



David Stirling (#2) leads the charge.

Argentine Open Polo Championship

Story and Photos by David Sartwell and Mary Gayle Sartwell

*Let other people play at other things.
The King of Games is still the Game of
Kings.*

Inscribed on a stone tablet at a polo field in Gilgit, north of Kashmir. Author unknown.

Adolfo Cambiaso, one of the greatest polo players in the history of the sport, riding the horse of the tournament, Chocolate, leaned hard into his right stirrup and drove the ball about 100

yards up the field at a 45-degree angle to the boards. Two great athletes, one human, one equine, fused together in one powerful union, flew across the pitch in an explosion of energy that left the enraptured spectators in awe.



Cambiaso lines up the hit.

Cambiaso getting set for the shot



Seven other man-horse combinations thundered down the 300-yard field in Palermo, Argentina, chasing the ball into the far corner. “Rubbin’ is racin’” as they say in NASCAR. Those boys need to come to Argentina if they want to learn the real meaning of those words. Side by side they drove toward the far rail, trying to ride off their opponents, horses leaning into each other at full gallop, triangles of power pushing to create that space that would allow their rider to have the line to the ball.

The spectators were spellbound by this display of artistry: full-throated flashes of brilliance of speed and balance played out on a pitch that would make any PGA greenskeeper proud. Although the rules are there to prevent collisions, nothing prevents these athletes from flexing their muscle when they are jockeying for position. And

the referees let them play.

Every polo match the spectators had witnessed before was, in retrospect, a schoolyard game between children. Here on the field known around the world as The Cathedral, the 120th Argentine Open Polo Championship game featured the best of both players and ponies that Argentina had to offer. And the best were spectacular.

The tournament started with eight teams with handicaps between 30 and 40 divided into two groups. They played a round-robin to advance to the finals. Everyone anticipated that La Dolfina (39), with their legendary veteran Cambiaso, and Ellerstina (39) led by their young gun Fecundo would meet in the championship game. After all, the two teams had the most 10-rated players in the field, had contested for the crown in the last six finals matches

(2007-2012), and had been the finalists in the last two triple-crown events.

However, in the upset of the year, Alegria beat Ellerstina in the semi-finals. The Alegria team consisted of Pablo Pieres (8), Hilario Ulloa (9), Lucas Monteverde (9) and the Canadian Frederick Mannix (8) for a team total of only 34. With Mannix playing solid defense and Ulloa and Monteverde controlling the midfield, Pieres, clearly the best player in this tournament, played the semi-final as if on fire, displaying both horsemanship and stick-handling ability that drove his team beyond its rating level. In the other semi-final match, La Dolfina, manned by the afore-mentioned Cambiaso (10), Pablo MacDonough (10), David Sterling (9), and Sebastian Merlos (9), substituting for the injured Juan Martin Nero (10), had little trouble dispatching La Natividad, setting up the Cinderella final game between a 34 and 38.

The first chukker of the championship game opened with superb runs and horsemanship. Although the play was a little erratic with some overruns and misses one might expect from the adrenaline rush of the opening stanza, the crowd was treated to a magnificent display of talent. At 1:27 Cambiaso, trying to win his 10th championship, scored on a foul, but Pieres of Alegria tied it up just 90 seconds later. Cambiaso closed out the first with a goal at 5:26 giving La Dolfina the lead of 2-1.

In the second chukker Cambiaso scored twice and MacDonough once to give La Dolfina a 5-1 lead at the 4:36 mark. It looked as though the favorites were just too much for the underdogs. But Pieres and his mates were not to be dispatched so easily. Riding the powerful Escondido Emper, he gave the Alegria crowd something to cheer about when their hero scored two goals in 90 seconds to end the chukker with the score 5-3.

The heart and soul of the Alegria team proved how valuable he was in the third chukker. Riding Don Urbano Vivas



Frederick Mannix drives the ball.

out of Vasco Mambo and Rengo Cholula, Piers scored the first two goals to bring the game to a tie at 5-5. The Alegria sideline went crazy as only Argentina polo fans can do. Songs rang out, flags were waved and cheers filled the stadium. But that was nothing compared to the celebration that erupted when, at 6:28 aboard Don Urbano Vasco Luz, Pieres scored again to push the Cinderella team on top 6-5. They had held the favorites scoreless so far in the chukker and their leader had tallied five straight goals! However, MacDonough scored the final goal of the period for La Dolfina, making it 6-6.

The fourth chukker was the best of the tournament. With power and athleticism underneath and grace and skill on top, these horse-and-ride combinations simply soared over the field, hooves touching the ground only occasionally as if only to remind you that they were real. Their muscles bulging under a glistening skin that looked like it

Monteverde leads Stirling to the ball.





La Dolfina celebrates its victory with a champagne bath.

was two sizes too small, these thousand-pound hummingbirds hovered over the ball for a moment and then, when it squirted out of the scrum, darted away, covering the whole 300-yard field in seconds. And, at full speed, the players leaned down and drove the ball with long graceful strokes that would have made Tiger Woods proud.

La Dolfina was not to be pushed aside by these upstarts and Alegria wanted to prove it was no accident that it was here in the final. It was as if the first three chukkers were just a warm-up. Each stable brought out the best horses they had to offer, and the riders played as if they knew this was their time. Cambiaso scored first making it 7-6, but the inexhaustible Pieres fired back to tie it again. Back and forth the battle went. The crowd was going crazy. Pelon Stirling scored for LaDolfina one minute later, but the amazing Pieres made it 8-8 at the end of the first half.

In the fifth chukker La Dolfina began to show why it was the favorite. With superior horse power, they started to pull

away. The foul differential was too much. Alegria had five to just one for its opponent. Although Cambiaso missed three of them, it was 10-9 at the end of five and 11-9 at the end of six. Now Alegria had to press to catch up. Tired horses and players started to foul more often and the score reflected that. It was 13-10 at the end of 7. And, finally, it ended 16-11.

La Dolfina won the 2013 Argentina Open Polo Championship and became only the fifth team in the history of the game to win the triple crown, having taken the Totugas and Hurlingham Opens earlier in the year.

No one who saw this spectacle went away disappointed. It was the best polo played anywhere in the world. Pieres proved that Cambiaso and Fecundo have another contender for best on the pitch, but the La Dolfina team showed why 38 does usually beat 34.

Dr. David and Mary Gayle Sartwell are an award-winning writing and photography

Stars of the Open



Chocolate, ridden by La Dolfina star Adolfo Cambiaso, was awarded the Lady Susan Townley Cup as the best horse in the tournament. He is an off-the-track-bred Thoroughbred that was bought for a polo pony by Ken Berry of the Santa Barbara Polo Club.

Pablo Pieres, the hero of the Alegria Sancor Seguros, captured the Gonzalo Heguys award for being Most Valuable Player of the finals. He also received the top scorer trophy for his 42 goals. Given his performance during the tournament, it should be only a matter of time before his handicap (8) rises.

Adolfo Cambiaso earned the MVP for the tournament and was judged to be the best mounted player for the series as well.

La Dolfina was undefeated through the high season with 11 consecutive games. They won the triple crown of Argentine Polo by capturing the Totugas Country Club Open (defeating Ellerstina in a close match 16-14) and the Hurlingham Club Open (once again beating Ellerstina 18-16).

team that have published thousands of articles in both newspapers and magazines. They are outdoor people specializing in adventure travel. Both love travel, bridge, good food and wine, fly fishing and outdoor adventure of any kind.