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Rules of Polo



2019

Glossary of Polo Terms

- The object of the game is to move the polo ball down-field, hitting the ball through the goal posts for a score. Polo teams then change direction after each goal in order to equalize field and wind conditions. A team is made up of four polo players.
- A polo field is 300 yards long and 160 yards wide, the largest field in organized sport.
- A match is divided into six periods called chukkers, running 7 ½ minutes each. A bell/horn is sounded at the 7-minute mark to let the players know 30 seconds remain. If the ball goes out of bounds or is scored during that time, the chukker ends.
- Play begins/resumes with a throw-in of the ball by the umpire at the opening of each chukker and after each goal.
- During half time, spectators are invited onto the field to participate in a tradition called “divot stomping” to help replace the divots created by the horse’s hooves.
- Penalty shots are given depending on the severity and location of the foul.
- Most of the rules of polo are for the safety of the ponies and their polo players. The basic concept is the line of the ball, a right-of-way established by the path of a traveling ball.
- Polo players are ranked yearly by their peers and the USPA has a scale of -1 to 10 goals (10 being the best). Team play is handicapped on the basis of ability.
- Two mounted umpires do most of the officiating, with a referee at midfield having the final say in any dispute between the umpires.
- Players change horses after each chukker due to the extreme demands placed on the polo pony. Each team brings 28 to 32 horses to the game. Therefore, both teams combined bring 56-64 horses (8-9 horses per player) for one game.

The General Rules of Polo

APPEALING:

Claims by players for a foul, expressed by the raising of mallets above the head.

BACK SHOT:

Backhand swing, changing the flow of play by sending the ball in the opposite direction.

BOWL IN:

When the umpire starts or resumes a polo match by rolling the ball down the center of a lineup of players, same as throw in.

BUMP:

When a player directs his pony into the parallel shoulder of an opponent’s pony.

CHECK & TURN:

To slow the pony and turn safely.

CHUKKER:

Term used for period of play in polo, 7 ½ minutes long. There are six chukkers in a polo match.

FLAGMAN:

An unofficial goal observer appointed to signal by waving a flag over the head if a goal is scored, or under the waist if no goal.

FIELD:

Usually 300 yards long by 160 yards wide and outlined by sideboards.

GOAL:

Anytime the ball crosses the line between the goal posts, regardless of who (including ponies) knocks it through.

HANDICAP:

Team play is handicapped on the basis of ability. A team’s handicap is the total of its players’ goal rankings. The team with the lower handicap is awarded the difference in goals at the start of the match.

HANDS:

Unit of measure for the height of a horse, one hand equals about four inches.

HOOK:

Catching an opponent’s mallet in swing below the level of the horse’s back, to leave or turn the ball for a teammate. A strategic defensive play.

KNOCK IN:

After the ball crosses the offensive line, the defending team knocks the ball back into play.

LEAVE IT:

To strategically ride past the ball so that the teammate behind can hit it or pass the ball.

LINE OF THE BALL:

The imaginary line produced by the ball when it is hit or deflected.

MADE PONY:

A polo pony that is well trained for polo and has been played for some time.

MALLET HEAD:

The part of the mallet used to strike the ball, the wide face of the head is used to strike the ball.

NEARSIDE:

The left hand side of the polo pony.

NECK SHOT:

Hitting the ball under the horse’s neck.

OFFICIALS:

Two mounted umpires do most of the officiating, with a referee at midfield having the final say in any dispute between the umpires.

OFFSIDE:

The right hand side of the polo pony.

PASS:

To hit the ball forward or laterally to a teammate.

PENALTY:

Numbered from 1 to 10, a free hit is awarded to the fouled, from a set distance determined by the severity of the foul committed.

PONY GOAL:

When a polo pony causes the ball to go through the goal posts.

POSITIONS:

There are four players on a team, numbered 1 through 4, each with different responsibilities.

RIDE OFF:

Two riders may make contact and attempt to push each other off the line to prevent an opponent from striking the ball.

SAFETY:

Also known as Penalty 6, a defending player hits the ball over his own back line.

SIDEBOARDS:

Short boards along the sidelines of the field to help keep the ball in play.

STICK:

The polo mallet.

STICK & BALL:

Personal practice time.

SUDDEN DEATH:

Overtime play when the score is tied at the end of the last regular chukker, the first team to score wins.

SWING:

Hitting at the ball with the mallet using one of four basic shots: forehand, backhand, neck, & tail.

TACK:

All the equipment used on a pony.

TAIL SHOT:

Hitting the ball behind and underneath the horse’s tail.

THIRD MAN:

The referee sitting at the sidelines, if the two umpires on the field are in disagreement, this third man makes the final decision.

THROW IN:

When the referee starts or resumes the match, he rolls the ball down the center of a lineup of players and horses.

TIME OUT:

An umpire may call a time out when a foul is committed, an accident occurs, or at his or her discretion, a player may call a time out if he has broken tack, is injured or his horse appears injured.

TURN:

To backhand hit the ball away from the goal being defended.

UMPIRES:

Two mounted officials, one for each side of the field.

USPA:

United States Polo Association, the governing body of polo.

WRAPS:

Protective bandages the polo ponies wear on their legs.