



Natalie Grancharov Camacho and
Andres Camacho Castilla

Polo for the



Text by JIMMY MAGAHERN ♦ Photos by JILL RICHARDS

On a barren stretch of desert land about 15 miles southwest of Casa Grande, roughly a half-hour drive from the junction where the I-10 between Phoenix and Tucson meets with the I-8 extending west to San Diego, sits a 10-acre patch of lime green Bermuda grass on a property called the Caballeros Field & International Art Park.

It's here where, on most weekends, members of the Arizona Polo Club haul their horses in from all around the state to practice their chukkas, fencing, dribbling, sparring and all of the other intricacies that go into the age-old "sport of kings."

"This is the only full-size field in Arizona for polo," says Diego Fernando Florez, who spends his weekdays as the owner and chief veterinarian at Aztec Animal Hospital and his weekends instructing beginners' clinics at the field. "It's hard to develop a polo club if members don't have a place to enjoy playing."

Florez is one of about 20 members of the club, which was established in 1982 and is perhaps best known as the host club for the annual Bentley Scottsdale Polo Championships each November at WestWorld in Scottsdale. The annual extravaganza, with its lively atmosphere, star players and eclectic sideshow attractions (this year the fare ranged from a Mozart

People

Arizona Polo Club is striving to democratize the 'sport of kings' for everyday desert dwellers



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE:
Diego Fernández Florez

performance by The Phoenix Symphony to DJ-hosted party tents and a dog fashion show), aims to be the Phoenix Open of polo events. This year, the championships drew almost 12,000 fans.

But the club's year-round goal is to attract more Arizonans to participating in polo, which Florez feels should be a natural activity for the state's many horse owners.

"The biggest misconception people have about polo is that it's only for rich people," says Florez, who grew up riding horses in Colombia, South America, where polo was popular but where owning horses – particularly in the mid-90s, when the drug

cartels controlled many cities – signaled wealth that could make the horse owners (and the horses themselves) targets. "But really, the biggest expense is buying a horse, so if you already have a horse in the backyard, you can probably afford to play polo. And in Arizona, you see people with three, five horses in the backyard that aren't doing anything," he says, with a laugh. "They could easily enjoy playing polo."

That goes for the horses as well as their owners. "A lot of horses do enjoy playing the game," the veterinarian says. "They know where the ball is and they most likely can anticipate some plays, so they know

where to go."

Finding a horse that actually enjoys the sport is important. "The horse alone is responsible for about 80 percent of the game," Florez says. "You give the horse cues with your legs, knees and body position, but it's basically like dancing: The horse should follow your lead like a dance partner."

Natalie Grancharov Camacho, an avid polo player who serves as the Arizona Polo Club's secretary, says it helps beginning players if they already know how to ride a horse, but that's not a requirement to join the club.

"I grew up in California around Silicon





Valley, and I didn't grow up around horses," says Camacho, who now works as an engineering manager at Intel's Chandler campus. "But I went to UC Davis, which had a big agriculture school, and they had a polo team there. I just tried out for fun, and I discovered I really loved playing."

After moving to Arizona, Camacho sought out the polo community and discovered the Arizona Polo Club – along with her future husband, Andres Camacho Castilla, another polo enthusiast from Colombia who over the years has become Arizona's top-ranked player. "He's actually a fifth-generation player," Camacho says. "His family is one of the founding families of the club in Bogota, so everybody in his family rides and plays polo."

Like Camacho, Castilla also has a demanding day job, working as a sales executive at Honeywell Aerospace. "For us, this is purely a hobby," she says, noting that many in the club also juggle professional careers along with their

polo-playing weekends. "We have three veterinarians who play in our club, but the rest of us are all in sales, engineering, real estate or other fields."

Camacho also points out that the polo-playing community has become much more diverse than people generally assume. "One of the great things about the Scottsdale Polo Championships event is that it showcases so many different players and talent from all over," she says.

Polo is one of the most inclusive sports for women, with the two sexes competing together on an even playing field. "That's something not a lot of other sports can lay claim to," Camacho says. "Most sports will deliberately create separate women's leagues to make the sport more co-ed, but in polo, men and women naturally play together. We'll hold special women's tournaments just to break things up because otherwise we would be playing with the men all the time!"

Also unique to polo is that amateur

players can play alongside the sport's top professionals, as long as they have the talent (and often the money) to enter a tournament. Recently the United States Polo Association finalized an agreement for the 2019 tournament series that will offer a potential prize of \$1 million. This will actually mark the first time prize money is offered for a polo competition. For the most part, polo has always been played for honor rather than for a prize purse.

"There are so many opportunities in polo that it's almost an unknown and untapped sport, especially for young people," says Camacho. "We have a teenage girl in the club who played in a Polo Party event two or three years ago – a 15-year-old girl running up and down the field with all these professional guys. You never know who the next polo player will be. That's one of the coolest things we've learned with our club." ♦