

By Howard Powers,
Longtime Marion horseman

Yes, Virginia, there really is polo in Iowa and if Jeff Boeh, an energetic and enterprising young man from Bettendorf has his way, it is going to again become a popular sport. A fourth generation farmer/carpenter/ entrepreneur, Jeff, with help from family and friends, has scraped out a field on his farm. And on August 12, they held the first polo match in that area. Nearly 1000 people were in attendance for that event.

This is not the first polo club in Iowa, as Des Moines has an active club, but it **is** the first in the Quad Cities area.

What is Polo?

The game dates back as far as 2000 years and surprisingly, had its origin in Iran, then known as Persia. The modern game had its beginning in India when a group of British officers copied the sport from some tribal horsemen. The game was introduced to England in 1869 and was played as an outdoor game but the first game in the America was played indoors at Dickel's Riding Academy in New York City in 1876. It remained an indoor game until 1880 when it was moved outside and became popular as an outdoor sport. In 1886, teams from England and the United States played the first international polo series in Newport, RI. Tommy Hitchcock, Jr. is generally considered the greatest player of all time. He was killed in World War II.

The polo field is 300 yards long by 200 yards wide with goal posts at each end set at 24 feet apart. The balls used are white painted willow and are 3 ¼ inches in diameter and weigh from 4 ¼ to 4 ¾ ounces. The mallets are cane or rattan handles 48 to 54 inches long, attached to a hardwood or plastic head. At the top of the handle is a leather loop into which the thumb is inserted. This helps hold the mallet straight. *Woe to the thumbless team roper who tries to convert to polo.* The rider's equipment consists of boots, white breeches, helmet, knee guards, whip, spurs, mallet, and team jersey.

Polo requires a special type of horse which is extremely athletic, able to run full speed in short bursts, stop and turn quickly and be rugged enough to crash into other horses without flinching. A Quarter Horse/Thoroughbred cross makes an ideal mount for this fast, wild and unpredictable encounter. Some ranchers are breeding horses especially adapted to polo but it takes months of training to produce a responsive mount which will bond with the rider and be dependable in a game situation.

According to Jeff, the horses actually seem to enjoy the game and will follow the ball without reining from the rider. Horses are ridden in an English saddle with a snaffle bit headstall and have protective guards on their front legs.

The rules of the game are quite complex and too long to cover in this article but have been amended at various times to make the game the safest for both horse and rider. There are four players on each team with the game divided into 6 chukkers of 7 minutes each. Experience has shown that 7 minutes is the optimum time period to prevent injuries to horses and riders from fatigue. A three-minute break between chukkers and a 10 minute half time break makes the game last about 1½ hours. Players may change horses as often as they choose and some will use 6 horses during a match. A rider can gallop between 11 and 15 miles during a match. A hit ball can travel up to 150 yards at 100 mph.

Polo is not a game for a timid horse or a faint-hearted rider!

A Brief History of Polo in Iowa

Information garnered from the Des Moines club's website, points to the fact that the first polo club in Iowa was headquartered in the Le Mars area, where a group of English people settled in that area and brought the game with them. English brothers William B. and Frederick Brooks Close began the Iowa Land Company in nearby Denison, IA in 1878, buying large tracts of land and then selling land as standardized farms. This encouraged English immigrants to develop a colony and many young men came to the colony from England to train in farm management.

These Brits were sometimes remembered as the "Fox-Hunting English" but that was only one aspect of the lively sporting era they created in northwest Iowa. The Norwest Polo League was formed in 1885 and included teams from Sioux City, Council Bluffs, and Omaha, NE. But the tragic death of Fred Close in a polo match with Sioux City at the Crescent Park Polo Grounds in June 1890, put a damper on the group. Close had trouble controlling his pony because his arm had been injured in a hunting fall in England two months before, and the result was a terrible accident.

The Le Mars colony kept its vitality until 1895 but after that, a decline set in. The death of Fred Close was discouraging and so was the legislature's passage of a law prohibiting the playing of polo, although it was soon repealed.



Polo in Iowa in the 20th Century

The Army Cavalry first introduced polo to Des Moines in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s. They played at the Fort Des Moines parade grounds. The game waned in the Des Moines area during and after WWII.

In 1965, Iowa City became the hometown for the state's only polo team. It was formed by Steve Richardson, a real-estate man, Fred Fluegel, an Iowa city businessman and Don Coulter, owner of the Sugar Bottom Stables at the Coralville Reservoir. Dick Meade continues to play with the Des Moines polo club today. [www.desmoinespolo.com]

It was not until 1982 that Bart Hicklin and Monte Antisdell created the Des Moines Polo Club. Bart built the first field north of Des Moines on Oralabor Road in Ankeny. The first members of the team were Bart and Monte, Melinda Antisdell, Jack Chopp, Ken Newman, Tim Holt, and Nancy Holt. Jim Goode and John Moeller later joined the team. Surprisingly, there were two women members on this team.

So, polo does have a history in Iowa. The team has had fields at Mossland Acres, south of Grand Avenue, and Fort Des Moines. At the time of this article, the current field is located near Cumming. This field sits next to a beautiful, new residential equestrian development known as Polo Pointe.



In Iowa??



Pictured above: July 4th, 2006 - Team Blazer (Des Moines) in action against a Minneapolis team at the High-Goal Tourney in Minneapolis. The referee is Mark Allen.

- Photo by Robin Allen -

Jeff Boeh, and Polo Today

Jeff Boeh's father, Alfred, a lifelong horseman who grew up driving draft teams and was born in the house in which Jeff and his family now lives, saw an advertisement in 2004 for a fund-raising polo demo to be held in Peoria, Illinois. He showed it to Jeff and the seed was planted. Jeff went to that game, later took lessons and in 2005 was on his way to something new and exciting when he and his family decided to put a field on his farm.

Jeff and his wife Marcy, with the help of their three children, his father, three brothers and a sister, planned out a polo field on the farm. And with countless hours of labor, scraping, dirt moving and then planting, the grass field finally took shape and was ready for the first game on August 12, 2006. Months of planning had gone into this enterprise and with help from all quarters, plus blessings from the weatherman, Jeff saw his dream come to be.

When the first games were played on his field that day, Jeff played for the Peoria team and played the first and fourth chukkers. It was his first time to play in actual competition so must surely have been quite a thrill. He probably did not even care who won; he was seeing the results of all his hard work and planning and it was surely a great day for the whole family.

More about Jeff & Iowa polo in the upcoming spring issue of Apples 'n Oats!!

