

HURLING ON HOT



THEY come out in summertime in the Phoenix Park to play Ireland's most exclusive team sport. Polo ponies can cost £10,000 (and you'll need a second one to play seriously).

GERALDINE COMISKEY (left) went out to see why they do it.



Cost marks polo out as a rich man's sport

POLO HAS an "exclusive" label. Of jet-setters who spend winter in Argentina, summer in the Seychelles and the rest of the year on yachts or at parties.

Not so, say members of the All-Ireland Polo Club. Quicker than you can say "Prince of Wales", they insist that most of them could only afford to visit Argentina "once in a lifetime".

But polo is a rich person's sport, whether you play it as a millionaire or a farmer. The richer you are, the better the horse you can afford. A very good, trained pony from Argentina could cost between £5,000 and £10,000, and £2,000 to bring it here. Some polo ponies have been bought for a lot less — around £500.

Ponies used in Ireland are either Argentinian or Irish thoroughbreds. Many players choose to train their own — "to cut costs" — but it takes two years' training to find out if a horse is suitable, and it could be a costly gamble.

You need at least two horses to play polo, though many players use three, and if you haven't anywhere to keep them the cost of livery is around £45 each, weekly.

Who's Who

The members' list at the All-Ireland Polo Club, in Dublin's Phoenix Park, reads like a "Who's Who" of Irish society. Members include John Mulhern and Tesco tycoon Galen Weston, and vary from farmers to builders and accountants. Of the club's 71 members, 20 are players.

When I visited the club, Lord Waterford and his son, Lord James Beresford, were playing. Another son, Lord Charles, played in England against his namesake, the Prince of Wales.

That's where the comparison with British polo ends. After the Falklands war, Britain banned imports of Argentinian ponies.

"Irishmen make good polo players, because they're very good with horses and it's an aggressive game, like hurling, with lots of speed and physical contact — but it's hurling at 35 miles per hour," says Alex Mackay.

president of the club. One of the members is former Antrim hurler John Mulholland.

There's no charge to watch the game in the Phoenix Park, but it seems to have lost out as a spectator sport to racing and football. Unlike football, you can't kick a polo ball around the back garden, and the bookies don't seem to have thought of polo odds. So passers-by stare for a few minutes and go away, not bothering to learn the rules.

In "Some Like It Hot", Marilyn Monroe remarked to Tony Curtis: "I suppose you play polo." "I'll say," he replied: "I had two horses drowned under me!" The average Dubliner's knowl-

Game of ancient Persia

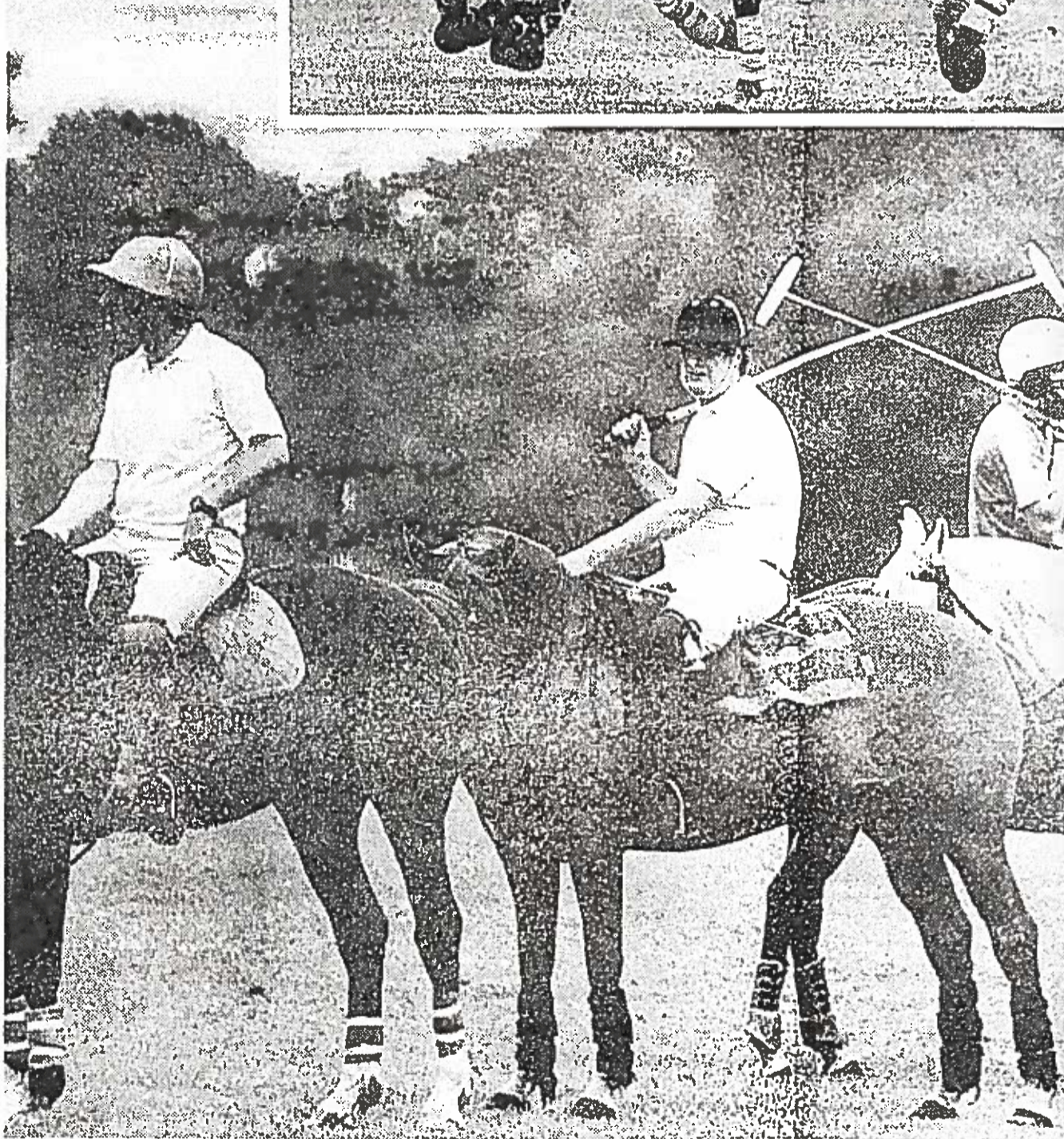
THE All-Ireland Polo Club is 115 years old, and the second-oldest in the world (the oldest is in Malta).

There was once a polo club in every county in Ireland. The game was introduced by the British army, who had discovered it in India, but it was played nearly 2,500 years ago in Persia.

On the official list of Irish polo players dated 1913, 53 were army officers.

The type of pony has changed since then. "Actually, 'pony' is a misnomer," says Alex Mackay. "They used to be 14 hands before World War Two. They're all above 15 hands now."

Lord Waterford and his sons breed and train them. "Our father started playing in the 1950s and when we grew up he taught us — we started at around 13 years old," says 22-year-old Lord James Beresford.



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

edge of the rules is no greater.

For £1,000 you can attend an intensive, week-long course under the instruction of Major Hugh Dawnay

in Waterford. He captained the British Olympic team in 1936 and also has a school in Palm Beach, Florida.

He describes his school in Waterford as "like a five-

star hotel. It's a holiday — you're paying for the drinks as well as the riding and accommodation."

Not having the money, I settled for a quick reduc-

tion to polo at the First I mounted a glossy chestnut Argentinian, owner manager Lar She sturup-leathers