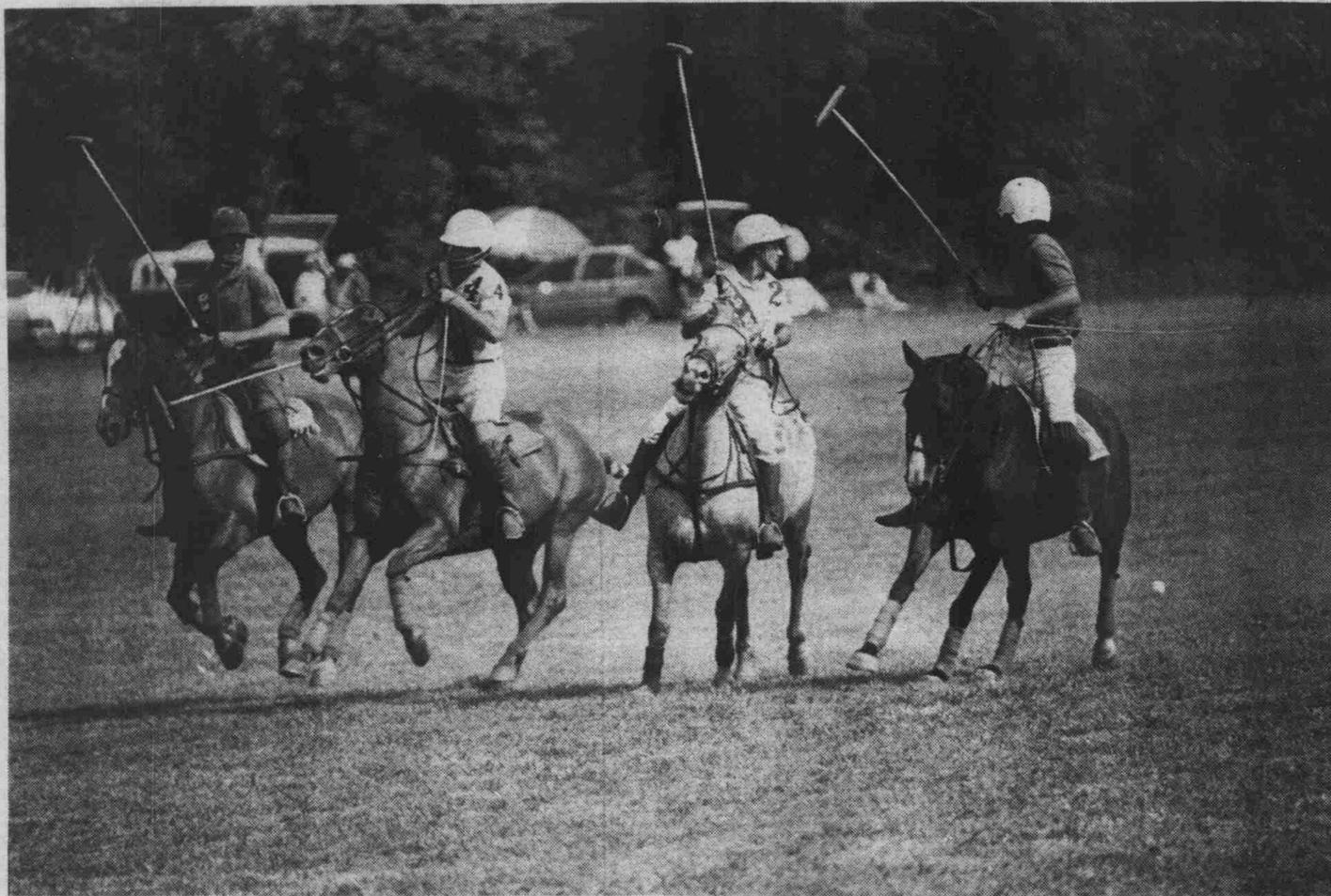


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fed ice by polo player to lower its body temperature cause horses to be susceptible to heat exhaustion.



'Elite sport' a challenge to both mount and rider

By JOEL KATZENSTEIN
and SCOTT BOWER
Tar Heel Staff Writers

One doesn't hear much about polo these days. There's an occasional news piece about Prince Charles falling off his pony at the Royal Grounds in London. And, of course, there's the apparel and cologne labels made famous by Ralph Lauren.

For the most part, however, polo isn't exactly high priority news for *Sports Illustrated* or ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. Even ESPN, a pay cable sports station that gives coverage to almost every sport known to man, rarely, if ever, mentions the sport of kings.

This really doesn't come as much of a surprise when one considers what goes into the game both physically and financially. For starters, the rules tend to be very complicated. Only four people can play at any one time on one team and the person who has the straightest path toward the ball has the legal right of way. Such strategy isn't always easily determined when the player and the pony are racing at speeds that often exceed 35 mph.

Needless to say, it is also a real trick to stay on an animal that constantly darts across the field in quest of a ball that isn't much bigger than an ordinary baseball. One local team, Polo South, recently played a match against a team called Washington, and as an incentive to remain in

the saddle, anyone falling off his mount had to buy the team a case of beer.

Danger is present for the mount as well as the rider. At a recent match at Quail Roost in Durham spectators witnessed the near death of one of the ponies. A knowledgeable spectator surmised that the pony almost died from acute stress and heat exhaustion. Especially active and competitive ponies are kept on a high-protein diet which makes them susceptible to high blood pressure and heat exhaustion.

The pony at Quail Roost was well-attended to as hundreds of people rushed forward with ice and cold water to cool the animal. Despite the admirable cooperation of the audience, it was not easy to overlook the fact that the animals are pushed (often beyond their physical limits), and a question of cruelty and inhumanity in the name of good, clean fun came to mind. Some observers feel that when an animal is forced to exceed its physical limits the sport ceases to exist. Perhaps that is the reason polo doesn't get much publicity.

Expense is one of the most prohibitive aspects of the sport. Standard equipment includes everything from leather riding boots to a helmet, and mallets can cost anywhere from \$400 to \$800-and-up. However, that doesn't include other essential equipment such as the pony, riding gear and boarding facilities. Then there is training, food, health care, insurance, transportation, grooming and en-

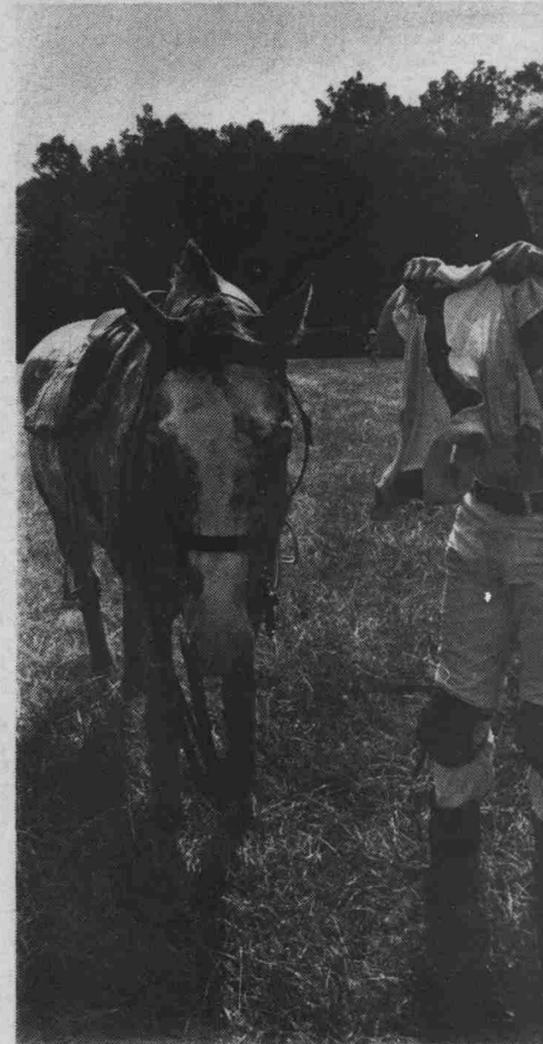
try fees. The total can easily exceed \$100,000 per year.

Therefore, it stands to reason that only the wealthy can afford to participate on the field. For years (since its conception) polo has been known as the sport of the elite. Originally played exclusively by members of royalty, polo is actually derived from the ancient sport of jousting. Nowadays, however, the sport is played by men of almost every description from all over the world.

A day at the polo grounds is an exciting one for the spectators as well as the participants. Southern polo tends to attract people from all walks of life. Aiken, S.C., is known as the polo capital of the South, and it attracts horse lovers both rich and poor.

Cars are driven through the gate openings and parked right up to the field. Tailgate parties of every description take form, and to an unfamiliar passerby, the grounds look more like a large-scale celebration of life than a polo match. Mercedes are parked next to Chevrolets, which are parked next to Rolls Royces, which are parked next to pick-up trucks. . . and although the curiosity seekers are outnumbered 2-to-1 (in most cases), everyone pays the same admission price (usually \$5 per person at one of the local grounds).

For participants, polo can be dangerous and expensive, but spectators are guaranteed a good time whether their interest be ponies or partying.



Tom Smith of Ra up for a polo ma "Bear" looks on. pony is sprayed. Such measures a off the overwork guard their health

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