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# POLO

## South Bay Polo Club

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It's Friday morning at Gilroy's South Bay Polo Club. The horses have just finished running laps around a dirt track that surrounds the lush green playing field. The sandy ground is still damp from the previous night's rain. A peaceful silence hangs in the air for the moment, but come Saturday, the field will erupt with a roar of hooves and the joyful banter of spectators as the afternoon breeze spreads the smoky aroma of barbeque throughout the ranch.

Founded in 2012 by Tim Westin, Francesca Finato, and Santos Arriola, the South Bay Polo Club started as a humble four-member club guided by Westin's vision to bring back affordable polo to the South Bay. Filling in the void left by the closure of Silicon Valley Polo, Westin sought to open a new club at the same site: a horse ranch nestled in the heart of garlic country. Westin hired Finato to run and manage the club, and chose polo veteran Arriola to be the club pro. For a year, the small team worked to restore the overgrown and neglected polo field that had been decommissioned six years earlier. After extensive mowing, seeding, and mulching, the field was back in playing condition. The club hosted its inaugural opening tournament in June 2012 and has continued to be *the* destination for polo enthusiasts from all over the Bay Area. Every year, South Bay Polo hosts a series of interclub tournaments, such as the annual Garlic Cup, that bring players from other clubs throughout California together for a weekend of polo and the club's signature postgame barbeque.

Three years after the club's founding, Finato and Arriola took over at full capacity after Westin moved to Southern California. "It was either we leave or keep it going," Finato recalls, "and it turned into a fun thing we could survive on,

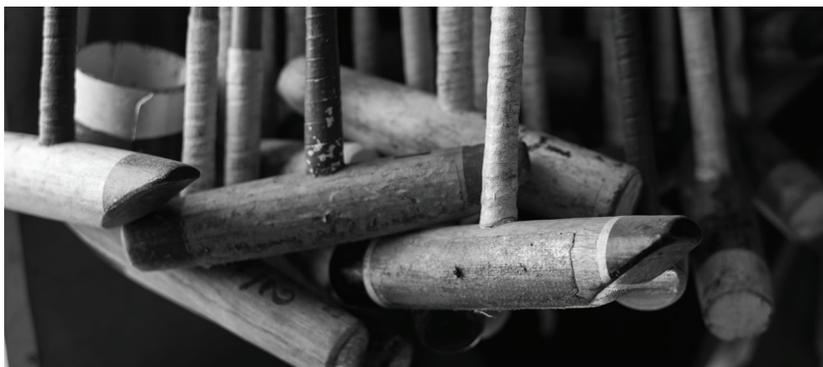
and we never looked back." The responsibility of running the club, teaching lessons, and scheduling tournaments fell to the two of them. In addition to her position as manager, Finato became the club's owner as well. "You learn as you go along," Finato laughs, reflecting on her experience of owning and managing the club, a task she continues to perform with dedication and enthusiasm.

Polo has been a part of Finato's life since high school. At seventeen years old, she began grooming horses at the Menlo Polo Club as a summer job after Tracy Conner, a member of the club, overheard her talking about her love of horses at the deli where she worked. She took her passion to the field during her time at Cal Poly, where she played three years on the women's intercollegiate polo team. After college, Finato worked in construction management, but her love for the game left her longing for greener pastures. "All day, all I could think about was riding and playing polo," she recalls. Fortunately, she found a way back to the field. Local polo pro Erik Wright offered Finato a job at Wrightway Polo, where she learned how to manage a club, exercise horses, and teach a new generation of polo players. The experience of working alongside Wright proved invaluable. "I wouldn't have been able to start [South Bay Polo] without the knowledge I gained from working with him," she says.

The true muscle behind any polo club lies in the horses. South Bay Polo houses over fifty horses, all retired racehorses. When their racing careers come to an end, Finato says, "they still have plenty of life in them." The club reaches out to local racing barns and tracks in the area to recruit potential polo ponies, a term used to describe the small horses used in polo matches. "We want agile, cat-like horses,"



CLUB MEMBER  
*Peter O'Malley*





explains Finato. For that reason, the horses at South Bay Polo are all under 16 hands, or five foot four inches. Once they're off the racetrack, it takes anywhere from a year to two years for them to start playing tournament polo. "Green," or inexperienced, polo ponies still possess the athleticism and raw power of their racing days, but they must learn to rewire some basic instincts in order to compete in polo. They need to abandon the pack mentality of running when all the other horses run, so that the rider can make a controlled pass to another player. Finato calls this "accepting the traffic," a skill she helps green horses practice by using them for umpiring matches. Most horses at South Bay Polo are now experienced polo ponies, having undergone training in the club's early years. Though they have been seasoned by years of on-the-field experience, they still must be walked and exercised twice a day to stay in prime playing condition.

With each horse comes a unique set of abilities and challenges. Finato encourages those who are serious about the game to own their own horse, so they can become familiar with their horse's specific skills and characteristics. After spending enough time riding his or her horse, a rider can quickly determine if the

horse is favoring a certain leg or not feeling well. The inverse is also true: the horse can internalize the subtlety of its rider's saddle movements after enough time with that rider. "When the horse and the player know each other, they know what to expect," says Finato. "It creates this amazing relationship." Despite the benefits of horse ownership, the club recognizes that not everyone can afford to buy their own horse, so they have a rental program available. The club also offers lessons for beginners, taught by Finato and Arriola. Depending on the student's comfort level on horseback, he or she can start playing the same day in a beginners' match, usually held in the club's covered arena, which is smaller and less daunting than the full-scale field.

Because of the limited player base and relative lack of mainstream coverage, polo is often misunderstood. "Most people haven't ever seen a polo match," says South Bay Polo Club member Peter O'Malley, "but it's a contact sport." Watching a chukkar, a seven-and-a-half-minute match, this becomes evident. Once the ball is in motion, the thunderous roar of hooves accompanies a frenzied race to the opposing team's goal. Clouds of dust trail behind a sea of fluidly swinging mallets as

**“WE’RE A PEOPLE’S CLUB. WE WANT EVERYONE  
TO COME OUT AND ENJOY THE SPORT.”** *—Francesca Finato*





the opposing team struggles for possession. Best described as “hockey on horseback,” the game is intensely physical and demands focus and precision, from both rider and horse.

Bringing riders from as far as San Francisco every week, South Bay Polo continues to attract seasoned players and onlookers alike. The club boasts one of the best playing fields in the Bay Area. Every spring, the club applies roughly 250 tons of sand and mulch to the field to keep it soft for the horses and the ball, which rolls best on soft terrain. But it’s more than the field that keeps members and first-timers coming back. “More than anything, I think it’s the social atmosphere here,” Finato observes. “We don’t just play the game, get in our cars, and leave.” Every Saturday, after the morning match, the club hosts a potluck barbeque on the field. As riders and viewers sit with a plate of food and a cold beverage, they relive the excitement of the game together. In addition to the Saturday barbeques, the club also has a tradition of going out for dinner or drinks after their Thursday night matches. The social aspect of the club is essential for Finato. “We’re a people’s club,” she says. “We want everyone to come out and enjoy the sport.”

In the tech-laden environment of the Silicon Valley, where most people are hunched over computers for hours a day, South Bay Polo offers an escape into a different world. “People come here and they can let their minds leave work and let it all go out on the field,” notes Finato, who has seen people speed down to the club from their day job to decompress with a chukkar. For those who don’t want to make the drive down to Gilroy, the club plays every Tuesday in the arena of the Horse Park at Woodside, closer to many riders’ Silicon Valley workplaces. As someone who works in e-commerce, O’Malley recognizes the power of a polo match to clear his head after a deskbound day. “When you’re out there playing, everything else that was on your mind is gone,” he reflects. Racing through the green field on horseback with a panoramic view of the Santa Cruz Mountains and Diablo Range, riders can forget their workplace stress and reenergize themselves with fresh air and a rush of adrenaline. South Bay Polo seeks to extend this experience to everyone. “Our doors are open to everybody all the time,” says Finato. “We’d love it if people came out and swung a leg over a horse for themselves.”

