

# ON HORSEBACK

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## Park fixture this weekend

THE FIRST polo game of this year's Irish season was played on Sunday last, when three teams competed for the President's Cup in the Phoenix Park.

Lar Sheeran as captain. His team members were Tony Rhatigan, Lord James Beresford and the Argentinean Ricardo Eduardo.

Football hero Ronnie Whelan shares a name with a member of the A.I.P.C. There were plenty of quips about it at the club when Whelan scored our goal against the Soviet Union.

The next major tournament on the International calendar is this weekend's Derby International, followed by several matches in August, the Dublin Horse Show tournament in September.

On Millennium Day at the Phoenix Park (July 10), we'll have a chance to see polo as it was in the days of the Raj—members will dress in period costumes.

fast center to an even one with many sharp and sudden turns. My task was to ride close beside the other horse, as if I was marking an opponent. It was like riding a March hare.

### Chukkers

"If you came to me for training, three times a week, I'd have you playing chukkers (seven-minute sections) in three weeks," Lar coaches friends at amazed I hadn't fallen.

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Next, I was given Merced, a sleek black Argentine mare, and a mallet. My arm was aching after the weight of the mallet but the biggest problem was hitting the ball—eventually I did, but it didn't travel far at first.

### Faster

There are only three women players in the A.I.P.C. "We're playing against men, but women can ride faster because they're lighter," says Christine Darmannin-Sheehan. Her first husband, Alfredo Darmannin, was an international polo player.

All poloists agree it's rough. Bad injuries to horses are rare—hitting a horse's legs with a stick is a serious foul and could break the legs. But players are occasionally injured.

Broken collarbones and wrists are not unknown. I was told it was good for releasing "natural aggression" but somehow I couldn't imagine "polo hooligans".

A helmet is worn for safety, with brown leather boots, knee-pads, gloves and white cotton jodhpurs and shirt or jumper in the tan colour. The lot can cost about £500.

### Galloping

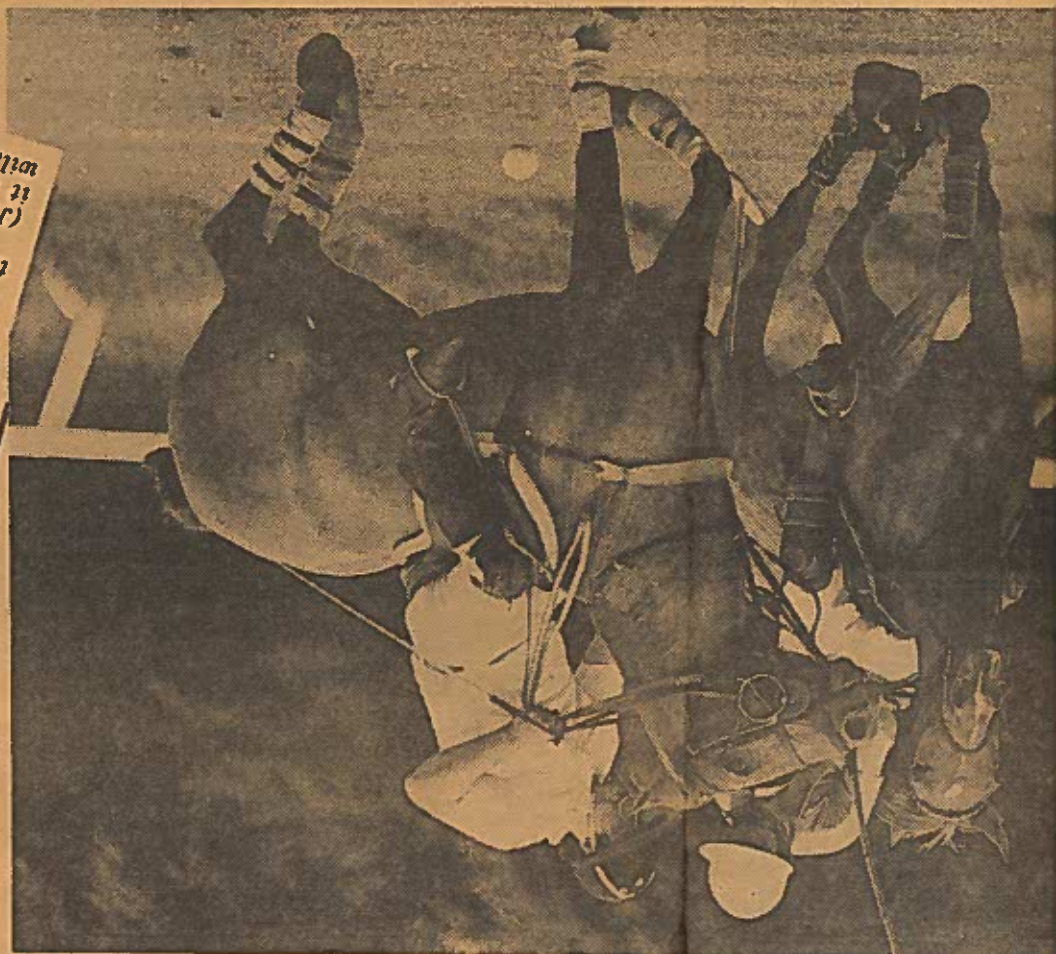
Each team has players. Horses are changed every seven minutes and the game lasts 45 minutes. The start of a match is a bit like a rugby scrum but galloping hoo-ker begins with a flurry of ing sticks.

Players can bump into each other provided the angle is slight and the pace not too fast. There is a handicap system, from one to ten. Lord Waterford has the highest handicap in the A.I.P.C. In Britain, his son, Charles, is rated at 6. There are only five players in the world with a handicap of 10.

Left-handed polo players don't have an advantage, they must learn to play right-handed!

Alex Mackay has been playing polo for 25 years and is the club's longest-playing member.

Horses can get hooked too. "I had a horse called Apache who didn't want to retire," says Alex. "I retired him when he was 17 years old but he got very sick and the vet said he was pining for the game! Now he's 21 and still playing."



A break from the action in the President's Cup at the Phoenix Park.

Pictures: FRANK MILLAR

He captained British Olympic team in 1952. He also has a school in Florida. Not having the money, I settled for a quick introduction to polo at the club. First I mounted Santa Fe, a glossy chestnut mare from Argentina, owned by polo manager Lar Sheeran. The stirrup-leathers are worn

long like a cowboy's. The left hand holds both reins and crop (a harmless whip which is even less harmful than the right hand hand!). The pace varied from a pony first.

Lar's daughter, Tina, carries the mallet but I had to learn to manoeuvre the mallet through the paces with me. The pace varied from a pony first.