



Jilly Cooper's name often pops up in conversation among the international polo set. Some hate the link with the pun-happy author of *Polo*, which is more about the games people play on the sidelines. Others, like Irish shipping contractor and player Joe Moran, joke: "If I don't find any sex by the end of the season, I'm giving up polo."

But the only Irish player who appears in Cooper's book is Major Hugh Dawnay, who reminds his wife of Major Yeats in *The Irish RM*. Tweed-capped with military bearing and a hoarse voice from yelling at his polo pupils across a windy field, "the major" (as even his wife, Argentinian-born Maria Ines, calls him) is the quintessential Anglo-Irish landed gent.

Cooper chose to slot him in with a remark by her arch-villain persuading the heroine to take sex lessons from a Chinese hooker: "You think nothing of going to Hugh Dawnay or Peter Grace (another top instructor) to learn polo."

In the major's language, hooking is a polo tactic, but the Cooper mention sums up his role. As owner of Europe's first residential polo school a few miles from Waterford, with another school in Palm Beach and teaching-clinics in over 20 countries, he inhabits the many worlds of polo.

His pupils span 30 nationalities and include Sylvester Stallone ("the only came to me for advice - it wasn't a lesson really..."), soap stars Doug Sheehan and the original Fallon from *Dynasty*, banker

OF CHAMPAGNE AND CHUKKERS

Prince Charles, the Sultan of Brunei, Sylvester Stallone and Stephanie Powers play polo but so do doctors, farmers, solicitors and vets. Few sports can boast such a heady cocktail of glitz, controversy, bravado and thrills. Earlier this month, the many faces of polo came together for a charity tournament and ball, reports Geraldine Cumiskey

of Albarracín's friends and fans arrived. Most stayed the night in the house with the overflow in Jury's and player Dr Gerry Cronin's Kilmeadon House Hotel.

The constant flickering of images made for a surreal weekend - chukkers in hazy sunshine; a string quartet on the grand staircase watched by a smiling portrait of

he says. What is it about polo that draws so many age groups, social classes and even fitness levels? Business people swear it cures stress by releasing aggression and taking their minds off worries.

Trouble is, it sometimes does the latter so well that board meetings are spent faintly-suspecting about polo.

"It's an addiction," say the players. "It's a disease," say spouses who good-humouredly admit to being polo widows. One of these is Maria Ines, who insists she hates horses but cheers the loudest at matches.

While players say the game is safer than hunting, she occasionally worries for her family's safety. No such fears haunt the tough Tipperary and Waterford hunting folk, including Peter Reilly, Fred Daly, Paul Ronan and Ward O'Malley, who regularly play at Whitfield.

"It's the speed and the shot of adrenaline," says Ronan, who was introduced to the sport by Reilly.

"It's very physical, but I don't think it's any more dangerous than any other everyday activity," says Reilly, who has been riding since childhood. "It's a bit of everything. It's a team game, it involves riding and speed, there are elements of hurling in it."

A background in both hurling and horse riding is what makes the Irish ideal candidates for a game once called "hurling on horseback," according to the major - though he believes any game is helpful. "I'd rather teach a non-rider who has played hurling or another ball sport than a

