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Although it involves a green grassy field and a white ball of similar proportion, the polo field is not your typical field of dreams. Unlike baseball, players must try to hit the ball while running at high speeds on top of an animal with its own mind. Unlike baseball, a team not only includes human teammates, but the four-legged variety as well. However, similar to baseball, the passion with which polo is played runs deep within the people who live and breathe it.

Stop by one of the Des Moines Polo Club fields during the summer and find an eclectic mix of laughing polo players and their equine companions breezing up and down the lush, green grass. The sport of polo is unique because it mixes young and old, professional and amateur. The Midwest, especially Iowa, is no exception. During the past 10 years, polo in Iowa has grown to a large family that includes people from all over the world, including those from Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. The high goal professionals play on the same field as the kids they're mentoring to be future teammates. The uniqueness of the sport is how the polo family spreads its net worldwide and individuals welcome

players into their homes as though they are longtime friends.

Engelberto Maldonado, known as *Flaco* throughout the polo world, was born in a small town in the Dominican Republic with no running water in his house. Fast forward to 2001, when Maldonado found himself at a plush polo field south of Des Moines. As a polo professional, Maldonado says he loves the competition of the sport, but also enjoys the people he has met from the all over the world and greatly appreciates the opportunities that have been afforded him. After playing in numerous cities throughout the country and in countries all around the world, Maldonado has found a comfortable fit in Iowa.

"I'm really far away from my home and people in Iowa treat me like family," Maldonado said, "And, they like to have fun on the field."

Mark Allen, an avid polo player with the Des Moines Polo Club and President of A.J. Allen Mechanical Contractors, echoes Maldonado's sentiments. Allen enjoys playing polo throughout the Midwest because of the camaraderie that has been generated during many years with the polo community in the region. He said polo brings about a different sense of bonding with teammates, competitors, umpires, grooms and groupies because everyone shares the values of working hard, doing your best at your level of ability, and truly



being enthralled with the equestrian activity.

“In some polo clubs, the competition carries on off the field,” said David Sommers, a fellow Des Moines Polo Club member and Registered Principal at Sommers & Danforth Financial. “Here, people all get together after the game and it’s one of the friendliest places to play polo.”

Sommers said he clearly remembers his first polo experience. While watching his first polo match from the sidelines, he said he not only saw and heard the polo action, but he felt it from his feet to his head. He said he could feel the power of the horses running through him and knew that he wanted to learn how to play. Sommers said the sport of polo gives him two things that nothing else in life can provide – escape and an adrenaline rush.

“Leaving for a polo event, whether it’s practice, a tournament or road trip, is the only time I can put all other stresses and problems aside,” Sommers said. “It’s a tremendous relief and I don’t think about things until I’m home again.”

Although the understood rule in the polo community is, “What goes on the road stays on the road,” Allen has an abundance of stories he could share. His most memorable stories include getting trophies delivered by sky divers in Rapid City, SD; fascinating trips to the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Africa that would have never happened without the common thread of polo; meeting movies stars, kings and 10-goal players; touring cocoa plantations; seeing cigar makers; buying custom boots from hand craftsman in Argentina; getting crazy with British polo players in Kenya; and several long-term relationships formed via polo that manifested into marriage proposals.

“Not to be undersold is the fact that my wife and kids have always been part of the activity,” Allen said. “Without the family being an integral part of the sport, it would diminish my rewards from what I achieve in the process.”

Sommers was on many of the same trips as Allen with other members of the polo club and remembers them fondly.

“Even when I’m laying on my deathbed, these memories will ring clear,” Sommers said. “They were some of the best times of my life.”

Not to be forgotten are their four-legged teammates on the field. Allen said playing his own horses in matches is

extremely gratifying because you know them as your pets and teammates.

“When they perform well, it’s extremely gratifying – like a partner that exceeded your expectations,” Allen said. “Caring for the horses all year long brings an excitement for the next season to begin.”

Jon Moeller, a Des Moines Polo Club player with one of the longest tenures on the team, said the horses are a major part of why he plays polo.

“The thing that I look forward to each year the most is the time spent with the horses,” said Moeller. “They are easily 80% of the game.”

Although not the typical stereotype, the polo field is a place of inspiration. Whether it is the businessmen needing a mental escape from the daily grind or a

young immigrant trying to make a living, the enormous carpet of green has meaning for everyone. For Maldonado, polo is a profession that proves the American Dream is still alive and well. For Allen and Sommers, the sport provides a great escape from reality to a field where dreams, family and memories are made.

<http://www.desmoinespolo.com/>

Jessica Walter is engaged to Des Moines Polo Club member Flaco Maldonado, but first and foremost she considers herself a “polo groupie.” A former polo groom for Mark Allen, she grew up showing saddleseat. Today, she plays polo occasionally, but is normally found on the sidelines cheering for the Des Moines players.

