

HERE'S A POLO PLAYING FARMER WITH HIS OWN FIELD OF DREAMS..



Snout of order.. These porkers get a lot of big time



By GERALDINE COMISKEY

IT'S a sport played by Prince Harry and billionaires the world over.

But polo is not just for the posh, says Irish farmer Robert Hogg.

The aptly named pig farmer set up his own club so he could play the world's most exclusive sport on the cheap.

Robert, 42, chukkered the pigs off two of his fields to make room for a polo pitch, where he plays with his mates and his son, Charlie, 13.

And while it's snout like Cowdray Park, Cirencester, or the All Ireland Polo Club in Dublin's Phoenix Park, the club in Clohmahon, Co Wexford, is swilly cool.

It might make some people chuckle, and some would say Robert's rasher than most pig farmers - but he does it in style.

Barbecues on the pig-farm farm are now a bit posher than you would expect - less bubble-and-squeak, more bubbles.

But modest Robert is not one to hog the limelight and insists: "It's not posh - definitely not on my farm."

He got a-rind the planning laws to rezone his land from agricultural to recreational use and build a clubhouse.

His club is one of several which have been popping up in farmers' fields all over the country. The others include Polo Wicklow where Robert got his first lesson in 2001.

"I only took it up because I couldn't go hunting", says Robert, who is a member of Wexford's Island Hunt. "There was an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease at the time so the hunt had to be called off. I love horses and really missed the hunt, so I thought I'd try out polo."

"I've played a lot of sports but I had never done anything like that. It's just a great sport."

After that, he took more lessons from top international coach Major Hugh Dawnay, who runs a polo school at his home, Whitfield Court in Waterford - and is even mentioned in Jilly Cooper's racy novel, Polo.

Robert never got as far as playing it at the All Ireland Polo Club in the Phoenix Park - but he was so hooked that he got together a team of his friends and they travelled the country, playing small tournaments.

But Robert got board-ed travelling.



Polo mint. Robert Hogg

On a PIG'S back



Giving a bit of stick...Polo is a game adored by the gentry and pig farmers alike



Horses for courses.. Prince Harry

combination of hurling and the Ben Hur race - only without the chariots.

The strict rules are designed for safety - both the ponies' and players'. "Riding-off" is one of the most thrilling manoeuvres, as two players put their horses' shoulders together and fight for the ball. One of the worst fouls is cutting straight across another horse.

With just four players on each team, no one can afford to slacken but the most difficult position is Number Three, who has to do the most defending and passing. Usually a pro player takes this position - which is where Robert's fit young farm-hands come in handy.

Robert says the game is just as thrilling down on his farm as it is in posh polo clubs: "We're not playing at the same level but if you just want a bit of excitement, it's great."

It's glamorous too - in a way that beautiful beasts and fit men always are.

But, unlike the glitzy events in the Phoenix Park, these matches are strictly casual affairs. Punters are more likely to turn up in big jumpers and wellies than cocktail dresses and Christian Louboutins.

Robert says it was easy to set up: "All I needed was a bit of land - which I have - and the ponies. You can pay 10-15 grand for a high-goal [top-class] polo pony but we're not playing it at that level."

A typical pony, fully-trained and ready to play, costs £5,000 - though you can get them raw for £1,000, Robert points out.

Like all polo ponies, they have their manes shaven so they won't catch in the sticks. But, unlike the other animals on Robert's farm, no trotters are allowed - polo ponies have to go straight from a stop to a canter.

To play a proper tournament, each of the four players on a team needs at least three ponies so they can rest in between chukkas.

Robert has got 12 fully-trained ponies on his land - just enough for a team of four - but they don't play big tournaments anyway. "We just play chukkas and small matches. It's for fun more than anything else."

To pay for the ponies, staff and club-house, Robert has opened an official club - and anyone can join, says Robert.

Members pay an annual fee of €600 plus a joining fee of €1,000 but if you just want to play chukkas (segments of a match), you can become a "chukka member" for just €450.

But students can join for €250.

People who just want to try it out can take an hour's lesson from the Argie pros for €50 - or a course of 10 for €400.

And, while Robert simply wants to pay for the sport he loves, it could someday make him a mint.

"I wanted to play it in my own backyard. We had no club in Wexford so I just gave it a go," he adds.

And now he's "on the pig's back".

They have matches three days a week, 35 adult playing members - and 10 young players aged 12-21.

And while the sport is as macho as the Marlboro Man, they have even got six women to take it up. Robert's fiancée Margaret O'Leary is a keen fan of

the sport too, he says. The club has attracted a regular crowd, who come to see the daring polo-players leaning out of their saddles at a gallop to swipe the ball.

The exciting sport, which was originally played by bandits and turned into a proper game by British Army officers in India, is one of the fastest ball games in the world. While they are called ponies, the animals are taller these days and are mostly small, light horses with big bums - perfect for fast turns and sudden stops.

With the ponies galloping at more than 35 miles an hour and the ball being whacked even faster, as players jostle for position, it is like a