

17

SUNDAYS

Flamingo flew south for the winter—for polo season that is. From the luxurious International Polo Club grandstand to a small square of a picnic blanket, here's how to enjoy the Sport of Kings *Flamingo* style.

Photography by MARY BETH KOETH





Above:
Sunday 3 p.m. high-goal polo action at the International Polo Club in Wellington

Thundering down a grassy pitch nine times larger than a football field at speeds nearing 40 miles per hour, professional polo players and their 1,000-pound horses kick up quite a fuss on rural pastures in Wellington. On sunny winter Sundays, when the small white ball goes sailing through the two goal posts, the scoring player raises his mallet and gallops across the grass in triumphant glory while well-dressed fans, gathered at the International Polo Club, respond with a Champagne salute. It's a scene straight out of the movie *Pretty Woman* that has become synonymous with the Sport of Kings.

For all the pomp and circumstance at the IPC stadium on the seventh day, however, Wellington insiders know that, on the other six days of the week, polo matches unfurl in refreshingly stripped-down fashion: raw athletic talent, equine beauty and country-style tailgating (literally) with pickup trucks pulled up next to a field. In fact, though polo is commonly seen as an elite part of Florida culture, the game is equally appreciated by sportsmen and socialites, families and singletons, and locals and tourists.

"How many people think they can't watch the game because they're not royalty?" says Brandon Phillips, a professional five-goal player who rides for Postage Stamp Farms in Wellington. "Anyone can do it. And it's fun to watch."

Opposite clockwise: Players wear protective helmets in the high-speed game; Polo ponies travel at speeds up to 40 mph in matches; Phillips rides his horse Honey Badger; Polo mallets, made of manau, are designed to curve during play

Over the course of the game's almost 100-year history in our state, Wellington has grown into the winter polo capital of the world. But players and their horses have mesmerized fans for nearly 2,000 years, beginning in Central Asia, then spreading to India, England, Argentina and finally the United States. Florida has 28 polo clubs, 16 of which are in Wellington, according to the United States Polo Association. Polo people help pour more than \$200 million into the Wellington economy—including about 150,000 hotel stays. On Sunday afternoons from January 1 through April 23 (about 17 weeks), the IPC in Wellington is the place to see high-goal polo, as well as a few celebrities and nobles.

RULES and REGALIA

Though polo has royal origins, participating in the sport at its highest level is not for the pampered wimp: Last season, Prince Harry, an amateur player, reigned over the field and the party scene at Wellington's Valiente Polo Farms for his charity's sixth annual Sentebale Royal Salute Polo Cup.

Polo is a difficult contact sport, according to George DuPont Jr., executive director of the Museum of Polo and Hall of Fame in Wellington since 1988. The game, played by two teams of four, unfolds in six periods known as chukkers, each lasting seven and a half minutes. In about one and a half hours of game time, players ride eight to 12 different horses. The horses, which are constantly compared to Ferraris, train a minimum of three to five years before playing in a match. To make things more

CAN'T-MISS MATCHES NINE OF THE COOLEST COMPETITIONS

— International Polo Club — HERBIE PENNELL CUP

20 GOAL
December 29, 2016–
January 1, 2017
The season opener is festive and glamorous

JOE BARRY MEMORIAL CUP 20 GOAL

January 4–22
In honor of an exemplary polo player, on- and off-field

YLVISAKER CUP 20 GOAL

January 25–February 19
A tribute to the guy who won 3 U.S. Open titles

IGLEHART CUP 20 GOAL

February 22–March 4
Final 20-goal battle of the season; only 4 teams

C.V. WHITNEY CUP 26 GOAL

February 22–March 5
Single-elimination format; first of three 26-goal tournaments

USPA GOLD CUP 26 GOAL

March 5–26
Two brackets, four teams each, one shiny cup

USPA U.S. OPEN POLO CHAMPIONSHIP 26 GOAL

March 29–April 23
Final, most prestigious tournament

8TH ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL GAY POLO TOURNAMENT April 6–9

Senators Cup trophy and tailgating prizes

— Further Afield —

LA MARTINA MIAMI BEACH POLO WORLD CUP April 27–29

Between 20th and 22nd St., Miami Beach
Bring sunscreen and a bathing suit





Up close, you can feel the power and speed and

challenging, players swing the mallet from their right hand and control the horse with their left. A player's line of sight and strike zone for hitting the ball can vary 18 inches due to riding turbulence. Professional players are given handicaps, similar to golfing, on a scale of -2 to 10 goals. Only a handful of athletes in the world attain 10 goal status.

Polo's elite reputation stems from its ancient, regal history, but also from the uber-wealthy owners of modern-day teams, known as patrons or patronas. Few people have amassed the wealth necessary to take the reigns as a patron. Some experts estimate costs upwards of \$5 million a season just for horses and players' salaries. Patrons are unique compared to other professional sports team owners because they typically play with the team, despite their amateur lower handicap status. The relationships between the big boss and the players are often as close as they are complicated.

"You're friends with these people, but you've

IPC PARTY PROFILE

FOUR DIFFERENT
SOCIAL SETTINGS TO
MATCH YOUR MOOD

PREPPY:

Sipping champs on the Lilly Pulitzer Patio at The Pavilion

CHILLAXED:

Toasting craft beer in your refillable growler while chomping on charcuterie in the Funky Buddha Beer Garden

DECADENT:

Munching a rich brunch in a refurbished vintage English double-decker bus known as the Coco Polo Lounge, valet parking and gift goodies included

VIP:

Bubbling in and out of the Veuve Clicquot Airstream Lounge, keep it popping during the game

also got to ask for the check," says Phillips. "One little thing goes wrong in [the patron's] life: they get divorced, get hurt, market goes bad, business goes bad, the first thing they cut is their fun money. That's us. I wake up every day wondering if I'm getting a call saying, 'It's not fun anymore.'"

CHANGING *of the* GUARDS

A substantial chunk of "fun money" drained out of Wellington in 2010, when one of the biggest patrons, John Goodman, founder and then-owner of the IPC, killed a 23-year-old man in a drunk driving accident and was later convicted and incarcerated. The fate of the IPC hung in the balance until this March, when the CEO of Wellington Equestrian Partners, Mark Bellissimo, purchased the club for \$72 million, according to reports. Speculation swirled that



see the horses—the real great athletes —MATT BARAN //

the show horse king might turn the grounds into a dressage and show-jumping venue, but so far, to the polo community's delight, Bellissimo and his team have planned renovations for the IPC starting in the spring.

Another sign of change came in May of this year when the 93-year-old Gulfstream Polo Club, Florida's first polo grounds, was sold to developers, with plans to build homes on the site.

POWER PLAYERS

Dark days and new developments haven't slowed the play. Every year from October through May, a barrage of equestrians, polo players, fans and about 10,000 horses come to Wellington for a series of events held in stadiums and on fields throughout the area. When polo season peaks, 100 fields on private farms and polo clubs within a 20-mile radius transform into an eques-

trian wonderland populated by equal parts polo fanatics and horseshow folks (who spend their time at the Winter Equestrian Festival, another big draw to town). A parade of trailers, carrying millions of dollars' worth of horses, pulls into town. Then the glitterati appear: the horse-riding offspring of movers and shakers like Bill Gates, Bruce Springsteen and Michael Bloomberg. For those looking to parachute into the social scene during the polo season, these A-listers mingle with Argentinian mallet-swingers and Palm Beach partiers—all under the comfort of white tents at the IPC, sipping Harry's fresh-squeezed lime fizz or lemonade cocktails.

Beyond the Sunday Champagne brunches, wide-brim hats and millionaire scandals, the sport also breeds a more accessible, stripped down culture that celebrates the athleticism of the animals and the players with scrimmages and matches held throughout the week. For more of a jeans and t-shirt kind of outing, some polo clubs and fields allow fans to park cars a mere

15 to 20 feet from the sideboards and watch the game from the tailgate of a pickup truck.

"Up close, you can feel the power and speed and see the horses—the real great athletes on the field," says Matt Baran, sport marketing manager of the United States Polo Association.

It's power—of ponies, players, patrons and parties—that keeps fans electrified and returning to these green acres in South Florida year after year.

At the center of it all, the players jockey a complicated course, competing as athletes for titles and rank, caring for a troop of horses, cutting deals with patrons and even cavorting on the social scene. Florida pro polo player Brandon Phillips breaks it all down for *Flamingo* in a revealing interview.

Above from left: The iconic clock tower on Worth Avenue in Palm Beach; Honey Badger, dressed for a match, gazes out of her barn window; The view from the grandstands on Sunday at the International Polo Club in Wellington



This page: Phillips makes his home in Wellington when not traveling the world playing high-goal.
Opposite: Phillips takes a moment with his horse Honey Badger at the barn at Postage Stamp Farm near his home.



THE POLO BOY NEXT DOOR

INSIDE WELLINGTON SPORTING CULTURE WITH
FLORIDA HIGH-GOAL PLAYER, CANCER SURVIVOR AND
LIFE-LONG HORSEMAN BRANDON PHILLIPS

Brandon Phillips grew up on a horse farm outside of Toronto and came to Florida for the first time as a 17-year-old on Christmas break. A week later, the young cancer survivor, had a spot on a professional team in Wellington. Phillips, 39, now calls the South Florida equine community home and has been playing high-goal polo around the world ever since. *Flamingo* recently caught up with Phillips at Postage Stamp Farm, the team barn where he keeps his 12 horses, to talk ponies, patrons and someday winning the big prize.

WHAT'S THE POLO CROWD LIKE?

BP: Every year is different. It's either a really young crowd or Vero Beach seems to come over and hang out. One or the other.

WHO ARE THE BEST PLAYERS?

BP: Argentines are the best in the world. They dominate. Americans playing polo are like Argentines playing in the NFL.

WHEN WERE YOU PLAYING YOUR BEST POLO?

BP: In the last five years. This is one of my biggest seasons in many years. I'm playing in



Above: Phillips in the barn at Postage Stamp Farm with Honey Badger, 5, a polo horse he bred and has owned since she was a foal

the 20-goal, which is the highest level here in the winter. The last few years we have played in a lower level, but now we have a team in the big show. It's time, we want to do well for [our patrona].

HOW LONG CAN YOU KEEP PLAYING?

BP: Players can last into their 40s. So I have at least 10 more years. I'm feeling good, but I'm one broken leg away from being done.

DO YOU HAVE ANY FAVORITE HORSES?

BP: My favorite horses are those that perform better, faster, and easier, like a Ferrari versus a Toyota. Out of 15 or 16 horses, maybe you'll have eight Ferraris.

DO YOU OWN YOUR HORSES?

BP: Players and pros usually own their own horses. Some of them I own, some of them I don't. Annabelle [my patrona] has recently bought a few that I play.



HORSES ARE EXPENSIVE, HOW DO YOU MANAGE THE FINANCIALS?

BP: It's like owning a trucking company. You have to keep buying trucks for business, constantly reinvesting. You sell off the older ones or the weaker ones and bring back new ones. Some guys sell their best horses to make ends meet. Then, all of a sudden, you get the good job and buy two good horses with that money. You need consistency, which this sport doesn't have because people who pay us, this is their fun money.

ARE THERE SPORTS AGENTS IN POLO?

BP: Sometimes you have longer-term contracts, but it's not like you're a hockey player with a three-year deal and an agent handling it. It's so personal. It's more of us sitting down at dinner and saying, "So what do you want to do next summer?" I wish it wasn't this way. I wish there were more agents to deal with the money.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR FIGHT WITH CANCER?

BP: I had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma when I was 15. I had a polo game on Thursday, a rugby game on Friday, soccer game on Saturday, and woke up on Sunday—June 7, 1992—and my left leg was aching, like growing pains. I had a grapefruit-sized tumor.

HOW DID OVERCOMING CANCER IMPACT YOU?

BP: I appreciate what I do, but much differently. When you hear people freaking out about stupid things and about pressure, they have no idea. Pressure is sitting in your hospital bed waiting for your doctor to tell you if you're going to die or not. That's pressure.

WHEN DID YOU START PLAYING PROFESSIONALLY?

BP: My last two years of high school, I started playing here. I had a tutor down here, so I finished high school while I started playing professionally.

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS THINK?

BP: They planned it. I actually came down Christmas break and had never been to Florida. I thought I was visiting a friend who happened to be a team manager. They put me in a practice and the owner said, "So you're going to stay and play the season with us." And I was like, "I have a flight tomorrow morning. I'm going back to school." My parents organized for me to spend the winter here. But they never told me.

POLO CRASH PADS

WHERE TO STAY AND PLAY

WELLINGTON

THE BENEFIT:
Less hoofing to see the hoofs

HOT SPOTS:

Hampton Inn & Suites,
Two convenient locations, book quickly,
2155 Wellington Green Dr.
or
8205 Lake Worth Rd.;
hamptoninn3.hilton.com

PALM BEACH

THE BENEFIT:
Closer to world-class shopping and strolling on Worth Avenue

HOT SPOTS:

The Breakers
An iconic experience with old-school glamour
1 S. County Rd.,
Palm Beach
thebreakers.com

The Brazilian Court
A romantic getaway
301 Australian Ave.,
Palm Beach
thebraziliancourt.com

Kimpton Tideline Ocean Resort & Spa
Relax by the beach or pool after the ponies
2842 South Ocean Blvd.,
Palm Beach
tidelineresort.com



Below:
The Brazilian Court

GALLOPING GOURMET

IT'S TROUGH TIME!
WE HAVE YOUR MEALS
COVERED FROM
MORNING TILL NIGHT

BREKKIE HOT SPOT: TAYLOR MADE CAFE

Open weekdays and Sat. at 9 a.m. to start your caffeine drip and grab a healthy, quick parfait, protein ball or egg wrap
12160 Southshore Blvd.,
Wellington
taylormadecafe.com

BRUNCH HOT SPOT: OLI'S

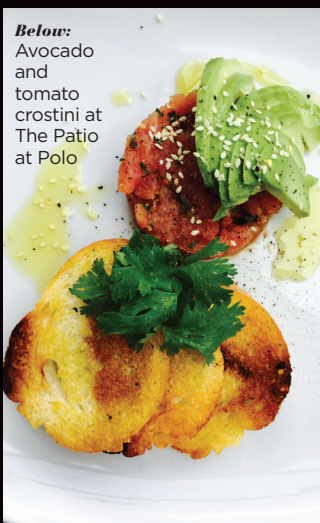
For five kinds of eggs benedict and Florida-fresh mimosas
10610 West Forest Hill Blvd.,
Wellington
olisfashioncuisine.com

LUNCH HOT SPOTS: FRANCO ITALIAN BISTRO

Keep it light with a savory salad or soup, or splurge on a thin crust pizza or heaping plate of pasta.
10160 Forest Hill Blvd.,
Wellington
francoitalianbistro.com

THE GRILLE

Indulge with their classic mac n' cheese (aged cheddar, bacon, truffle essence) or dine like an Argentine on a grilled skirt steak with chimichurri.
12300 South Shore Blvd.,
Wellington
thegrillefashioncuisine.com



Below:
Avocado
and
tomato
crostini at
The Patio
at Polo

You have a Michael Jordan, and then you have a league minimum guy.

—BRANDON PHILLIPS

IS FLORIDA HOME?

BP: This is my favorite place to be. I'm not into the snow or cold anymore. You go to Aspen for a week, go skiing and then get the hell out. I'm excited to come home. You have horses here, and you're 15 minutes from the beach and an hour from Miami. I was supposed to go do a thing in Hawaii this week, and I canceled. I'd rather hang out here.

WHAT DOES A POLO PLAYER DO TO STAY IN SHAPE?

BP: I'm in the gym five to six days a week. Like a soccer player, I do a lot of cardio, agility, band work and repetition. You're not like the guys there with the mouth guards, grunting, lifting 5,000 pounds.

DO YOU WEAR A UNITARD WHEN YOU WORK OUT, LIKE WRESTLERS?

BP: Only on Sundays!

HOW OFTEN DO YOU PRACTICE?

BP: Three days a week, we do drills, but those practices are more of a scrimmage.

Above from left: Stomping the divots at half time at the IPC; Phillips riding with friend and fellow player Nic Roldan at the Greenwich Polo Club in Greenwich, Ct.

So eight players get together every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday morning. Then we'll have team practices where we'll rent the field out.



HAVE YOU EVER BEEN SERIOUSLY INJURED?

BP: In Houston, 10 years ago, my horse fell. I went over the side, and it stepped on my chest, ripped cartilage on my sternum.

DO POLO PLAYERS GET ROWDY?

BP: Horse show people are worse, but horse race people are absolutely nuts. Being in polo, especially at this level in a small town, everyone knows everyone. If you're going to have more fun than the rest, you have to be careful.

HOW MUCH MONEY IS SPENT ON A TEAM?

BP: We have 12 horses for myself and my patrona has eight, with a budget of around \$23,000 a month to keep them healthy and fit.



HOW ARE PLAYERS COMPENSATED?

BP: Ten-goal players make \$2 to \$3 million, after expenses, for a Florida season. There's five or seven guys doing that out of a couple hundred. Then there are guys making \$1,500 dollars a game. You have a Michael Jordan, and then you have a league minimum guy.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN THE PROFESSIONAL RANKINGS?

BP: The higher ranked you are, the more money you get. A committee watches you year-round, and you stay the same, go up, or down.

WHAT DOES YOUR FIVE-GOAL RANKING MEAN?

BP: I'm in the top 20 for Americans. There are 25 of us at that level. 80 or 85 percent of polo players are two-goal and below.

WHAT IS THE MAKE-UP OF A 20-GOAL TEAM?

BP: I'm ranked five-goals. [My Patrona] is an amateur. She starts at zero. Then I've hired a nine-goal player and six-goal player. So the nine, six and five, we add up to 20.

WHICH MOMENTS STAND OUT IN YOUR CAREER?

BP: The one year we won all the 20-goal [tournaments] for one team. I think only one team had done that before.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE U.S. OPEN?

BP: That's the one thing left, the U.S. Open. I lost the final once, and I lost the semi-finals in overtime twice. I may not have a chance to play at that [26-goal] level and win it.

—by Christina Cush and Jamie Rich



Above:
The bar at Imoto

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HAPPY HOUR HOT SPOT:

LA FOGATA

Fresh-made guacamole, margaritas and all-day happy hour Sat. and Sun.

11924 Forest Hill Blvd,
Wellington

lafogatawellington.com

DINNER HOT SPOTS:

BUCCAN

Award-winning chef's wood-grilled menu features ingredients from local farmers.

350 South County Rd.,
Palm Beach

buccanpalmbeach.com

IMOTO

Buccan's sister restaurant next door serves Asian-inspired dishes like tuna tataki and lobster ceviche.

350 South County Rd.,
Palm Beach

imotopalmbeach.com

MEAT MARKET

For playful bar hobnobbing and sassy steak sauces such as Touch of Fire

Mango and Scotch Bonnet.

191 Bradley Place,
Palm Beach

meatmarketpalmbeach.com

THE PATIO AT POLO.

An outdoor dining option within the Palm Beach Polo and Country Club.

11198 Polo Club Rd,
Wellington

thepatioatpolo.com



Below:
Dinner at Meat Market