



# Best Ponies



*Horsemanship is an essential focus of Team USA*

*The United States Polo Association established Team USA in 2009 to grow and sustain the sport of polo by identifying talented young American players and providing opportunities to grow their abilities.*

*By Madison Darbyshire*

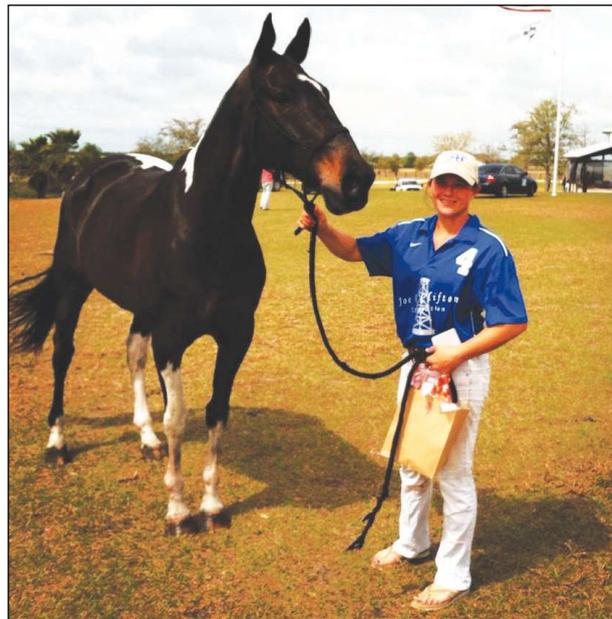
In Adam Snow and Shelley Onderdonk's book, "Polo Life," Adam's No. 1 piece of advice to the aspiring polo player is to learn to ride well. For Team USA players, this emphasis on horsemanship is the same. Players maintain and train their own strings, and many work to breed, make and train horses for others.

By providing training opportunities, year-long support and connections to the best trainers in the world, Team USA helps teach its players the skills to become good riders and to make good horses into a great horses.

Horsemanship, and the emphasis on making and finding great horses in order to play great polo, is an essential focus of the Team USA program.

"There is a common denominator when it comes to people who are successful in the highest levels of polo, and that is horsemanship," said Kylie Sheehan, Team USA coordinator and team member since 2013. Team USA strives to instill this in every player who comes through the program, through mentorships with well-known green horse trainers and by providing access to continuing education. "We hope they will take these skills to make and maintain the best horses they can, and then pass them down to the next generation of players."

The payoff of their work comes when Team USA players make a sale, raise



*Toyota, owned by Steven Armour and played by Tiamo Hudspeth, was awarded best playing pony at the 2015 Tabebuia Cup ladies tournament at Port Mayaca Polo Club.*

their handicap or receive an award. For many players, the best reward for the hard work that goes into making a horse is felt when a horse receives the most prestigious award given for its performance in a match, the best playing pony award.

To be named best playing pony, a horse has to excel in a game above and beyond other horses on the field and have an outsized impact on the game. For a best playing pony to stand out, the key is consistency. Judges look for horses that are well rounded, who consistently run well, stop well, accelerate well, take off past the other horses, recover quickly, win all their bumps and get

their riders to key plays.

Said Tiamo Hudspeth, Team USA 2012, "It can be on the losing team as well. A best playing pony is a horse that really made it difficult for the other team." These are the qualities that Team USA member Mason Wroe's mare Basil exhibited to earn her a best playing pony award at the H. Ben Taub Memorial Championships at the Houston Polo Club. Mason works hard alongside his wife Kaylee Wroe to keep his string in top form, working with each horse individually almost everyday.

A best playing pony's consistency should also extend beyond a single tournament. "If you're playing a best playing pony, it's not out of nowhere. It's a horse that is consistently playing at a higher level," said Isabella Wolf, Team USA 2012.

The most difficult part of describing a best playing pony is what players call the x-factor, the quality of a horse that you cannot quite describe that sets them apart from the others. Hudspeth, who made horses at the A-F Pony Farm and now raises and trains polo ponies for San Ysidro Ranch in Texas, said, "Most of the horses are going to be great, especially in 12- or 14-goal polo. Five of the horses will be about the same, but there's something special about certain horses, I don't know if you can really put a name on it." Team USA member Felipe Viana, 5 goals, was able to find that special horse last year in



*Mason Wroe's Basil took the best playing pony award at the 12-goal H. Ben Taub Memorial at Houston Polo Club in Houston, Texas.*

Wellington, Florida. He made an investment on a mare named Grey Goose, which paid off when she received best playing pony while Felipe was playing in Santa Barbara this summer. Felipe has worked hard to continue to add these kind of horses to his string to give him a group of horses that will raise his level of play and enable him to be competitive in the highest levels of polo in the United States.

"The stars have to align," said Steven Krueger, Team USPA 2010.

"A lot of what goes into making a best playing pony is the prep before the game: feeding, exercise, regimen, riding the horse well, and not overusing it in practice," said Wolf who makes polo ponies in Virginia with her operation, Wolf Pack Ponies. She now has 11 horses, including a foal out of her lifelong best playing pony, Esperanza, and Joel Baker's Morningstar, the sire of Cambiaso's best playing pony from the 2015 Argentine Open, Chocolate.

Consistency of care is important, said Wolf, "You have to treat all your horses like a best playing pony if you want any to play like a best playing pony." Team USPA worked to support Wolf when she began making her green horses, helping to provide her with facilities in Aiken, South Carolina.

For horse operations large and small, receiving a best playing pony for one of

their horses can make a big difference. "It's not going to hurt the value, that's for sure," said Krueger. He said winning best playing pony is a point of reference, a solid data point that you can go back to. There are not many concrete points in selling a horse and a best playing pony award is one of them—that the horse is recognized by other people in polo as playing well. The meaning of a best playing pony award varies widely by the level of the tournament, said Wolf. "It gives validation for the price you're asking. It means people other than you recognize how good the horse is."

Winning best playing pony can also enhance a horse's reputation as a horse that is versatile under different riders. "A true best playing pony is a horse that other people can ride as well," said Wolf. The last best playing pony Wolf won was on a horse named Maverick owned by Carlos Galindo, in Midland, Texas. "It's a feather in your cap when you can hand a horse to someone else and they get a best playing pony."

"What I really love in the sport is making horses who are going to play under 5-goalers and that are going to win under them," said Hudspeth. "Basically, it pats me on the back for my operation and routine and work I've put in. I'd be even more proud if it won under some high-goaler [than with me]. But either way is nice," she adds,

laughing.

Winning a best playing pony award means more to these players than the accolades of MVP or other player awards. A player puts a lot of time and energy into building a string of horses, said Krueger, so winning a best playing pony and receiving outside recognition that you have a good horse is as much or more of an honor to win best playing pony than MVP, especially if it's your horse.

For Wolf, a best playing pony award is an opportunity to recognize the horses on a team for the athletes they are. "Polo ponies rarely get the recognition that they deserve, so it's nice to get them that recognition." In the end, she says. "They only get what we give them."

The thrill of the game rests on the horses, and a best playing pony represents the best of it. Said Hudspeth, "When you're on the best horse on the field it's a pretty incredible feeling. You feel like you can go anywhere." ♦

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