



# CLINICAL SKILLS

## Students benefit from outside polo instruction

By Cindy Halle

Cindy Halle, center, visits members of the South Bay Polo Club interscholastic team at Woodside Horse Park in California.

The Intercollegiate and Interscholastic program has, as one of its cornerstones, a mission to help players improve their horsemanship and playing ability through educational activities.

This past fall, funds from the intercollegiate tournament season, canceled due to COVID-19, were re-purposed to offer instructional clinics to any collegiate or interscholastic program that wanted them. Not only was this an opportunity to teach players, but also to reconnect with programs and players that we haven't been able to see throughout the bizarre pandemic year due to travel and COVID-19 restrictions. It is also an opportunity to put eyes and ears on the programs, players, horses and facilities, and offer suggestions to help their programs and teams.

Connor Deal, Tony Condo, Danny Scheraga and I collectively taught over 25 instructional clinics to both intercollegiate and interscholastic teams all over the country, and other instructors picked up some of the load as well. From California to Texas, Michigan to Massachusetts and everywhere in between, we worked with teams for one-day clinics.

Sometimes we had one group the whole day and other times there were several different groups for shorter time periods. It is challenging to just have one day so we try to cover as much as we can, emphasizing the most important things and hoping a few things "stick" to help them improve their game.

I, for one, was very excited to be back out teaching and helping

these enthusiastic young players who were all eager to learn and improve. I touched base with my colleagues to compare notes and see how they set up their clinics, what they emphasized and any common skills that seemed to need the most attention and help. I found that we taught many of the same concepts and emphasized many of the same things albeit in slightly different ways.

We all emphasize "riding-for-polo" horsemanship skills and stroke mechanics and then, depending on the amount of time and the number of students, we might also be able to cover strategy, defensive plays, rules and penalties and usually have some sort of coaching chukkers. In these, we will not only umpire but also stop the action to point out plays and team positioning. In some cases, chukkers are videoed and reviewed. Often, the rules and penalties are explained on the ground using a whiteboard during a break for the horses. Last but not least, we often sit down with the teams to help them improve their overall program and make it sustainable.

We all agreed that horsemanship and riding for polo was the most important topic that we covered. It's also important to cover the "why" of everything taught so the players understand how something like lateral movement, maintaining impulsion or using two hands on the reins relates to improvement in their playing ability and game outcome. Additionally, students need to have a balanced polo seat or they will not be able to correctly hit the ball.

I like to start out with a simple cavalry drill Danny Scheraga taught me as an icebreaker. It warms up the horses and kids, while allowing them to look around at the other riders to help judge relative speeds when lengthening or shortening strides. Tony says he always has the players warm up their horses with mallets in their hands to see who holds their mallets up and who has the habit of carrying them down. Connor likes to emphasize staying centered and balanced and going back to basic riding skills.

It's helpful to get a sense of the students' riding backgrounds: did they do hunter-jumpers before polo, start in polo, or ride cow horses? Introducing the concept of using the second hand on the reins, along with making sure they understand how the horse moves and how to use all of the natural aids, are key components of my riding-for-polo section. Knowing their legs, eyes and seat are as important as their hands is crucial, and then how to apply their leg appropriately. Creating impulsion, maintaining momentum and balancing your horse are important to cover.

Connor likes to have the students do the riding pattern Charles



Cindy Halle discusses the importance of keeping the mallet in the ready position to Culver students.

Smith developed, including changes in direction, a half halt, a roll back, a halt, as well as other skills. This can also be modified for beginner students. Connor also likes to teach the students how to be as soft as possible with their hands to keep a horse from fighting them and becoming heavy in the bridle.



Cindy Halle used a cavalry drill to warm up students at the Lakeside Polo Club.

With all games played on split strings, it is crucial these young players have a sense of how to feel what a horse is like to ride in a few short minutes. Depending on the size of the group, I sometimes video students on an iPad or phone so the students can see themselves riding the pattern or drill, make corrections and then be videoed again to compare.

I emphasize the power and the brakes coming from the hind end while Connor uses the analogy of a “slinky” to describe a horse that is strung out versus one that is balanced and collected. If the group rides well enough, Danny introduces the concept of lateral movement—so important in ride-offs and being able to get the horse to the line of the ball without fouling. We all start the days with the riding portion since it is crucial to all the other skills needed for polo.



Tony Condo, center, instructs members of the Franklin Polo Academy in Tennessee during coaching chukkers.



Tony Condo demonstrates the proper nearside foreshot to students at St. Louis Polo Club.

Stroke mechanics are usually the next thing we work on. With a limited amount of time, we all work on the four basics and make sure the mechanics are sound before we move on to more difficult shots. I have found many students have bad habits that are hard to break, which emphasizes the importance of getting

proper instruction from Day 1. Muscle memory is pretty strong and it takes time to correct old habits with repetition of the correct movements.

Most students need help with nearside foreshots, angling shots, accuracy and following through. Sometimes they need



help with ball control, dribbling or flip or sweep shots, so crucial in the arena game.

Knowing what shot is appropriate in what situation, especially around goal, is another key topic. A clinician must also keep in mind the level of fitness of the students. Once the students are fatigued they will find it difficult to do things correctly, so we are all very aware that often, less is more. It is a skill to keep everyone engaged and paying attention, especially when the kids get tired. I try to change gears and do a different drill or skill to keep things fresh.

I utilize many of the simple drills I have found work well. I always ask the group what they most want to work on or need help with so I make sure to cover that topic. Sometimes we do the stroke mechanics with a foot mallet before the students get on the horses. It is important to go over and practice some penalty shot hitting basics—have a routine, take your time, keep your head down and your horse straight and have some set plays for your center and spot hits.

Once we have done some hitting and stroke mechanics, we all try to put some teamwork, communication and strategy into the session.

Connor explained, “Many students just need to slow down. They want to go faster than they are able to hit the ball. If they slow down, they won’t override the ball and then have to circle back.”

Practicing getting to the boards, knowing when to rotate and when to stay up for passes, and placing backshots and turning for them are other topics that may be covered. We make sure students understand the concepts of how to safely and effectively ride-off, how to hook and when it is appropriate to do either one.

During the chalk-talk, we try to cover line of the ball versus right of way, common fouls, penalty shot positioning and throw-in strategies. Tony likes to also explain how he views plays as an

umpire so the students understand that point of view. The concept of an umpire making a “non-call” or using a “slow whistle” is useful for players. The day usually finishes with coaching chukkers in which we try to emphasize the concepts we have covered that day and make corrections as needed.

It is a tricky thing to just have one day with a team or club. We all want to help them as much as possible but have to be aware of the availability of horses, time and facilities, as well as the differing ability levels that may all be in one group.

We all agree it is important to learn everyone’s names and call them by name. I use a “cheat sheet” in my pocket to keep everyone straight, with what color shirt or wraps they have on. We also try to keep it light and fun, and always keep our sense of humor. The ability to be flexible and change plans as needed is also crucial. The age of the students was less important than their

polo experience although younger players may have a slightly shorter attention span and may not be as analytical as college students.

The horses’ welfare is central to how we structure the clinic and what we do. All four legs need to be bandaged or booted and tails tied up for any mallet work for safety. One eye is always on the horses, making sure they are appropriate to the rider and that they are used appropriate to their fitness and ability. We emphasize safety, model best safety practices in all that we do and make suggestions and corrections as well.

Last but not least, we often sit down with the team captains, club presidents or coaches to see what we can do to help them grow their program or make it more sustainable. This may include fundraising ideas, how to best communicate with parents, horse care, how to recruit more players, how to connect with other teams to schedule games, etc. The list is endless. We want to make sure they are aware of resources available to them from the I/I program through several different avenues and they understand paperwork, tournament formats and game requirements.

The students appreciate seeing the USPA represented and helping their programs. The attention is very much appreciated by the students and coaches. I know when I was coaching, I loved having clinicians come every year because I always learned something new. Often, clinicians may be reiterating what the coach has said, but perhaps using a different analogy or verbiage, leading to a player having an aha moment. Clinicians may also have handy hints or new ideas for plays and are up-to-date with any rule changes that may be confusing.

All of us who had the opportunity to work with these up-and-coming players truly enjoy the experience of teaching these clinics and look forward to seeing these teams putting the skills or knowledge into practice at the tournaments.

