

AUGUST 2022 VOL. 26, NO. 4

POLO

\$5.00 US/\$5.50 CAN

USPA Secures National Polo Center



Brilliant Babies

Farm breeds polo horses
using top racing stock.

Plns & Needles

Benefits of acupuncture
treatments for horses.

Head Games

No such thing as perfection
in polo.



HEAD GAMES

No such thing as perfection in polo

By Kristen Grube

As a mental coach, trained in the specific quirks of polo players, I often get called to help with psychological issues.

Puzzling to many players is that their game performance is often not up to their training pitch brilliance! During training, every 60-yard penalty shot seems to be a goal, every difficult shot is bang on target. On game day, suddenly that all changes.

A training chukker or stick-and-ball session is usually relaxed. If players mishit a ball or two it is really not that irritating, you shake it off and life goes on. In a game situation though, now it counts. There is the added stress of knowing there are consequences—a bad play, a lost game, etc. So, every mishit, every failure pressures the player about the outcome of the game.

In ideal plays, when in the zone, polo players perform at their best. The mind of the player is in the present, focused on the game, the horse and the other players. When irritation or frustration sets in, however, the mind wanders into the future (we are going to lose this game) or into the past (how could I have missed that). This makes

being in the zone impossible. If players do not manage to regroup into the present and banish negative past or future thinking, they won't get back in the zone. However, there are some techniques to help:

First, awareness that your mind must move away from counterproductive thinking back to the present time zone is vital. To get your mind back into the present, use every break for a time out to practice all your senses: watch your surroundings, what do you see? How does your mallet or reins feel in your hand, how does your pony's coat feel? Take note of how things feel and look, then describe them in your mind. This small exercise will get you back immediately into being mindfully present, and en route to being back in the zone. If your mind is still too busy and complaining, make a deal with yourself! Keep the stresses in a box and open it up at say 9 p.m. over a beer. For many, this simple trick helps to postpone frustration and any anger that might have built up during a game.

Anger

Anger is a difficult issue for many polo players. Some tennis players demolish their tennis rackets on the court

Playing your best game and being No. 1 every day is unrealistic. Expecting perfection often leads to burnout.



Sergio Llamera



Self-monitor during the game.
Don't let stress boil over into anger.

Sergio Llamera

when they get angry. A polo player cannot trash a mallet or do something else to appease aggression. What is important is to deal with it before you are consumed! Usually, there is a pot boiling build-up leading to a final straw outburst. If you are oblivious to your own mood changes, you cannot alter things, so make a point of being honest with yourself and self-monitor during the game.

Find your pauses to get rid of the stresses. Don't jump from one pony to the other. Get off, stomp your feet, and only then get back on the next horse. A stress-and-relax exercise is also effective: stress every single muscle in your body, hold it for a moment until you feel your entire body tense, then relax. Take a couple of deep breaths and breathe out slowly. Breathing can be an amazing helper. To relax properly just focus on breathing out with long breaths. It probably won't work with blind rage, so it is best to catch it before it escalates.

Perfection

Perfectionism can be a big problem. High expectations of yourself or even from coaches can often lead to difficult issues. Perfectionists set unrealistic expectations for



If you are not having your best game, maintain self confidence by making plays you know always work, like defense.

Sergio Llamera

themselves. Every day, every game, they expect nothing less than a faultless performance. Every mistake, every mishit irritates them. For a perfectionist, playing in the zone is not the pinnacle of a game, it is a minimum

expectation. Anything less means failure and often breeds low confidence. But just how realistic is it to play your best game in the zone every day, and even exceed it with new game heights? Well, it is not realistic at all. It is not uncommon for perfectionists to lose all the joy and fun of playing and suffer from burn-out or even depression.

One way to challenge this is to look at statistics and compare expectations with the real-world game. In research for my clients, I watched hours of high-goal polo and analyzed shots at goal, conversion rates, penalties, etc. My perfectionist clients are surprised! Yes, conversion rates are high among the 10-goal players but even for them, they are far from 100%. Comparisons with a client's own performance along with working on realistic and long-term goals rather than immediate successes, all help to get a grip on expectations.

Self Confidence

A lack of self-confidence is something I come across a lot, and it's not just the perfectionists. These players aren't strong on self-belief or their capabilities. Any mishits or badly-played shots mean a spiral into the negative, and

GAUNTLET OF POLO		
PILOT		LA ELINA
11	GOALS	6
10/20	FIELD SHOT CONVERSION	5/17
1/1	PENALTY CONVERSION	1/2
3	FOULS COMMITTED	5
10	THROW-INS WON	11
FINAL		

Even for the best players, conversion rates are far from 100%.

Use the most of pauses in the game to
relieve stress, breathe and stay present.



during a fast game like polo, that quickly heads irreversibly downward.

Low confidence causes concern for a player about game outcomes and consequences with the team owner. And for a kid, it often means disappointing their parents or coach.

This thought spiral shifts from present to future and to outcome-oriented thinking. Players without defense mechanisms to regain mental stability often inhabit a vicious circle. The fear of failure drives them out of the zone and into poor performance and thus into a further loss of confidence. Stopping the spiral is essential.

Hopefully you bring your A-game to the zone, but it helps to have both B- and C-games clearly defined if things start to fail. Your C-game may be ride-offs, marking, hooking—things you know always work. The B-game will encompass other small certainties. If your A-game fails, just turn to B. If your B-game fails, move to C as you know that your C-game never fails. This allows you to bide time achieving small successes, and eventually regain enough confidence to return to your B- or even A-game. Your

A-game might be your preference, but you also need to accept your B- and C-games and be prepared to switch to them when needed. There will be days when you just must stick with the C-game. You may have brought both your A- and B-games to the party, but they are being shut down by the opposition and not by your own poor play. You can still have a great game!

These are just a few techniques for you to try. Of course, there are many more. Have fun trying them out.



A Q-rated polo player, Kristin Grube is a Level I mental game instructor, certified by the International Mental Game Coaching Association, as well as a sports mental trainer certified by the Zentralstelle für Fernunterricht in Germany. She continually undergoes training to gain new knowledge of the latest state-of-the-art techniques in the field of mental training. She has coached polo players, as well as golf and rugby athletes and corporate business people. As a player herself, she has competed in Argentina and Thailand. She can be reached through her website polomentalgamecoach.com.