The splints and exostoses which develop from sudden wrenching or pounding are usually not too severe and are not permanently incapacitating.

**Introduction of Light Horses**

Polo has been limited to those who were financially able to buy proper stock and have time to practice the game. However, the current trend is toward popularizing the light horse as a pleasure animal to the extent that horsemanship is enjoyed by an increasing number of people. In view of the rising interest in the light horse and the decline of the draft horse, the veterinarian should be prompted to prepare himself for and encourage the advancement of light horses.