

# PO



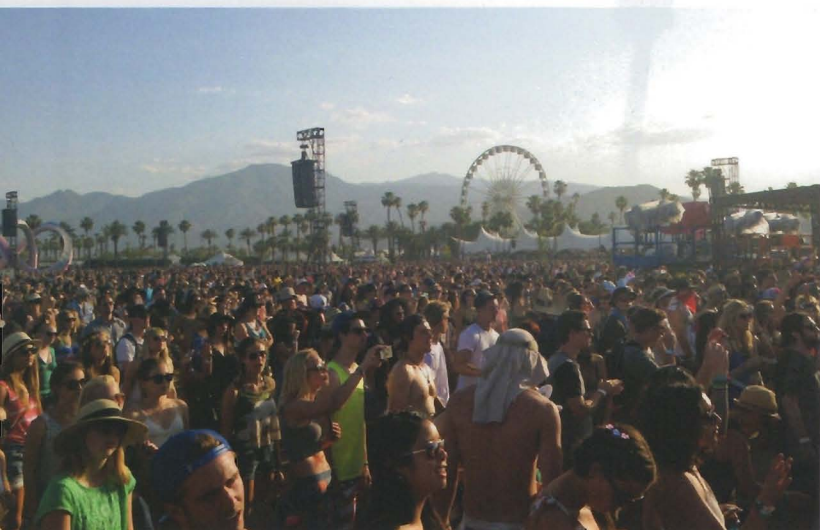
Empire Polo Club in Indio, Calif.  
photographed by Joielala.

# LO

## IN THE DESERT

*By Lindsay Van Gelder*





FROM TOP: Snow-covered mountains behind Empire Polo Club. Spectators at the Eldorado Polo Club. 2014 Coachella Music and Arts Festival at the Empire Polo Club fields.

Whether or not you're a music fan, the sacred dusty ground where Hollywood's A-listers come to play, beer gardens flow, bohemian-rocker fashion blooms, and such top acts as Arcade Fire, Calvin Harris and Jay-Z shake the dates out of the palm trees is likely on your radar: Coachella.

But from November until March, when Coachella (officially the "Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival") and its sister country music festival, Stagecoach, are long gone — the stages, campgrounds, food trucks and the events' signature Ferris wheel are broken down and moved out — there's a quieter, lesser known transformation. The swath of land in the city of Indio bound by Avenues 50 and 52 and Madison and Monroe streets turns back into some of the top polo grounds in the country.

Two polo clubs occupy the area: Eldorado Polo Club, which was purchased last year by Coachella and Stagecoach festival organizer Goldenvoice, and Empire Polo Club, with whom Goldenvoice has a long-term lease. Between them they have 22 playing fields, each the size of nine football fields, plus tracks, stables for thousands of horses and several restaurants. Although plenty of other activities take place here — from the Rhythm, Wine & Brews Experience and Palm Springs Kennel Club dog show to lacrosse and field hockey tournaments to corporate events and weddings — polo is the *raison d'être*. Without it, the music would never have happened, and yet another gated community would have likely been built on the site years ago.

"Polo is our loss leader," says Alex Haagen IV, who co-owns Empire with his father, Los Angeles real estate investor Alexander Haagen III. Alex Haagen grew up riding horses and

"picked up a mallet for the first time when I was about 14," he recalls. A few years later, in the mid-80s, his father bought their first parcel of horse country in the Coachella Valley. What was originally conceived as a getaway where friends and family could play polo quickly evolved into a club.

Then, in 1993, Goldenvoice president Paul Tollett was looking for a new Southern California venue for a Pearl Jam concert due to an ongoing battle with Ticketmaster over service fees. He cut a deal with the Haagens to rent the land and help provide infrastructure. "It was a bare bones show with limited toilets," Haagen says. "We were overwhelmed." In the late 90s, a different producer staged a concert on the site "but didn't promote it right," Haagen says. "Turnout was terrible and a lot of artists pulled out." But Tollett could visualize a proper setup and vibe, and began to entertain the idea of leasing the polo fields for what was to be the first Coachella festival in 1999. Haagen remembers looking out at the audience and feeling "awestruck" at the volume of people who showed up in Indio. That first concert failed to make money, but Coachella returned in 2001 with far greater success. It's been an annual festival ever since, expanding from a single day to a multiple weekend event that draws close to 200,000 attendees.

That's a good thing for polo. Although it may not attract as many

Cowboys playing broom polo.



Photo: Broome polo courtesy of Tim Spang; melancolabecery, all rights reserved. Photo courtesy of Ecuadorian and Cuba.



Nacho Figueras (in white) and opponent during Polo d'Elegance at Empire Polo Club.



A stylish spectator at Empire Polo Club.

groupies as indie rock or techno, there's probably no athletic activity with more jet-set glamour. If Prince William and Prince Harry, Ralph Lauren, or the odd sultan or maharaja are ever in town, we've got their favorite sport covered. Haagen notes that the stereotype only goes so far, and that the majority of professional trainers and players "are drinking Bud Light, not Champagne." But he also acknowledges that for wealthy sponsors of the teams, it's about the love of the sport and the animals. "There's an old joke that the way to make a small fortune in polo is by starting out with a large one," Haagen says. Music profits help subsidize his addiction.

Greater Palm Springs has been a winter polo capital since the early 1920s, according to Renee Brown, associate curator and director of education at the Palm Springs Historical Society. "The very first place that they played was at a field club where the Palm Springs Library is now — which was considered way out of town at the time." Early games included "broom polo" against local cowboys, with sweepers for mallets. By the 1950s, the posh polo scene had migrated to Palm Desert, Indian Wells and La Quinta. "A hotel called the Desert Air in Rancho Mirage had a private airfield and a polo field," Brown says. The brooms were gone by midcentury, but some area residents would engage in golf cart polo matches.

Founded in 1957 on the site of what is now the Eldorado Country Club in Indian Wells, Eldorado Polo Club relocated to the city of Indio in 1980. Except for a few places in Florida, the desert "has been synonymous with winter polo ever since," explains James a'Court, Eldorado's marketing and events director. The flat grassy land makes it perfect for polo play, plus, "you don't get

rained out." Players come from such snowed-out regions as Canada, other parts of California, and even as far away as Argentina — including renowned player and Ralph Lauren model Nacho Figueras, also known as "The Beckham of polo."

But both Eldorado and Empire would like to see more locals and area visitors at matches. "We have this world-class polo happening on peoples' doorstep and we want [them] to engage with it," a'Court says. Admission to weekend matches at both clubs is free, except for a nominal parking fee per car at Empire; visitors are encouraged to bring their lawn chairs and libations, and to treat the occasion like any other tailgate party. You can also go the VIP route at Empire for an additional fee, with reserved seating and cabanas with food and beverage services. Both clubs also offer schools for those who want to learn to play themselves. "We have people of all ages learning," adds a'Court.

Kristin Bloomer, a 32-year-old Palm Springs resident and financial planner with Franz Tatum Wealth Management in Palm Desert, has become a fan. Bloomer's company rents a cabana at Empire, and invites some of its clients to matches. "They've all loved it," she says. "A lot of them didn't know how beautiful it is out there. The polo fields may be more known for the music, but the polo is amazing. And the announcer does a good job helping you understand what's going on, even if you've never been before."

Both clubs stress that there's no dress code, but Bloomer likes the chance to put on a sundress, and maybe an oversized "My Fair Lady" Ascot hat. But she does have one shoe fashion tip: "Wear flats or wedges. It's grass." ♦

|||  
The polo fields may be more known for the music, but the polo is amazing. And the announcer does a good job helping you understand what's going on, even if you've never been before.

|||

# POLO 101

The experts at [polo101.com](http://polo101.com) shed some light on the basics of polo

## The Players

There are four players on each team for outdoor polo, while there are three players per team for indoor polo, including arena polo. Each player wears a jersey numbered one through four, which correspond with their positions. Number One is generally an offensive player. Number Two is primarily responsible for covering Number Three, with Number Three usually being a team's strongest player and the on-field coach. Number Four is the most defense-oriented player of the team, defending his team's goal. Interestingly, there are no left handed players in polo; they were banned in the 1930s for safety reasons, with the ban lifted during World War II due to the scarcity of polo players, but the ban was then reinstated in 1974 and has remained in place since. Similar to golf, the players are rated using a handicap system, ranging from -2 goals for a newbie to 10 goals for the best players (the term "goal" is used to refer to the player's handicap in this context). A team's handicap is the sum of its players' handicaps and dictates the type of game being played, with leagues being organized by handicap.

## The Horses

While referred to as "polo ponies," this name arose out of a former size restriction on polo mounts, while there is now no longer a limit with respect

to size. Today's average polo pony measures from 15 hands (there are four inches in a hand) to as much as 16 hands and weighs between 1,000 and 1,100 pounds. Polo ponies are usually at least three-quarters thoroughbred or more, since thoroughbreds typically have more stamina, strength and speed, as well as a better disposition for polo. Since the ponies typically run the equivalent of one to two miles per chukker (the name for a period in a polo game), the players switch out their horses for each chukker to allow them to rest, with potentially as many as six horses used by a player during the course of one game. The manes of polo ponies are clipped and their tails are wrapped or braided during play in order to avoid danger from becoming entangled in the equipment.

## The Field

A regulation-sized polo field is 300 yards long by 160 yards wide. A regulation-sized polo arena is 110 yards long by 50 yards wide, with walls that are at least four feet high. Polo is also played on the beach and in snow. Goals are placed at each end line, spaced eight yards apart. Polo fields can be "boarded" or "unboarded," which refers to the wood sideboards that run the length of the field in some games. The purpose of the sideboards is to keep the ball in play and avoid having the players and ponies

too close to the spectators. It is customary at polo matches for spectators to be invited onto the field at halftime to tread in the divots in the grass that are kicked up by the horses.

## The Equipment

Polo players carry long-handled wood mallets, typically 49 to 54 inches long, which are used to hit the ball into the goal posts. In outdoor polo, the ball is made of hard plastic and is white in color. The ball is hit using the side of the mallet head, rather than the end as in croquet. Players wear helmets and knee pads for protection.

## The Rules

In outdoor polo, a game is generally played in six chukkers (periods) of seven and a half minutes each, during which each team tries to score goals on the other and the team with the most goals is the winner. The opening play in polo is called the "throw-in," with the umpire tossing the ball in between the two teams as they line up parallel to each other. After each goal, the teams change direction to allow an equal advantage in case the field or weather is better in one direction. If the offensive team misses a goal, the defensive team is allowed a "knock-in" from the point where the ball crossed the end line, with play continuing. Contact between opposing

players and their horses is allowed during a match in the form of a "ride off" or a "hook"; in a ride off, two players traveling parallel and at the same speed come together at the horses' shoulders to attempt to displace the other horse in order to gain or keep possession of the ball. In a hook, the players' mallets are used to interfere with the swing of an opposing player; the opponent's mallet must be below his shoulder when hooked, and the player hooking must be on the same side of the opponent's horse as the ball, or else it is considered a foul.

