

Playing polo, Sylvester Stallone once said, is like trying to play golf during an earthquake. Well maybe, but as Peggy Weng reports, the sport is putting down roots in China with a tournament scheduled for October

Polo, 'King of Sports' and 'Sport of Kings,' comes to China

China's economic development is changing people's standard of living, their lifestyle and even to some extent, their sporting tastes. Now polo, known as the most expensive game in the world, is now starting to find a place in China.

China's first Royal Salute Gold Cup Polo Tournament will kick off from October 19 to 21 in the neighbouring Zhejiang Province and the event marks the return of the "King of Sports" to China which is regarded as one of the birth places of the game.

Players from the UK, Australia, and the US as well as South America are expected to participate in the tournament. Players from Jordan, Malaysia and Brunei have also expressed a desire to be part of China's first major polo tournament.

Polo is recognized as the oldest team sport in the world. Although it is usually associated with Europe, many recognize China as the probable birth place of the sport more than 2,000 years ago. However, despite this early start, polo's development in China is still at an early stage.

With all its features: speed, control, equestrian ability, team work, discipline, strategy and courtesy, polo plays a huge part in the sporting and social calendar

of royalty in the UK. The enthusiasm of the British royal family for the sport has made the country the modern "spiritual home" for polo. It is even said that the UK has endeavored to have polo named as a sport for the 2012 Olympic Games.

Polo is now played by only 70 countries and regions across the world. Because of its extremely high entrance level, both in terms of cost and in facilities and staff, it's hard to find evidence of polo clubs in China. There were said to have been clubs established in Xi'an and Beijing but they did not last long.

"Polo is the 'King of Sports' and the 'Sport of Kings,'" says Steve Wyatt, chairman of Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club, the first and probably the only existing polo club in China. "Polo is a sport that involves strategy, speed, courage and tactical maneuvers which make it equally exciting for players and spectators alike."

With the annual membership fee of 500,000 yuan (US\$65,936), the club has enrolled more than 300 members, 85 percent of whom are Chinese. They are adults and children at all levels of horse-riding skills.

The club has bought more than 60 horses from Britain and Australia for its members. A group of professional staff are working in the club giving horse training. Each horse

must finish a 90-minute training session to maintain good body condition.

Wyatt says what all the members have in common is an appreciation of the outdoors and a desire to participate in the refined social activities associated with the polo lifestyle.

He describes the experience in playing polo as a feeling of meditation-like calmness. "You must be fully alert to the movements of the horse, the bounce of the ball and the tactics and actions of the other players," he says. "It is a feeling of inner stillness at high speed."

From his own experience of playing polo for years, Wyatt has discovered that polo has always attracted leaders, such as kings and noblemen because, he says, polo requires strategic thinking and the ability to make split-second decisions and bravely out-manuever an opponent.

"Such leadership characteristics are prevalent amongst China's businessmen and entrepreneurs, who thrive in highly competitive environments," he says.

The Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club is located on Hangzhou Bay near a golf club and marina in an area where canals and villas are being developed. With ocean views and mountain paths to explore on horseback, the club offers many equestrian

activities such as trail riding, dressage and polo.

Rachel Wyatt, who had played polo for more than seven years says what she enjoys most in polo is its luxury lifestyle and great opportunities to expand her social network.

"You can see ladies dressed up elegantly and men in polo shirts confidently riding their horses," she says. "During the breaks in the game, I can chat and stroll through the retail stores that house world's top-notch brands alongside the polo ground. It really makes me feel good."

As a sport that demands a lot of strength and time, most people think that polo is

dominated by males.

However, the Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club has attracted many wealthy ladies. Some of them have come with their husband and some are entrepreneurs on their own. No matter what their sex, the characteristics shared by polo players are "outgoing, curious and willing to take a risk," says Rachel Wyatt.

Played mainly during the summer months, polo is continuing to grow in popularity and is now far more accessible. In Australia, Rachel Wyatt said she saw people driving their cars to polo games, enjoying a picnic alongside the polo court and watching the game.

"Polo is gradually becoming a lifestyle in some Western countries," she says.

Many people think that the game, like golf, is all about money. It is true that money is a key factor in polo. For an entrance level player, it will probably cost an initial 300,000 yuan to buy a horse and other equipment.


However, Yu Hui, a 27-year-old white collar, sees it differently. "Polo is about manners, strategy and quick reactions in an emergency which will make you a gentleman. "It is not the game that you can buy into or play only with money. It is the spirit and culture that are most fascinating."

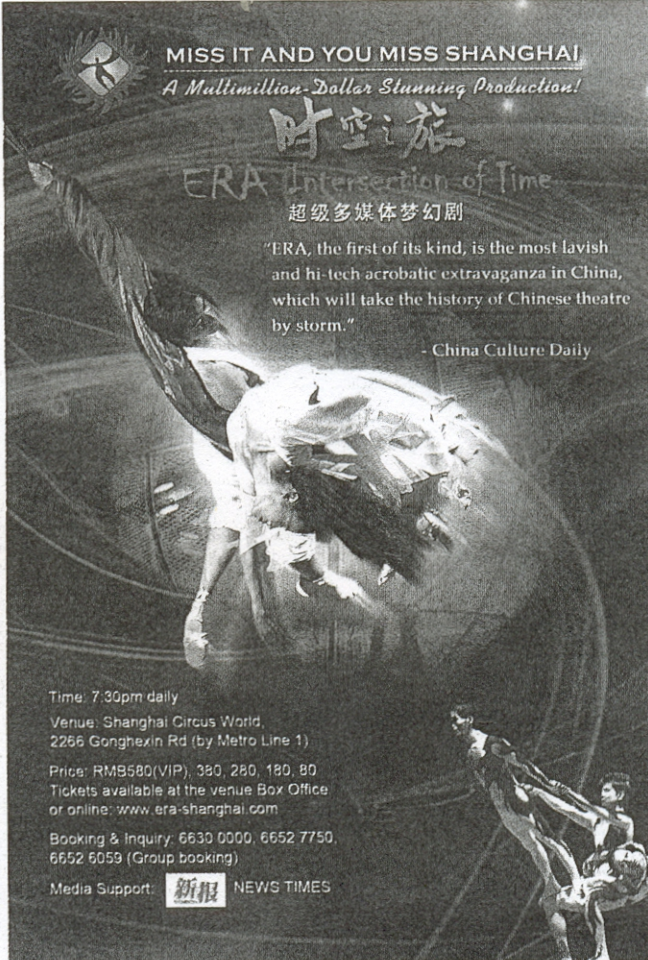
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Steve Wyatt (left), chairman of Nine Dragons Hill Polo Club, and his wife Rachel Wyatt. Wyatt believes that polo is a sport that involves strategy, speed, courage and tactical maneuvers which make it equally exciting for players and spectators alike.