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Top, Julian Hipwood of I.C.I. Racemark chases down the ball. Right, a polo pony in full gear awaits his rider on the player's club side of the field. Below right, players fight for the ball during a practice match at Whitney Field.

Saratoga Polo: Not for members only

By Kate O'Hare

SARATOGA SPRINGS, NY – Last August, four Saratoga-area businesspeople purchased the Saratoga Polo Association from Peter M. Brant of Greenwich, CT, and William S. Farish of Lexington, KY. Despite near-ruinous weather in 1994, the new partners—Bob Bailey, Anthony J. DePaula, George Hearst III, and Linda M. Mansfield—persevered. This year, they delivered on promises made at last year's press conference, held under a soggy Players Club tent on the club's rained-out opening day. Appropriately, a couple of those changes were direct responses to the unpredictable weather and to polo's image as elite entertainment for the well heeled and well connected.

Improvements were made at the main playing field on the city's west side, renamed Whitney Field in honor of Harry Payne Whitney, a leading figure in the game. New drainage pipes were installed, and the Players Club tent area (reduced to a bog at times last year) was raised two feet above the field. The 45-acre site also includes a second playing area, the Hector Barrantes field. The partners also recognized the value of a alternative location in case Whitney Field was unsuitable for play. They also wanted to realize their goal of offering matches in June, July, and September.

Recalls Dave Mansfield, the association's secretary, U.S. Polo Association delegate, and assistant polo manager: "Bob Bailey was good friends with one of the partners in the Saratoga Raceway (the harness-racing track) and had introduced us to Frank Fitzgerald, the president of the raceway. We started batting around some ideas." Also on the partners' agenda was a way to consolidate stabling for the 200 polo ponies, who previously were housed at nearby Skidmore College and at barns around the area. In the end, the raceway and Saratoga Polo agreed to stable the ponies at the harness track and to build a new polo field in the infield of its training track. This fit in with the raceway's plans to establish itself as an equine-sports center and gives it a grass area to use for other equine events.

On July 18, the new Bostwick Field (named after legendary polo player, jockey, trainer, and show rider Pete Bostwick) was ready to host the Saratoga Cup Medium Goal Tourna-ment, sponsored by the Adirondack Trust Company. (In polo, each player is assigned a goal rating according to his or her skills. A team's total goal rating determines whether it is high or medium goal; the team with the higher total also must yield the difference in points as a handicap.)

By all measures, the expanded polo season was a success. Despite a couple of torrential downpours during the medium-goal tournament, attendance was good. The August high-goal tournament at Whitney Field saw large crowds on both the Players Club and general-admission sides of the field. New for 1995 was a tent on the general-admission side, offering souvenirs and the same food as on the Players Club side, where members pay yearly dues of $245 for families and $175 for individuals. General-admission prices remained constant at $5, with children aged fifteen and under getting in free.

During the August meet, the polo association decided to offer Friday-evening and Sunday-afternoon matches in September. The plans for 1996 are even more ambitious. Friday and Sunday matches will be offered in June, July, and September. Food and beverage service will be available. Says Mansfield, "It will just be 'Come in, park your car on the sideboards, enjoy yourself. Not the Players Club, just family, down-home polo.'"



Michael E. Bryant

This idea is new to Saratoga Polo, which has in the past been linked to the August meet at the Saratoga Race Course and the socialites it draws. Happily, when the partners sought local sponsorship for the new matches and the new program, they received a warm reception.

"We're local people that are involved with it," says Mansfield, "going there and doing something that's going to help them and asking them for some help for us, where that was never the case before. Polo was always run by the outside group that came in for four weeks, then left. They really didn't want to know and didn't care to know the local people. It was their traveling show, they came in and played and left. What we've tried to do is get the community involved."

Other plans for 1996 include the return of the polo clinic initiated this year by top British player Julian Hipwood, who participated in both the medium- and the high-goal tournaments. Next year's matches will be videotaped, with the tapes played back at fieldside as patrons enjoy post-match socializing. Mansfield and his cohorts are also on the hunt for a new venue with adequate seating to be used for Skidmore College's indoor-polo team and for other indoor play during the winter months. Within the next two years, Saratoga Polo may be able to operate year-round.

Right now, Saratoga Polo is riding high. Says Mansfield, "The public response has been far greater than we even hoped for. We're looking forward to next year."