

LORD  
IT

HOW TO

LOOK

COOL

WHILST

LEARNING

POLO

very

A Modern Approach to  
a Traditional Game

BY STEVE THOMPSON

# Table of Contents

Foreword	
Preface	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
The Difference Between Kids And Grown-Ups	6
Physics!	12
<b>PART I: <del>RIDING GUIDELINES</del></b>	<b>15</b>
	<i>riding like a pro</i>
The Polo Pony	17
Learning How to Ride	29
Balance	30
<i>Exercise 1: The Pyramid</i>	32
Stirrups	33
Accommodating Motion	35
Steering	40
<i>Exercise 2: Turning in the Pelvis</i>	44
Basic Polo Riding	47
Walk	48
Trot	49
<i>Exercise 3: Power Trotting</i>	54
Canter	58
<i>Exercise 4: Trot to Canter Transitions</i>	62
Transitions	62
Advanced Polo Riding	65
The Half Seat	66
<i>Exercise 5: The Half Seat</i>	68
<i>Exercise 6: Accelerate / Decelerate</i>	70
Efficient Turning	74
<i>Exercise 7: Circles within Circles</i>	75
Changing Direction	76
<i>Exercise 8: Changing Direction</i>	78
Versatility	80
<i>Exercise 9: Sink left / Sink Right</i>	82
The Tube	84
<i>Exercise 10: Chin on Chest</i>	88

## winning at swinging

<b>PART II: <del>HITTING SUCCESSFULLY</del></b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Mallet Essentials</b>	<b>93</b>
The Grip	94
<i>Exercise 11: Balancing the Mallet</i>	96
The Pendulum	98
The Plane	106
The Shots	113
Intention	120
<b>The Smiley Technique &amp; Grid</b>	<b>127</b>
<i>Exercise 12: The Smiley Technique</i>	128
The Smiley Grid	130
<i>Exercise 13: The Smiley Grid</i>	132
The Nearside in Isolation	134
<b>The Hitting Process</b>	<b>139</b>
The Checklist	139
Perception and Height Deficits	141
Making Contact	142
<i>Exercise 14: Working Backwards</i>	142
Hitting Discipline	144
Accuracy On Distance	145
<i>Exercise 15: The Clock</i>	146
Power Hitting, Penalties and Pre-Swings	149
<i>Exercise 16: The Pre-Swing</i>	154
Pitch-Side Training	161
	scoring on and off
<b>PART III: <del>APPLICATION</del> the field</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>Stick and Balling and Hitting Diagnostics</b>	<b>169</b>
<i>Exercise 17: Stick and Ball</i>	171
<b>Playing</b>	<b>177</b>
Riding Off	184
Hooking	185
<b>Problem Solving</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>Stretching</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>And Finally...</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>216</b>



# The ~~Polo Pony~~ superhero

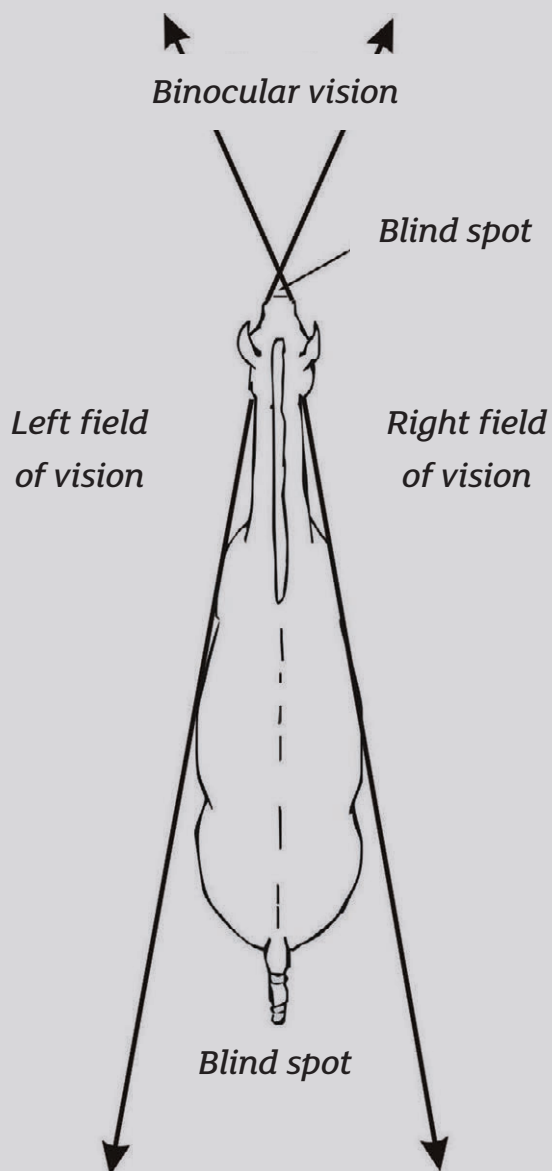
**DEFINITION: YOUR BIG FURRY MATE WHO CAN TAKE YOU FROM ZERO TO HERO AND KEEP YOU SAFE AT THE SAME TIME - IF YOU LET HIM!**

By their very nature, horses are flight animals and they run away from pain or fear. They don't like noise or chaos and are fearful of unfamiliar things. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, unlike us they don't have the ability to rationalise. Understanding and accepting this should just make us marvel all the more at their absolute courage and trust in their rider in any equestrian sport, but especially polo.

The player/horse combination should be a harmonious one with clearly defined instructions and empathy from player to horse. The fact that any horse allows you on its back in the first place would suggest he



**DUPLICATION PROHIBITED**  
by copyright holder



is already submissive and therefore subservient, so he just needs clear direction. If he wasn't keen to please, and he didn't want you on top (as I'm sure some have already experienced), you wouldn't be in situ for very long, that's for sure!

Considering that once you are mounted, a horse cannot actually see you, the fact that he completes his job at all and with such apparent ease becomes all the more astonishing. A horse has monocular and binocular vision so he is blind to you for the best part of the riding scenario. Quite a statement when you consider what you are expecting him to do, all with chaotic, inconsistent instructions from us as players.

The next thing to really consider is how he does anything at all - and by that, I mean technically and mechanically. All horses are individuals, so we can only answer that one when we strip him of all the man-made aids of saddles, reins, bits and bridles and observe how he actually functions free from any human interference.

The way any horse gallops freely around a field and stops abruptly at a fence before turning and accelerating off is specific to that individual animal. As trainers and players, it is our job to identify a horse's unique movement, to harness his naturally efficient way of doing things and then ask him to do it on command. Only then can we look at improving his efficiency and work towards improving performance.

*The photos below demonstrate the horse stopping naturally without interference from the rider. Note how low the shoulders have dropped - quiet contrary to the traditional 'make it sit down' attitude and thought process. It is our job to identify a horse's unique individual movement, to harness his naturally efficient way of doing things and then ask him to do it on command.*



## TEAM CHAT

Consider for a moment that a friend has jumped onto your shoulders and is making you run around whilst leaning off, swinging a mallet, kicking you in the ribs and pulling you in the mouth when he wants you to change direction, slow down or stop. Difficult, I think, to stay focussed on the job whilst trying to keep you both upright and balanced. **Now consider the whole scenario again, but doing it with blinkers on.**

**DUPLICATION PROHIBITED**  
by copyright holder

Only when you accept the extraordinary display of patience, tolerance, and trust that a polo pony (or any horse for that matter) shows will you ever truly aspire to ride with deserved respect and a real desire to constantly improve your horsemanship.



*The great players seem to manoeuvre effortlessly around the pitch due to a lack of interference and minimal but accurate communication to the horse.*

The great high goal players seem to manoeuvre effortlessly around the pitch without the drama often seen in low goal polo, and the majority of this skill is down to lack of interference and minimal but accurate information communicated from the rider. Energy conservation is top of the list for good players and the ability to ride efficiently means barely any unnecessary stopping, turning, or galloping; instructions to the horse are almost invisible to the naked eye if the player is indeed a true horseman.

Polo is the strange equine discipline that allows you to effectively 'hire a car for a couple of laps around the circuit' but using that analogy, no one would expect every car to be the same. To take it further, some cars have manual, automatic, or tiptronic gear boxes. Some are heavier on steering and brakes, but generally all will have a steering wheel, a gear box, brakes, and wheels. So the same analogy applies to the horse: whilst the golden rules are all underlying, the trick to riding or playing an unfamiliar polo pony is never assume anything.





*Polo differs from other equestrian disciplines in that it is much more of a consideration of **balance** and **versatility** in the saddle, as opposed to conventional riding whereby the horse is driven forward by the rider's seat and back.*







A polo pony will never subject itself to more pain or discomfort than necessary if it understands what it is being asked to do. So quite simply, **ask**: only then are you in a fair position to apply additional artificial aids.

Now unlike many other equestrian disciplines in which the rider operates the horse by driving it forward with their seat and back, riding for polo is much more of a consideration of balance and versatility in the saddle. Having said that, and not wanting to point out the obvious, a polo pony is still a horse, therefore the basic fundamentals of equine movement really do apply.

When we strip away the image of flying sticks and racing around at speed, if watched in slow motion, the intricate polo pony manoeuvres and requirements on the pitch are actually all unadulterated dressage movements. The advanced manoeuvres of counter canter, flying change, and half pass are all clearly visible. They are just executed in many cases very quickly.



*The advanced manoeuvres of counter canter, flying change, and half pass are all clearly visible. They are just executed in many cases very quickly.*





# DRESSAGE MESSAGE

*dressage, n*

*Pronunciation: / dre-'säzh /*

The art of riding and training a horse in a manner that develops obedience, flexibility, and balance:

**ORIGIN**

*1930s: from French, literally 'training', from dresser 'to train'.*

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

1



2



5



6



It has been said that people take up equestrian disciplines such as dressage because they like horses, whereas people aspire to play polo for its sporting nature. However, as both activities require a horse, it is interesting to note that dressage, as the purest form of all equestrian disciplines, is the one that truly demonstrates a harmonised partnership between horse and rider.

To reinforce this *dressage message*, here you can see one of my Academy ponies executing

and mirroring an advanced canter pirouette in sync with a top international horse and rider combination. The polo pony I am riding has never been trained how to perform this, but is able to mirror it simply because all horses basically function in the same way.


Whilst speed is often required in polo, **rhythm**, **tempo**, **control**, and **balance** are at its very core. Note how precise, accurate, and synchronised her footfalls are during every stride in the sequence.



Amateur polo players often mock dressage as an equestrian discipline...

**Pro polo players treat it with infinite respect.**



A photograph of a white tent on a grassy field. In the background, several people are standing, some in formal attire. The scene is outdoors with trees in the distance. The text is overlaid on the lower left of the image.

When God created the horse,  
he built it to ensure maximum  
efficiency.



DUPLICATION PROHIBITED  
by copyright holder





