



Andrew as he is usually seen – in the dressage arena.



# Gould rush

When *HORSE* met dressage rider Andrew Gould earlier this year, he confessed that his ambition was to learn to play polo – Ascot Park Polo Club rose to the challenge



Andrew gets to grip with polo tactics.

**R**anked sixth in the British Dressage small tour rankings and a member of the 2006 World Class Potential dressage squad at gold level, Andrew Gould's skills lie in honing and executing measured, technical dressage manoeuvres. So what would he make of the fast-paced, tactical world of polo, where riders gallop up and down a ground the equivalent size of nine football pitches at up to 40mph?

## Talking tactics

Before being allowed near a horse, Ascot Park Polo Club founder and senior Hurlingham Polo Association qualified polo coach, Peter Grace, goes through the basics of polo off the field with Andrew. He uses plastic horse and rider figures on a board to help Andrew understand the rules. Peter explains that polo is a very tactical team sport with four players a side – each player fills a specific role and plays offensively and defensively.

Football fan Andrew notes the games' similarities (although Peter explains there is no offside rule and no goalkeeper in polo!), and quickly picks up the key tactics.

The first and most important concept to grasp is the line of the ball – the imaginary line that the ball creates as it travels from one point to another. This governs how players can approach and attack the ball, hopefully avoiding serious injury in the process.

"When two players ride to the ball, both hoping to hit it, they must ride on either side of the line, so that both will have access to the ball," Peter explains. "They must remain on opposite sides of the line, thus minimising the risk of collision. The line remains set until a player strikes the ball, which changes direction, forming a new line.

"A player following the ball on its exact line has the ultimate right of way at that given time, and another player may cross the line only when it does not create a hazardous situation, such as risking a collision with another rider."

The other line that Andrew must learn about is the 'anticipation line', the perceived path between the ball and the goal. "This line runs around the ground, preferably anti-clockwise," Peter says. "It is usually in the shape of a banana, rather than a straight line, as horses naturally move in an arc."

## Checking coordination

Andrew is obviously an accomplished horseman, but he wonders whether good hand-to-eye coordination or excellent riding skills are the most important attribute for a novice polo player. Peter explains that it is more important to be able to hit the ball initially, but your riding ability will become important as you improve.

With this in mind, Peter tests Andrew's hand-to-eye coordination by teaching him to master the swing of the 38-inch-long polo mallet from atop an upturned beer crate.

"You need to think of the ability to twist your body," Peter explains, demonstrating the desired riding position.

"Hold the mallet in your right hand like a sword, not a hammer, so you can hit the ball straight. There's a small ledge on the bottom of the handle that you will feel with your little finger. Think of pulling the string of a bow when your arm comes back to take a shot, and try not to lift your hand above your nose."

Andrew enjoys the occasional game of golf, but finds that this particular way of swinging his arm is detrimental to his polo swing.



It's important to master the swing before mounting.



Hold the mallet like a sword, not a hammer.





Andrew hones his technique on the field.

Due to his golf experience, his elbow comes too far away from his body and his shoulder lifts too high. Peter is positive, however, and says that Andrew has great style and just needs practice. The next swing, Peter declares, is "beautiful".

Peter demonstrates the six different polo shots (all taken with the right hand, as riders do not carry the stick in their left hands): the powerful offside forehand and the offside backhand; the offside neck shot, which requires a great deal of precision to avoid hitting the horse; the nearside neck shot, often used to attempt a shot into the goal; the offside tail shot, used to clear the ball as it goes past the horse, and the nearside back shot, another potentially powerful shot.

Peter explains that the power in a polo swing comes from a karate-chop action, and with the compressed polystyrene balls sailing across the polo field from Andrew's fast-improving offside forehand shots, it seems that Andrew is a natural karate kid!

#### Ball skills

Next Andrew mounts Prince, his first polo pony of the day, adjusting his stirrups as instructed so they are between show jumping and dressage length. Prince is a retrained racehorse from Argentine Criollo horse descent, and according to Peter is "starting to play good polo".

Peter joins Andrew on the polo field, along with professional polo player Tarquin Southwell and his student Richard Clarke, who is taking part in a four-day intensive course, and the four riders work on their ball skills individually.

Andrew starts by walking Prince up to the array of balls on the field and practising his swing with a 52-inch-long mallet. Initially, he gets too close to the ball and, in Peter's words, "shovels it" with an ungainly swing, but he soon begins to develop his technique.

"Think of screwing your body into a 'half-seat' position," Peter suggests, demonstrating a

secure, forward seat. "This gives you a stable position from which to take any shot."

Riding alongside him, Peter describes another 'line' that Andrew must take into the equation; the plane of the rider's swing. "There are three main lines in polo – the line of the horse, the line of the ball and the plane of the swing," he says. "If two are the same, you will have a 60-70 per cent chance of hitting the ball, while all three give you a 90 per cent chance."

Having informally practised in walk, trot and canter on the polo ground, Andrew is ready to join Peter, Tarquin and Richard, and Ascot Park's Lucy Northmore and Argentinean groom Martine, for a friendly chukka.

#### Fast and furious

A game of club polo consists of four to six periods, or chukkas, each seven minutes long. After that period, a bell is rung, and the game

goes on until the ball goes out of play, or for another 30 seconds, when the bell is rung again. There is a three-minute break between chukkas, and a five-minute break at half-time. Teams change ends after every goal scored, to ensure the elements do not favour one team.

The seemingly brief period of play is necessary, due to the stress placed on the polo ponies from the fast and challenging game. The ponies are changed over after each chukka – a pony can play two chukkas in a game, but not consecutively.

Although the tactics of the game may seem baffling at first, the objective is reassuringly simple – the winning team scores the most goals by hitting the ball through the relevant goalposts (eight yards apart) at each end of the polo ground, which is 300 yards long and 160 yards wide, with 10-inch high boards down each side.

Andrew and fellow recruit Richard are marking each other, and despite being newcomers to the sport, the game is fast and furious. Peter shouts instructions to Andrew and appears pleased with his protégé.

After his team suffers a respectable defeat in the first chukka, Andrew swaps to another pony, Zulu, and Peter gives his team-mate advice.

"You're doing exceptionally well in terms of the riding, and are getting to the ball with ease, but you forget to swing the stick and hit the ball," he explains, with glaring honesty.

The players start again and Peter yells "stick up!" as Andrew challenges Richard for the ball.



Andrew goes in for the attack.



The riders charge across the field to take possession of the ball.



After a third change, onto spirited mare Rosie, Andrew is clearly becoming a proactive player and a valuable team-mate, and produces some powerful, offside forehead shots. Although the result of the friendly game does not appear to be in Andrew's team's favour, no-one is really sure of the final score and Andrew is deemed to have excelled himself on the field.

"After just a few hours of tuition, Andrew has done very well; he really took to this style of riding, and it is just his timing that needs a bit of work – it is all about practice," says Peter.

#### Letting off steam!

Andrew is clearly taken with polo, but did it live up to his expectations? "I really enjoyed the game, although it was physically hard work," he says. "The hardest thing was getting positioned to hit the ball at speed – my last horse, Rosie, was very fast and seemed to chase the ball, so it made my job easier. I thought polo would be hard to master, but I didn't really anticipate all the tactics involved, and everything you have to think about at the same time.

"Peter was a great teacher – to the point, but with a good way of making you understand. I am used to the relatively slow discipline of dressage, so the best bit for me was having a good charge about!"

## The history of polo

Polo originated in Asia around 2,000 years ago and is now played in more than 77 countries worldwide. Each player is handicapped from minus two up to 10 goals (the latter being the domain of the world's top players), and the collective handicap of the four players is the team's handicap; therefore, if the four players have a handicap of two goals each, the team handicap is eight.

In 1983, the Federation of International Polo (FIP) was created to enhance the stature of polo and ultimately return the sport to the Olympic Games.

Ascot Park is the oldest polo training centre in the UK, and the largest training academy in the world.

"You don't have to be an accomplished rider to learn how to play polo," the club's Lucy Northmore explains. "Over 85 per cent of those taught at Ascot Park have never sat on a horse before! We are a training centre with a pool of school ponies disciplined and trained to teach newcomers how to play polo."

● Tel: (01276) 858 545, or visit: [www.polo.co.uk](http://www.polo.co.uk) for details of Ascot Park's 'Discover Polo' lessons.

● Visit The Hurlingham Polo Association, the governing body of polo, at: [www.hpa-polo.co.uk](http://www.hpa-polo.co.uk)

● To purchase a copy of Peter Grace's book *Polo*, with a foreword by HRH the Prince of Wales, tel: (01276) 858 545, or email: [info@polo.co.uk](mailto:info@polo.co.uk). The book costs £49.50, which includes postage and packing (ISBN 087605954X).

## ONES TO WATCH

Each month, we showcase an up and coming rider and ask them some probing questions. This month, event rider **Louise Lyons** explains why four-star events beckon

#### What do you enjoy most about eventing?

I love eventing, as it is a partnership between horse and rider – being successful requires training to develop trust and confidence from your horse. Watching Ginny Elliot when I was younger made me want to event. Ginny was poetry in motion across country.

#### Which of your horses should we look out for in 2006?

That would be Watership Down. We competed at Punchestown International CCI\*\*\* three-day event in May and came third, and hopefully I will take him to the Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials in September – our first four-star event. Watership Down and I have also been invited to training sessions as a potential for the World Equestrian Games (WEG) on the Irish team [Louise's parents are from Ireland]. He doesn't have any quirks, but has extremely long legs!

#### What moment has given you most pride?

I felt proud to be awarded the Caroline Pratt Memorial Fund bursary in 2005 – Caroline died at Burghley Horse Trials in 2004 and the fund was set up with money donated after the tragedy. I admired her for getting to the top by hard work, determination and talent. She was brilliant at producing youngsters through the grades – winning it meant a lot to me.

#### If you could compete any horse, dead or alive, which would it be?

My horse Cava Light. He was the most talented horse I have ever sat on – I took him to Advanced-level eventing when he was just seven. He tragically died of a brain aneurism in 2002, aged eight. I was heartbroken. If he had lived, I would probably have achieved most of my goals by now! I knew nothing then, and he was just amazing. I wish he had fulfilled his talent. If not him, then Ian Stark's late horse, Murphy Himself – wow, what a horse!

#### Let us know why people should sponsor you!

I'm now at a stage in my career where I can promote products brilliantly for a sponsor. I'm young and ambitious, and out there to be seen!

#### Tell us about the TopSpec Scholarship...

Winning this scholarship in 2006 has been a real bonus. TopSpec has recognised how tough it is to succeed in eventing if you are self-financed and work for yourself. Through it, I receive feed for two horses, clothing for horse and rider for a year and received £500-worth of cross-country training.

Louise Lyons is based on the Wirral in Cheshire. She runs her own yard, with 15 horses – some her own and others she has in for schooling. Louise also trains other event riders and takes Pony Club clinics.

"I started riding aged three," says Louise. "I was successful in working hunter pony classes, and was on the England working hunter pony team. I also won the intermediate working hunter pony class at the Royal International Horse Show on Dartans Dorrindi.

"I moved on to eventing and compete horses from Pre-Novice to Advanced. I am also a British Show Pony Society Panel working hunter pony judge."



#### Tell us about your trainers...

I have trained with Tuffy Tilly for nine years. Tuffy taught me how to produce event horses that jump boldly, while still thinking, and her groundwork sessions are legendary! I have also had help from Ros Morgan, who has helped me become more confident as a rider.

#### What are your competitive plans for the future?

I'd like to reach four-star level in 2006 and 2007 with Watership Down and Venividivi. I also want to attract enthusiastic owners who will purchase youngsters that I can produce to four-star level. I know where to find super young Irish horses, but my finances are very limited!

#### If you could purchase anything to assist your career, what would it be?

A whole range of Stubben saddles. They are brilliant for cross-country and show jumping. Also Cavallo leather riding boots – I live in mine!