

Our intrepid improver Carlie Trotter (-2) works her way around the UK's polo clubs

Heath in good health

Carlie Trotter travels to Binfield Heath on the Oxfordshire/Berkshire border and finds new polo manager Pedro De Lamare making great progress during his first year in the job

"Water, need water," I croak following a closely-fought match on the Polo Fix team at Binfield Heath's summer festival. "So that'll be a Quilmes then..." comes the devil-on-my-shoulder that is club member and my teammate for the day Matias Carrique (3).

One could be forgiven for thinking the day before the Cartier International at nearby Guards would be a quiet one here, but tournaments have been oversubscribed at Binfield all season and today is the biggest party of all. So a Quilmes beer it is.

Winning by half a goal seems particularly lucky against West Wycombe's JJ Spark – and perhaps unfair since I'm borrowing his ponies – but Matias's equine acrobatics and Erik Anderson's team tactics happily earned us the bubbly and a comfy spot watching the 6-goal and 8-goal. I'm so chuffed with my chukka on 18-year-old mare Tocassa that I have to be restrained from squeezing her into my car – I'm not the first to ask if she's for sale and won't be the last.

West Wycombe and Kirtlington players are regular visitors and the



Finalists in the 8-goal Coppid Owls Tomaz Fernandez, Tristan Phillimore, Jason Norton and Greg Keyte and Black Bear's Henrietta Seligman, Garth Fraser, Simon Keyte and Davy Baxter with Lady Phillimore (centre). Below, 0-goal action

closeness of the clubs means JJ is on speed dial for pony hire.

Since most members live or rent property locally the club does not want for spectators, including the dog walkers that happen on us when roaming the heath. The cheers erupt loudest from Henrietta Seligman's corner as she helps Black Bears to a 5-4½ victory against Coppid Owls/Waimai in her first run out for the legendary team. Having a high goal

team down the road has certainly benefitted the minus-goalers here, as players with but a few years in the saddle ride out confidently against the likes of seven-goaler Simon Keyte.

Club deputy chairman Michael Mylonas says the connection also helps members source the best ponies, just before he scores with one of the best nearside backhands I've ever seen to win the inaugural Firefly Partners Cup.



The club will no doubt attract even more pros next season after investing "a river of money" in irrigation earlier this year. Visiting pro Rafael Villela Rosa says: "I'm really impressed with how the grounds have improved recently – and, once they're sanded, even more pros will come."

When commentator Jamie Hayward takes a break to sample the finest empanadas this side of Tucumán province from the Portena food stall, member Clive Posselt gladly grabs the mike. "Oh dear that's a mess," he says of one botched goal, then "we're in for some entertainment folks, this pony likes to buck."

The chuckles on the sideline show that this is a club of longtime pals. Lord Phillimore, who owns the estate and chairs the HPA Umpires and Rules Committee, is thrilled to see his club re-energised after a couple of quiet years and shares a giggle with me as his son Tristan (2) wwgives an appealing player the run-around.

I'm reminded that if anyone misbehaves

here there'll be an enquiry on the spot, unless it's at the after-party.

With 90 people inbound for an evening of asado grub, dancing and more Pimms than you can shake a stick at I'm put to work wrapping cutlery. Organiser Rona Posselt says: "I love arranging relaxed shindigs where the kids, grooms and non-playing members can all enjoy themselves."

The club is re-energised and has invested heavily in irrigation for its two fields

Proceeds go to the local air ambulance, which Rona is all too familiar with after breaking her neck back in 2007.

Just as I'm donning my dancing shoes the Phillimores beat me to it and put us all to shame with an expert and very energetic swing dance. When I tear myself away at 1am the party looks as if it's just hotting up, and I think the same goes for the club. ☒

Soundbites from the sidelines

Pedro De Lamare - polo manager

"Members have been really supportive in my first season here so we've been able to get lots more polo happening and installed an irrigation system that will encourage more pros to come. We won't stop doing zero-goal but the plan is to take our polo a step higher than what's played at West Wycombe and Fifield, focusing more on six-goal tournaments. I'm working on establishing a polo school and some club hirelings for next year and I'm lucky the family that owns the land gives the club their full backing."



Michael Mylonas - founding member

"I used to play away a lot but now the polo here is so good that I hardly bother. We've got strong links with nearby Black Bears so the guys who look after the team's young horses come here for 2-goal chukkas at the beginning of the season and that improves your game enormously. We try to accommodate pros who have multiple games a day in the match schedule and limit tournaments to six teams so that the grounds don't get killed. Most members live locally for jobs in London and we have an alcohol licence so it's quite sociable."



Louise Goodenough - spectator

"After doing an introduction day at Ascot Park I looked up my nearest club and realised I could walk here from Harpsden with my dog. I've always been horsey and used to go to Ham to watch games when I lived in London so to find a club on my doorstep is a dream. At the moment I'm a chef for a local family but the next step is to find a family with polo ponies who wants a chef-come-groom. I can't wait to get some lessons but I suppose I'd better start saving for the membership fees."



Binfield Heath

Vital statistics

Playing members 44

Non-playing members Sponsors and polo aficionados of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon set

Facilities Two full-size irrigated grounds, sideline food stall and bar, shaded pony lines, comfy seating and loos.

Location Set in a tree-lined clearing on the picturesque Phillimore estate, the club is accessed via Emmer Green Road coming from Reading and five minutes from Henley-on-Thames. Down the road from the Glass & Bottle pub, 10 minutes from Reading train station (25 minutes from London Paddington), and within 40 minutes of Guards, RCBPC and West Wycombe.

Philosophy Competitive weekend polo for low goalers on the way up

Running the show Since moving the defunct Checkendon Polo Club to Binfield Heath in 1994 and retiring from polo himself in 2001, land owner Francis Phillimore has kept a keen steward's eye on proceedings. In their first season at Binfield, Pedro De Lamare and partner Karyn Shuter have revitalised the club calendar in their respective roles of manager and secretary with the help of a proactive committee. Other key players behind the scenes include chairman Sir Michael Rake and events queen Rona Posselt.

Crowd Mostly local high-flyers with their own ponies, the club also attracts a large Brazilian contingent and high-goal players looking for a practice run out. Supporting pros include John Paul Clarkin (8) and Simon Keyte (7).

Seasonal highlight The club's annual charity day brings as many members as possible together for a pre-Cartier party, as well as popular faces like famed equine artist Elizabeth Armstrong.

Livery Local stabling can be arranged through the club, the polo manager is happy to advise on this. There are plans to build more stables on the estate and corals for visiting teams.

Membership Adult membership is £1,000, £350 for professionals. Pony hire with nearby Green Point Polo (greenpointpolo@yahoo.co.uk) is available. Tournament entry starts at £350 per home team up to 4-goal, increasing to £550 per visiting team for 8-goal.

Contact bhpcmanager@gmail.com; call polo manager Pedro De Lamare on 07792 211259; for more information about the club visit their website at www.binfieldheathpoloclub.co.uk