

Kent, a nephew of the late Shah of Iran, a German duke and "a ruler chap called the Mogul Timur" (the last of the non-mongol moguls).

Polo may be the king of games, but the major does not believe in giving aristocrats special treatment. "One of them wanted it, but he didn't get it," he grins.

Eton-educated, the son of General Sir David Dawnay (who played for the British Army at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin attended by Hitler), grandson of a Viceroy of India and cousin of the polo-playing Marquess of Waterford, he is equally at home among peers, nouveaux riches, fox-hunting farmers and the select band of professional players who migrate with the season.

One of the latter was inadvertently responsible for bringing all these worlds together last bank holiday weekend, when the major held a three-day tournament and gala ball at his Waterford mansion, Whitfield Court. It was held in aid of a trust fund for injured Argentinian professional Eduardo Albarracín, who was in a coma for over a year after a polo accident in Pakistan.

It was a hectic week for the Dawnays. They had just waved off a batch of pupils - a hypnotist and wine taster, both French, Australian property dealer Wayne Fussell and Palm Beach businessmen Frank Vlahovic and Joe O'Neill - and were preparing for September's visitors, including actor Trevor Eve and his wife Sharon ("You know, the girl in the sexy (Nescafe) coffee ad," explains Maria Inés), when 140

rock'n'roll in the marquees; staff gliding along balconies; a herd of silken polo ponies thundering up to the fence in curiosity.

The visitors formed a potted "who's who" of the horse business - among them racehorse trainer Eddie Hartly (who played a few chukkers earlier in the day), Meath veterinary surgeon and racehorse breeder Richard McCormick, Baroda Stud's Susan McKeon and the Garavelli brothers of Sallywell Estates stud.

Also there was Woodchester boss Craig McKinney, Albarracín's most recent patron and a keen polo player, who came for the ball on Saturday evening and awoke to read in two Sunday papers that he was under police protection following extortion threats.

"I have to protect him from all these flirting women," laughed his hostess, who has seen many a female visitor fall in love with the potent cocktail of muscles, titles, and wealth which inhabit the polo fields, and proving the old British officers' chant: "You'll never be solo at polo".

McKinney, who is also Master of Hounds of two hunts during the winter, was thrown into polo at the deep end by his friend, Oakleafs boss Larry O'Mahony, at the All Ireland Polo Club in Dublin's Phoenix Park three years ago. "He handed me a rule book and a polo stick and told me I was due on the pitch in six minutes," McKinney remembers.

He is one of an increasing number of Irish business people who have attended the major's training sessions.

Others are James Kennedy, MD of Bausch and Lomb (Ireland), maker of Rayban sunglasses, who is also chairman of the major's Whitfield Court Polo Club; All Ireland Polo Club president Tony Rhagan; socialite Renata Coleman (one of a growing number of women players); racehorse trainer Eddie O'Grady; Meath solicitor Brendan O'Mahoney; Kilkullen saddler Tom Berney; and Malcolm Kidd - a former London stockbroker who now runs his own polo school in Kildare, where he charges £40 per lesson.

The major has reduced his fee from £1,000 for a week five years ago to £75 per day for a minimum of three days today. He does not need to - he is widely considered to be world's best polo teacher and this month manages the prestigious tournament at Deauville, France - but increased rivalry is healthy for the game and for business.

Whitfield Court Polo Club (annual membership fee, £300) has 17 players. The All Ireland Polo Club in Dublin (players

membership, £800 including pavilion fee) has 43 playing members, including four professionals.

Admission to games is free, unlike in many other countries - but only recently have the players performed to crowded sidelines.

After years in the doldrums, polo in Ireland began to pick up five years ago, with new clubs appearing in Kildare, Wicklow and Meath.

Some players keep a low profile. As one well-known Dublin businessman put it: "Polo has this image - it's not just the wealth. It's amazing how many Irish people dislike you just because you play polo".

Inverted snobbery? Perhaps. But, ironically, those who have come under attack from within the international polo circle are the people for whom polo's snob value is the key attraction - hangers-on who and with their backs to the pitch, swinging champagne and asking "Who won?"

Bad for the egos of players they may be,

Major Hugh Dawnay standing in front of a portrait of his father



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"You'll play until you're 100 years old," newcomers are warned. Hosting a champagne reception or flying in a professional is just one step beyond splashing out on expensive equipment and, especially, a string of well-bred ponies.

Price ranges from £2,000 for an average mount, trained, to upwards of £15,000; some players operate a "pony pool" but others far exceed the minimum of two. The team captain who can afford the best ponies will have no shortage of good players.

One of these is the major's son, Sebastian, aged 17, who spent the earlier part of the summer playing on Kerry Packer's Elestron White team in England (where they reached the semi-final of the Queen's Cup tournament) and Argentina, alongside two of the world's top players, Gonzalo Pieroz and Adolfo Conguero, and against two more, Marcus and Battistio Heguy.

Sebastian is serious about polo - so serious that he left the ball at midnight, determined he would be no Cinderella in the match the next day. He aims to be a professional player.

The major's eldest son, David, aged 20, captained the first Eton polo team four years ago.

"Why shouldn't they be good players when they have their own polo field to practice on?" reasons the major hiding pride with a classic stiff upper lip.

Youth is an asset, but so is experience. "I've had pupils aged from 10 years to 70,"

Some spectators, content to watch the glamour of the sport, neglect to learn the rules. There are some who still confuse it with water polo (an easy mistake in the Irish climate).

But few could match Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot* who, when asked by Marilyn Monroe if he played polo, replied: "I'll say - I had two horses drowned under me".