

Palm Beach Polo Club

By Ron Garl and JoAnne Dyer

When Prince Charles of England married his Diana in a resplendent ceremony at St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1981, they received a highly unusual wedding present, but one that the Prince especially cherished.

William Ylvisaker, president of the Palm Beach Polo Club, gave the couple the use of a villa at the exclusive Palm Beach Polo and Country Club if they should ever be in that posh Florida neighborhood.

Finally, on November 12 of this year, the Prince and Princess of Wales dropped by to enjoy their gift while Charles indulged his princely passion for polo—and scored a goal for the winning team.

Charles ignored a stray shot that whacked him in the right shoulder as he scored his second-half goal for the Palm Beach polo team, a goal that made the crucial difference as the prince and his teammates defeated an all-star squad in an 11-10 squeaker.

All in all, it was a much more rewarding game than his last foray at the Palm Beach Polo Club in 1980, when he had to be treated for heat exhaustion.

Presumably holding their breath on the sidelines as the prince chased the four-ounce ball over the field were Hal Porcher, director of turf care and maintenance for the ten polo fields, and his colleague, Leroy Newman, head superintendent at the Polo Club. Newman manages the 20-man crew that keeps the turf immaculate and as accident-free as humanly possible. A serious spill during the royal visit, as the prince's visit focused world attention on the club, would have been reported around the globe.

Fortunately the two men and the crew had done their work well, and the turf didn't let them—or the prince—down.

There was one heart-stopping moment early in the match when Charles nearly fell off his horse. However, he managed to recover and pull his mount upright, to the immense relief of the crowd of 12,000.

Clearly the prince was enjoying himself thoroughly as he sped over the immaculately groomed turf. Wearing a bright green shirt labeled No. 4, he played defensive back, using a string of thoroughbred polo horses—which had been chosen for him by his polo manager.

Polo horses weigh a hefty 1,200 pounds and streak across the field at 25 mph, which means that when two of them collide—as they are carefully trained to do when necessary—a one-ton-plus, 50 mph force could make mincemeat of the turf if it were not in top shape.

Indeed, polo is the roughest imaginable



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sport when it comes to torturing the turf, even under the best of circumstances. During Charles' match a billboard flashed between every period (called a chukker) to inform all those present, "It's divot-stopping time." That was the signal for hasty on-the-spot repairs to the Tifway (T-419) bermudagrass field, as divots were replaced across its ten acres—vast as seven football fields.

After the match, divots removed during play would be filled with a mixture of 60 percent dark sand and 40 percent muck. The dark sand mixture is used for aesthetic purposes. When the divots have been filled, loose divots are pulverized by mowing and scattered over the playing area. The fields are then topdressed with sand and a boxblade is used to smooth the surface. Finally, after the fields have been topdressed and smoothed, they are fertilized and watered. Soluble nitrogen fertilizer is injected into the irrigation system once a week during the polo season.

The season runs from December through April, but nobody expected Charles to wait till December to indulge his love of the princely sport—which is kept exclusive not so much by snobbery as by the need for a player to support a

hay-loving string of half-ton eating machines all year round.

As one of the world's richest young men, that presents no problem to the prince, who plays with a four handicap out of a possible ten. He is "sort of a good-to-very-good player," says Michael Shea, press secretary for Buckingham Palace.

Diana, the Princess of Wales, kept her eyes on Charles as he galloped across the close-cropped, emerald-green turf. Watching anxiously to be sure that her husband was not hit by a mallet or toppled from his horse, she presumably could not have cared less about all the work that had gone into preparing the field for this memorable day. However, in a sense every day is special for the crew that keeps the polo fields in shape at the Palm Beach Polo and Country Club.

After all, this is one of the premier polo clubs in the United States. Situated on 1,650 acres of lushly wooded terrain on Florida's Gold Coast, it is a world-class resort that plays host to some of the world's most prestigious polo tournaments. They include the \$100,000 World Cup Championships and the United States Polo Association's Gold Cup Tournament.

Offers Sport of Princes



time and place and the Hindi word, chakar.

The ten playing fields in the polo complex at the Palm Beach club were built in 1978 to house a fast-riding, hard-driving sport that excitingly combines the most daring tactics of horse racing, hockey and soccer. In a nutshell, two teams of four mounted men with mallets try their best to drive the ball through their opponents' goal posts, which are made of light wood (or even paper-mache) so that they will

collide upon command, they also make quick stops and sudden turns that regularly dislodge large divots of turf. As in football, it's as though the turf is carefully built up and pampered during most of the week so that it can then be destroyed in a few hours of heart-stopping violence.

There are two types of polo: high-goal and low-goal. High-goal or fast polo is used for major tournament play during the winter season. For these matches the turf is maintained at low height of cut, increasing its susceptibility to damage.

The fields are either boarded or unboarded on the sides. Both types are 300 yards long, but boarded fields are only 160 yards wide, while unboarded fields are 200 yards wide. However, the sideboards don't offer spectators all that much protection: They are only 11 inches high.

That's all the more reason to be sure the turf is not likely to trip up the horses: At the Palm Beach club, the fast-growing runners help the bermudagrass provide the flat, dense turf needed to support their high-speed gallop.

The turf, of course, is only as good as the irrigation system that feeds and invigorates it. At the Palm Beach facility the two main stadium fields have the most extensive irrigation system. Field One has 44 Rain Bird quick-coupler heads, divided into six zones. They are covered during games with turf plugs, which somehow do their job despite the hard action pounding down on them during each polo match.

Each sprinkler head delivers 75 gallons of water per minute. Every zone runs a 30-minute cycle that applies 15,750 gallons per zone.

The outer polo fields, known as the Southfields, are irrigated by 22 quick-coupler heads per field. These are supplemented with water winches when the rain falls short.

In his six years as head superintendent at the Polo Club, Newman has given several automatic sprinkler systems a try. One test was conducted on a four-acre stick-and-ball practice field, where the players practice without benefit of horses. The superintendent discovered that the rounded-head, automatic sprinklers were potentially dangerous to the horses. They could suffer serious or fatal leg injuries without turf plugs over the heads. Wisely he switched back to a manual system of Buckner kicker-type heads.

Drainage is helped by a 30-foot center crown in each field. Excess water is collected into drainage swales that run down the sides of the field. In the center of each swale are 18-inch tile drains. They lead to canals that girdle the playing fields. The canals are supplemented by a 40-acre



Prince Charles and Princess Diana stay in a villa like this when they visit the exclusive club.

break easily if a horse runs into them.

The matches are divided into six seven-and-a-half-minute periods—the chukkers. Total playing time is 45 minutes.

Since the object of the game is for two offensive players to move the ball downfield with their bamboo mallets and get it through the opponent's goal posts, much of the turf damage occurs during the rush downfield to score. Not only do horses

While the resort also has tennis, croquet and golf facilities, it is polo for which it is famed. The game is one of the oldest in recorded history, and is believed to have originated in Persia—the present-day Iran—some 4,000 years ago. The modern game had its start in Punjab, India, when a group of British officers copied it from some tribal horsemen. The word, chukker, dates from that imperial



All fields are topdressed with sand and smoothed with a box scraper prior to fertilizing and irrigating.

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retaining lake.

Fields Four and Five in the Southfield area posed a special problem because they were too level, with only three feet of fall for every 1,000 feet. In heavy rains this poor drainage causes two problems: The sides of the fields become soggy and this in turn makes them an attractive site for mole crickets to take up residence. These problems are being successfully attacked through the use of additional topdressing to raise the crown area and the addition of extra side drains to the canal.

To promote water percolation, a turf-quaker is used at the end of the polo sea-

son. It slices and loosens the turf before it is topdressed. Turfquaking is done from the crown outward in a horizontal pattern. The device is also used in the swale areas twice a month during the season. This slicing promotes efficient drainage.

The entire 156-acre polo complex is aerified five or six times a year. The cultivation with aerification and turfquaking helps provide the strong, healthy root-zone that sports turfgrasses require.

If divot repair is one of the most visible aspects of turf care at the Polo Club, weed and pest control plays just as vital a role.

Polo fields and other bermudagrass fields in Florida are fair game for nema-

todes and mole crickets. While a surface application of nematocide will reduce root damage by nematodes, a greater menace to the polo fields is the lowly mole cricket, whose handiwork is fully capable of unseating a prince and sending him sprawling. It attacks turf that has been weakened by nematodes or by overly damp soil caused by poor drainage. Newman has treated problem areas with Orthene in hopes of eliminating the cricket before the start of the winter season.

Wherever there are horses, there are bound to be certain souvenirs. Grassy and broadleaf weeds are encouraged by horse dung, as well as by surface damage. MSMA, 2,4-D, and Sencor are used for weed control.

Surprisingly, cars can cause similar problems. Crowsfeet along the roadways, caused by parking, are a nuisance. Weed seeds lodge in the tires and become dispersed alongside these roadways.

However, it's the game itself that really savages the turf. The two main fields are played on every Saturday and Sunday during the season. Some 15 to 20 preliminary matches take place every week on the outer fields.

All this hard action gives Newman's crew just five short days to prepare the championship fields between major matches and tournaments, while hustling to keep all the outer fields in top shape as well.

It takes real precision to mow the polo fields at the Palm Beach Polo and Country Club. During the summer, when only an occasional game of low-goal polo is played, the bermudagrass is maintained at its top height of 1-1/2 inches. As the season approaches in December, and then every three weeks during the season, Newman carefully lowers the cut by 1/8-inch intervals. When the season comes to an end in April with the Gold Cup Championship, the fields are at their fastest, mowed at a low 3/4 inch.

The speed delivered by such closely cropped fields allows players to move the ball much faster. This increases the overall pace of the game—and the skill required to keep up. The damage caused by the Championship takes more than a week to repair, but at last there is time to do so.

Newman and his crew make sure the turf is as trim and beautiful as the "beautiful people" who flock to the Polo Club for the matches. Of these, the most memorable was Princess Diana. After seeing Prince Charles help win a hard-fought victory, she graciously presented the captain of the winning team with—what else?—the two-foot-tall Princess of Wales Trophy, topped with a figure of a player aboard a rearing horse. She gave her husband and the other players smaller trophies.

Someone should also have given a trophy to the turf.▶



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