

OCTOBER 2013

# POLO

PLAYERS' EDITION

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# ARMY CAPTURES WORLD TITLE

*Polo and the U.S. Army Officer Corps during the interwar period*

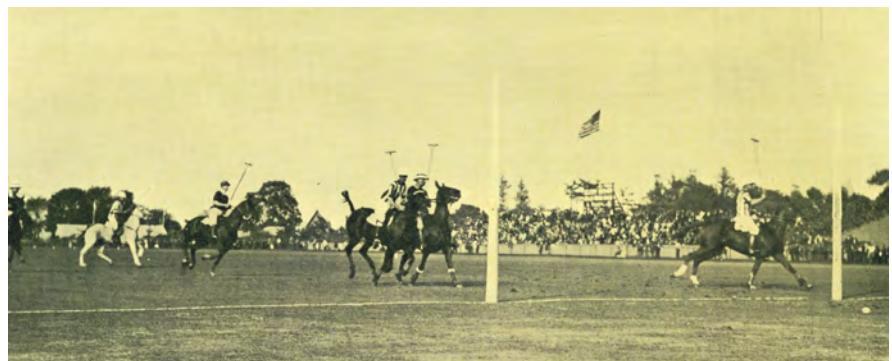
"The United States Army polo team swept everything before it yesterday on International Field, Meadow Brook Club, Westbury, L.I., and captured the third and deciding game for the world's military championship from Great Britain, 10-3. There is no superlative to describe the efforts of the United States representatives. Pitted against a team rated nearly twice as strong as individuals and which was mounted on far superior ponies, the Americans won simply by their own determined will to conquer and an ability to play together as a unit."

—*New York Times, September 19, 1923*

**A**fter the "war to end all wars" ended on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month across Europe in 1918, the United States Army entered what accomplished historian Dr. Edward Coffman characterized as a "limbo" period.

Many Americans openly questioned the need for such an institution, with the inevitable cycle of reductions and overseas withdraws paring the Army down to a skeletal frame of its First World War glory. The early years of the "Roaring Twenties" saw significant Army training all but cease. The monotonous daily schedule of formations, duties and drills helped make athletics an increasingly significant part of Army life.

For a number of Army officers, rather than endure an idle existence at the Officers Club after morning formation and work call, the mounted sport of polo became an important part of their interwar routine. Derided by conventional historical wisdom as a frivolous and meaningless activity, polo was, in fact, a significant sport many officers pursued with gusto during the time of The Great Gatsby, Babe Ruth and bathtub gin. The year of 1923 saw a singular peak of accomplishment for Army Polo as a handpicked and highly trained squad defeated the finest military opponents in the world from the United Kingdom. The victory popularized the sport and set the tone for an Army level of participation and



*Maj. A.H. Wilson, a 6th Calvary Medal of Honor recipient, scores for the Army during the international series against the United Kingdom. Army won two out of three games.*

success that would only come to an end with the advent of the Second World War.

Polo in the United States Army can be traced back to at least 1892 when the 4th Cavalry Regiment established a regimental club in Washington State. By 1902 the Army Polo Association was established, affiliated with the U.S. Polo Association, with Army clubs organized on posts both in the states and overseas. Six years later, Army officers first appeared in the roster of ranked players with a handicap from the USPA. Growth of the sport continued in the years before the First World War with teams organized on most posts and an Army Championship held in Washington, D.C.

Sports, after the end of the First World War, exploded in popularity and participation. The war introduced hundreds of thousands of soldiers to various sports and athletics in Army camps. Afterwards such sports as baseball, football, golf, and others

increased in popularity. This trend was also true for polo with U.S. Army teams becoming highly competitive in the annual national circuit tournaments, and ultimately on an international level of play.

The years after the war were "... the golden age of military polo in the United States," according to polo historian Horace A. Laffaye. Considerable resources, to include government provided mounts, stables, riding facilities, time off and an ample supply of enlisted grooms kept the sport galloping along in the Army. Such institutional support for polo enabled Army officers to participate, since very few officers on the meager pay of the time had the financial resources to support horses and tack needed to pursue polo. But Army largesse had a limit. Officers supplemented the government provided mounts for the sport with private polo ponies purchased for play. Polo



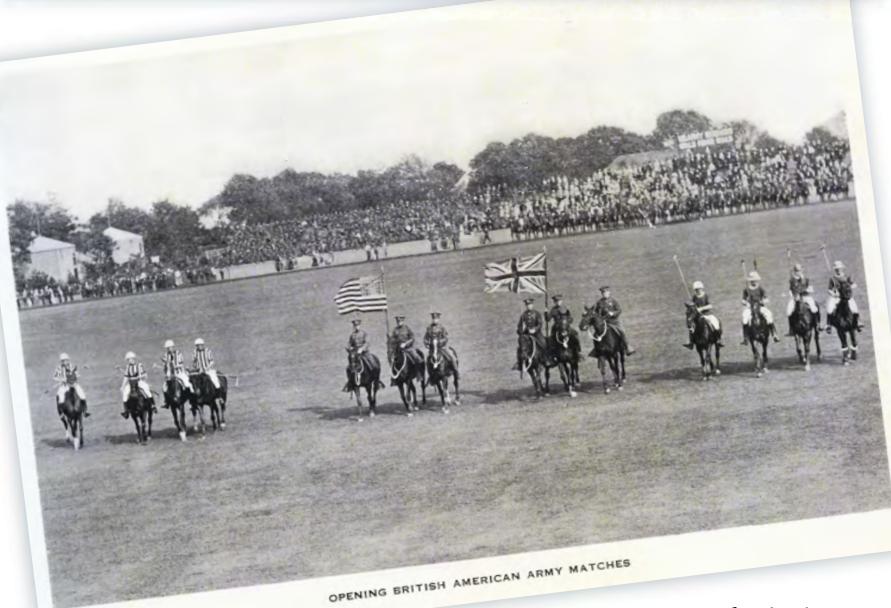
L T COL T P MELVILLE      L T W S MCCREERY      MAJOR F B HURNDALL      MAJOR E G ATKINSON



SECRETARY OF WAR WEEKS  
MAJOR GENL. ROBERT L. BULLARD

between officers and enlisted men, commissioned and non-commissioned officers, or sergeants, did not play on teams or against each other in matches.

Army polo participation in the interwar period included play at the international level. In 1920, an Army Team was fielded and represented the United States in the Olympic Games at Antwerp, with the American squad emerging bronze medalists behind the United Kingdom's British Army gold medal winners and Spain's silver medalists. United Kingdom teams were the international polo powers of the time and were medalists for five Olympiads held before the Second World War. This natural rivalry between two English-speaking nations and armies received a boost in 1923 when Army Chief of Staff General John J. Pershing invited the British Army to send a polo team to the United States for a first-ever international military polo championship. The offer was accepted by Field Marshal Lord Cavan, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, with the subsequent series of matches becoming a seminal event, which popularized the

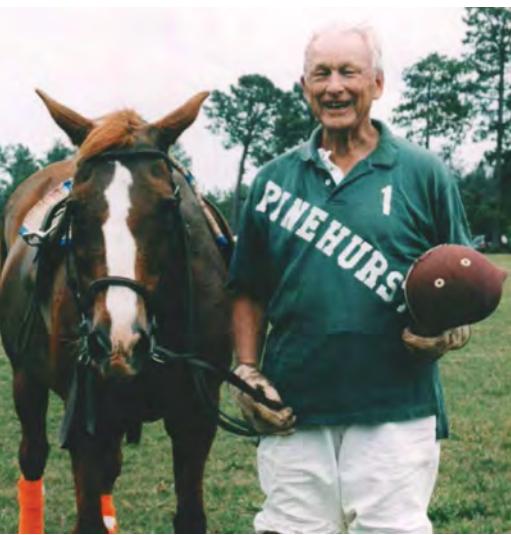


OPENING BRITISH AMERICAN ARMY MATCHES

enthusiasts at times had to choose between costly gear needed for play such as saddles, riding boots or a favorite pony, and more mundane expenses such as life insurance.

The normal playing season was April to October, with matches and tournaments held on post and in nearby communities against local civilian polo squads. Polo participation was most

enthusiastic among the still-mounted horse branches such as cavalry and field artillery, but teams were organized across the force even in such pedestrian branches as the infantry. As an example, the 1924 USPA Year Book reported teams fielded in almost all infantry regiments and that the Seventh Infantry, stationed at Vancouver Barracks in Washington, had purchased 28 polo ponies for officer play. With the rigid relationships of the day



*Brig. Gen. Robert L. Johnson played for the University of Illinois and 124th Field Artillery Regimental team in the 1930s. He credited polo with improved decision making, teamwork and fearlessness resulting from play. He later played in North Carolina until the age of 87.*

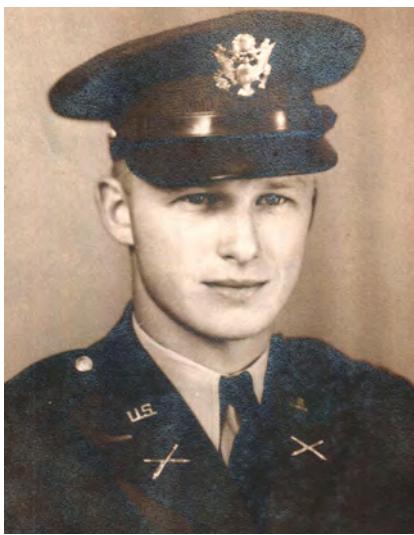
sport with American Army officers.

With the international tournament scheduled for September, hopefuls for the U.S. Army team assembled at Mitchel Field, New York in June 1923.

A complete Army Polo center existed at the Army Air Corps post with stables, hospital, barracks, feed storage, enclosed playing field and practice grounds. The four selected for the Army Team included two prominent cavalry officers of the day, Captain of the Team Major Arthur H. "Jingles" Wilson, a 6th Cavalry Medal of Honor recipient from "knocking out the Moros" in 1909, and Major John K. Herr, a highly rated 5-goal player who became the last Army Chief of Cavalry in 1938.

As Chief, Herr would lead a valiant but vain effort to retain a horse mounted capability in the Army until forced into retirement by George C. Marshall in 1942. Rounding out the team were Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Brown, Jr. and Major Louis A. Beard. Although a strong squad and the best the U.S. Army had to offer, the British were heavily favored to win, being rated some 14 goals higher per match than the U.S. team. Handicaps were not used for the matches, placing the Americans at a great disadvantage.

The U.S. Army team wasted no time preparing for the clash of military



mallets. Tuning up that summer at several tournaments in the northeast, the officers went on to win the U.S. Junior Championship before the arrival of their opponent U.K. Army team with 25 first class mounts and grooms on August 24. With three weeks to prepare, and Olympic gold medalists on the team, the British were heavily favored to win the upcoming three matches to be held at the "Yankee Stadium of polo," the prestigious Meadow Brook Club in Westbury, Long Island. Interest in the sport was high with results of polo matches during the time reported in the pages of national papers and spectators to events surpassing both the sports of tennis and golf in overall numbers.

The U.K. British Army Team was formidable, consisting of very experienced polo playing officers from storied lancer and hussar regiments. All had all been hand-picked themselves for the international tournament. Lieutenant Colonel T.P. Melvill of the team was rather concerned being in Prohibition America where "...it is forbidden by law to drink, gamble or bet ... I did all these things in the greatest luxury and comfort within forty-eight hours of my arrival." The visiting British team enjoyed the hospitality of prominent polo families including the

famous Tommy Hitchcock, a dashing figure who was the highest-rated player of the day and inspired a character in the novel "The Great Gatsby."

The opening match for the best of three series was held on September 12, 1923 amidst great excitement. Before some 10,000 spectators the British Army team scored only 30 seconds after the beginning of play, but the U.S. squad battled back to win an upset 10-7, led by team captain Wilson and "Herr and Beard ... stroking splendidly, saving many points by their courage in checking the British attack." Secretary of War Weeks and "officers and buck privates" in the stands celebrated the victory as the Americans at a gallop style of play seemed to baffle the slower moving British. Four days later, the Empire struck back with a 12-10 win against the American officers with "Black Jack" Pershing and the U.S. Military Academy First Class in attendance as spectators on a Saturday. Thus, a third and decisive match was to determine the first ever International Military Polo Championship.

Major Herr wrote home on September 18. "Today we must do battle with our backs against the wall," before heading to the field to ride polo ponies Liggett, Starlight, Meld and Spaghetti against the U.K. Continuing their hurry-up offensive style of play, the Americans attempted to score quickly before their mounts were exhausted. Herr and Brown were the offensive stars of the Army squad, with four goals apiece, as the American officers ran away with a decisive 10-3 victory over the best of United Kingdom international polo. The unexpected victory was complete and cups presented to the winning team by famous polo player Devereux Milburn and the Secretary of War. *The New York Times* afterwards in analyzing the tournament identified the winning key components of the U.S. Army Team, as speed, intensity and team work, traits that many

officers later also identified as values of the sport.

As newspaper sports writers struggled to come up with superlatives to describe the victory, the effect upon the U.S. Army was instantaneous. In the aftermath of victory, the *Cavalry Journal* reported in its pages that "We are continuing to justify the War Department policy of promoting polo." More officers than ever were interested in the game.

Afterwards, the USPA reported an additional 244 officers on their handicap rolls with nearly 40 percent of all rated players Army officers. Institutional Army support for the sport continued unabashed. In the years leading to the Second World War, Army polo teams dominated low- and mid-grade polo play in the United States. An examination of records for one year indicates that various Army teams entered some 22 tournaments throughout the U.S., winning 17 of those 22. Army teams won the Junior Championship seven times, and on the collegiate level the U.S. Military Academy team won two National Championships in 1931 and 1937.

On the international level Army Teams also continued to win and traveled to the United Kingdom for a second Military Championship Tournament in 1925. In London, at the prestigious Hurlingham Club, a U.S. Army Team again defeated their British counterparts, this time in two straight matches, one before a probably displeased King George V and Queen Mary. After the beginning of the Great Depression, the international military tournaments with the U.K. were cancelled, but Army officer teams continued to play opponents closer to home in Mexico and Argentina.

#### Value of the Sport

Prominent officers of the day believed strongly in the value of polo. For example, Major George S. Patton Jr., head of the 1922 Army Team that won the Junior Championship, commented in



GENERAL JOHN J. PERSHING ARRIVING FOR BRITISH AMERICAN ARMY GAMES



ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF WAR DAVIS PRESENTING TROPHIES TO AMERICAN ARMY TEAM WINNERS MILITARY CHAMPIONSHIP

an article, "The virtue of polo as a military accomplishment rests on the following: it makes a man think fast while he is excited; it reduces his natural respect for his own safety—that is, makes him bold; it ... teach[s] restraint under exciting circumstances ... nearest to mounted combat; makes riding worthwhile; keeps a man hard ... [and] teach[s] better horse management." Also Lucian K. Truscott, who went on to become one of WWII's most highly-regarded Army commanders, always

credited the sport with helping to develop a successful commander's qualities. Polo's hard riding intensity at times was indeed similar to combat.

Polo was dangerous—perhaps one of the sport's attractions for young, energetic officers. In 1931 an Army officer was killed while playing at the Meadow Brook Club. A survey of four tournaments by the *Cavalry Journal* reported a minor accident or fall rate of some 71 percent for officers who were questioned. Concussions and head



injuries were not uncommon, with exceptionally aggressive players such as Patton suffering numerous head injuries. Like contact sports such as football, one had to be tough to play polo.

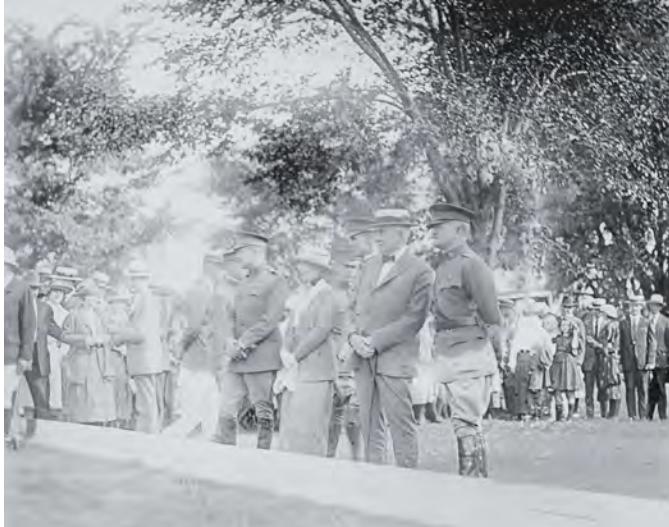
Reports from the Army Polo Association described the sport as a “vital professional asset,” that improved players’ aggressiveness, decision making skills, teamwork and physical fitness. Finally, a review of rosters from the period lists a significant number of notable Army division, corps and army commanders who went onto achieve prominence both before and during the Second World War. A review of APA officers with a recorded handicap during the interwar period includes such renowned Army leaders as Herr, Chaffee, Patton, Truscott, Wainwright, Simpson, Gerhardt, Devers, Allen, Harmon, Holbrook, and Swift.

Today, surviving Army polo players from the interwar period are few. Two interviewed by the author both played at the collegiate and regimental level during the 1930s. Brig. Gen. Ret. Robert L. Johnson, University of Illinois and 124th Field Artillery Regimental Team, and Lieutenant Colonel Ret. Ed Ramsey, Oklahoma

Military Academy and 26th Cavalry (PS) Regimental Team, both mentioned the improved decision making, teamwork and fearlessness resulting from play. Brig. Gen. Johnson considered the polo players in his Field Artillery regiment to be the “elite” of the unit, possessing superior skills and leadership abilities.

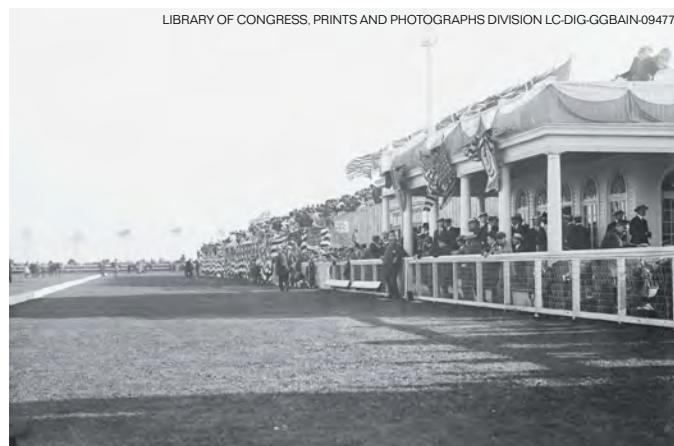
One can state with a reasonable degree of certainty that the mounted

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*Gen. Pershing and President Warren G. Harding at polo in 1921*

sport of polo had a significant impact upon U.S. Army officers in the interwar period, contrary to accepted historical wisdom. Far from being a game of the idle, polo participation had a positive



*Crowds gather at the Meadow Brook clubhouse for a polo match.*

effect on officers, increasing their aggressiveness, decision making ability and physical fitness.

This is confirmed by an examination of sources including records such as membership rosters, written statements and interviews of the few remaining players of the bygone era. This evidence indicates a level of officer participation after the First World War, contrary to the

elitist image of the sport.

A significant number of officers played polo, with rosters and interviews suggesting a five to 10 percent participation level for Army officers. The sport undoubtedly attracted an athletic, aggressive type of officer who benefited from the conduct of play, according to notable devotees, and a dwindling number of surviving players from the era who subsequently fought in World War II.

One can hypothesize that the characteristics of an Army officer who played the sport are similar to those of current volunteers for demanding airborne, ranger or Special Forces training. In fact, one of the reasons Lucian K. Truscott, the chief architect of the Army Ranger concept in early 1942, was chosen for this role by Eisenhower was his well-known abilities with the sport.

The image of polo as an idle pastime of the rich, which Army officers used to amuse themselves, should be revised to accommodate the reality of the sport’s positive effect upon a interwar Army force starved of funds and training.

The pivotal year of 1923, and the Army’s triumph over their United Kingdom cousins, set the tone for a level of significant participation that was maintained until the advent of World War II cancelled organized play. In the end, polo was a sport which had a positive effect upon a U.S. Army officer corps in a state of limbo during some difficult years, and helped develop the mental and physical toughness required to fight and win a global war. ♦