

POLO & LUXURY

Country Life Magazine



Cartier Queen's Cup Final 2016

Dubai wins Cartier silverware – eighth Queen's Cup triumph for Adolfo Cambiaso

XIA YANG - DIRECTOR OF THE CHINA HORSE INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION

"Our next objective is including polo in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics"



20 RECOMMENDED AND HIGHLY POPULAR SPANISH TAPAS

Travel to the flavour of Spain



CHRISTIE'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY

James Christie: Art of the auction





Sébastien Le Page, owner of Polo Park Zurich

"As much polo as possible,
for all levels"

Situated in the picturesque winelands between Zurich and Winterthur, the Polo Park Zurich has a large international full-sized training field and offers perfect training conditions under the leadership of the Argentinian professionals Francisco and Martin Podesta. With the construction of the club house and 57 boxes, the club now finally plans to implement the extension of its infrastructure which had been planned for more than 10 years. In the interview with the Polo Luxury & Country Life publisher Birgit Hügli-Herrmann, Sébastien Le Page talks about the future of his polo club.



Sébastien Le Page and his wife Morgan van Overbroek



Sébastien, the new club house and stables were scheduled for completion by the start of the season. Then, in March and April there were reports in the local newspaper that the construction had been stopped due to unpaid contractor bills over several millions. Let's briefly look into this surely unpleasant issue. What is your view on this? What was the reason for these negative headlines?

It is not new that the public generally has a wrong picture of polo, associating the sport with royalty and billionaires. Although it is certainly the case that royalty and billionaires play polo, they are the great minority, and people from all walks of life play polo, in what is normally a very laid-back and family-oriented atmosphere. This is certainly the case at Polo Park Zurich, but is not much known by the general public, despite our efforts to counterbalance this cliché. It is also not a surprise that some newspapers looking for scandal are always eager to publish bad news about large financial projects, especially ones involving famous people, royalty, or billionaires. Or in this case: polo, a potentially juicy subject.

The truth is really much simpler: this clubhouse and stables project is fully financed by myself, and I had a financing plan in place at the start of the project. Due to the incredibly wonderful sunny winter that we had in Switzerland this year, the project, which I would have expected to stop for some months due to the snow, did in fact not stop at all, and therefore, was far more advanced in March and April than I had planned for. This, of course, constrained the financial planning and led to some delayed payments to a handful of large contractors. The amounts were, it is true, a few millions because the project itself is in the millions. This led to some building delays, until the financial planning caught up with the construction, and everything went back to normal at the beginning of June. In the end, the size of the project is such that it can be compared to building a hotel. And delays in the construction of hotels is a very common occurrence. So the article was a feeble attempt at making a huge issue out of something that is really quite common. Actually, other media contacted me with the intention to write a story, but seeing that there was no story, they simply abandoned it. Not juicy enough ...

How high are the investments into the new infrastructure? When will the boxes be ready for the horses, when do you anticipate that the club house will be completed?

The total investment for the project is in the neighbourhood of CHF 10 million. This does not include the land, but only the construction. The amount appears high, but there are a few reasons for this. First of all it is the location of the club: there is an underground river that runs under the polo fields. This brings drinking water to the town of Hettlingen, and we had to build three different sets of piping systems with pumps to ensure that the water would stay pure, and would not be polluted by horse manure, human waste, or any other potential polluting liquids. This increased the costs tremendously. We also have buried water pipes all around the polo field to have fresh water for the horses, to drink or cool down.

Secondly, the nature of what we are building is costly: the 57 stables and clubhouse are top of the art, with automated water systems for the horses, copper pipes, special ground for horses to sleep on, and walk on. We also have an automatic walker for the horses, washing machines, multiple tack rooms, a bar, showers, toilets and changing rooms with

storage lockers for ladies, and separate ones for gentlemen, a lounge and deck, a fireplace, a mallet room, storage rooms, all this on the ground floor. Then on the first floor 9 large apartments, and on the top floor space for another 12 apartments. The roof is covered in photovoltaic panels to have green energy. And, of course, we had to build a parking area and completely rebuild the existing parking lot to allow for horse trucks with trailers to manoeuvre. We really went for the best, and there is a cost to it. The delays I mentioned earlier mean that we expect the stables to be in full use already in August. The clubhouse will need more work, as it's much bigger, but should be ready by next February.

Three years ago you had purchased the Polo Park Zurich. What is so special about this club that you chose to buy that one and no other?

Well to be honest, it's a mix of people, opportunity and location. The location is wonderful: very close to Zurich itself, only 25–30 minutes by car or by train. Only 10–15 minutes from the airport, without having to cross any large city, thus avoiding traffic, and it's in the centre of Europe, located in a beautiful countryside, with rolling hills and farms all around, an extremely peaceful landscape, with vineyards, pastures and agriculture, only 5 minutes drive from the motorway. After playing, I love to just sit there with some wine or maté and simply enjoy these fabulous surroundings and the great atmosphere of the place. Then, there is opportunity: I didn't actively think at that stage of buying a polo club, I had only been playing polo for a year! But when I was offered to buy Polo Park Zurich, including the land, I thought that it would be a great opportunity for me and an interesting investment in sports land in a prime location, namely Canton Zurich. Investing into farm land or sports land in Switzerland is notoriously difficult, and this was a great chance given to me. And the fact that it was connected to polo – my passion – is just great.

Finally, it is the people that run and play in the club that have made the ultimate difference. Polo Park Zurich is one of the best run, laid-back polo clubs I have seen so far. The atmosphere between the players, between the staff and with the local community is very friendly. We have an asado almost every week, and we have a glass of bubbly almost on a daily basis, after polo. For those who think it is not very wise, I answer that we play about 650 chukkas per year on the field number 1, so we are fit, and a bit of bubbly can't hurt fit people! And of course, the absolutely wonderful organizational skills of our polo manager Francisco Podesta and his crew are second to none, and it was very important for me to secure Francisco's support at the time of purchase to ensure that he would continue even in a change of ownership. I am delighted that he has agreed.

With the new club house, the members now have modern changing rooms, showers and a chilling area with terrace available. At the same time, 57 modern boxes have been built for the horses. What financial impact does this added convenience have on the members? Will the membership and stable fees rise sharply?

No. The stable fees will stay comparable to what is being charged by stables nearby. As to the membership, I have not decided yet and need to discuss this with the other polo players. For sure there will be some increase, but probably not across the board, and surely not a sharp one. The issue is not so much the added convenience, but rather the whole structure of the pricing of the club currently, which I believe is now

outdated, especially since we have been playing so much more medium-goal polo with quite a few professionals permanently in the club. But nothing is decided yet, and this discussion I will have with the players towards the end of the season, so that everyone agrees before it is put into practice. Though I am the sole owner of the Polo Park, I do listen very closely to what the other players say, but also the polo manager from the top of his 27 years of experience in Europe and Switzerland. So we shall see!

The PPZ is well-known for its active club life. What impact will the new building have on its social activities? Will there be more club tournaments for the members or other activities?

It is true that Polo Park Zurich is a very sociable club. And this is despite the fact that we had no real place to get together other than on the side of the field. I believe that the new clubhouse will have an increased appeal, not only for the current members, but also, and in a sense, more importantly, for their family and friends. If you as an individual are playing polo, and there is a nice cosy place for your spouse, with proper toilets, a bar and perhaps a restaurant, a fire place, and similar-minded people, it is likely that your spouse will be joining you in the polo club more often. Which means you can probably play more! So I expect an increase in social activities, which is why the club is called Polo Park & Country Club Zurich. We want the members and their family and friends to use the new facilities as a country club. In terms of other activities, we are already getting together regularly for non-polo related parties and get-togethers, and I do have some special ideas, in partnership with a few sponsors, to make it even more interesting. Watch this space!

More club tournaments will be difficult as we already host around 14 tournaments per year, so the agenda is pretty much full, even though we see an interest from new sponsors to create new tournaments, so we are working on it. The new buildings of course are very interesting for sponsors as they will allow a nice atmosphere for their guests even if the weather is not good. In any case, we will ensure that the tournaments continue to have this friendly but very high quality organisation, as we have seen in the Piaget Opens, the Zurich Championships, and the Ladies' Cups, to name but a few.

Up to 2010, the Polo Park Zurich hosted a sizeable international tournament once per year, attended by many top stars of the scene. Do you plan to revive this tradition in the coming years?

Yes, but perhaps not in the same format, as the polo scene has changed. We are already approaching this goal by having hosted the Zurich International Ladies Polo Cup, in which 24 ladies from 8 different nationalities competed. We are building relationships with other polo clubs and polo players. For example we have a reciprocal agreement with Polo Club Stuttgart and Ibiza Polo Club, but I am also working on some others. We are in contact with some of the super-stars of the polo scene. We are also doing a lot of advertising in various polo magazines. But until the new stables and the new facilities are ready, I don't want to go too fast. It will be difficult to host very high-level polo with the amount of members we now have, as we cater for all levels and only have two fields. So my answer is yes, but perhaps not yet to the extent of what was done in the past years. And again, this will depend on the members.

Let's take a far look ahead. Where do you see the PPZ in 10 years?

First of all, I see PPZ with at least one and perhaps two extra fields. This will allow us to really expand the member base and continue our philosophy, which is "as much polo as possible, for all levels". I would also like that the local, cantonal and Swiss communities learn more about polo, and recognize the sport as an interesting sport to watch and participate in, with the support of the media. If we do our job properly, there is no reason why television would not be interested in polo, which would bring the sport to more people and perhaps get rid of the snobbish reputation polo has. So I would like for much more members to join following this overture.

Then, I would like for PPZ to host a large international tournament of high-goal, a dozen medium and low-goal, a large International Ladies Cup such as the one we did this year, and a large international Juniors Cup. Basically, I would like for PPZ to be recognized as a must-stop location for polo, as well as continuing the grass roots approach we are having currently with the kids polo, juniors, women, and low-goal. A polo centre of excellence for all levels, recognized worldwide. That is my dream, and it seems from the returns we are getting at the moment that it is an achievable dream. We simply have to work on it and keep true to ourselves. Time will tell, but the process has started.

