

# Dale Johnson

## Strategizing for a lasting future in polo

Sparked by a brief, but impactful, encounter with the sport in Argentina, Dale Johnson's deep passion for polo was solidified the minute he first picked up a mallet at age 32. Attending a clinic with Francesca Finato at Menlo Polo Club (Atherton, California), Johnson channeled his enthusiasm into lessons at South Bay Polo Club in Gilroy, California, dedicating a full year and 100 hours to learning how to ride and play the sport.

Demonstrating the same level of commitment and consistency, which has served him as an Olympic weightlifting hobbyist, Johnson has taken a lot of what he has learned in the weight room and applied it to polo. Originally from Oakland and based in San Francisco, California, Johnson's career in financial technology enabled he and his wife Christine to approach the capital-intensive game with a strategic three-year plan for economic sustainability. Two years in and one polo horse later, Johnson is continuously exposing the world of polo to his family and community via Instagram (@sfexceptionalism) while learning and sharing valuable lessons along the way.

"When I first met Dale in 2018, he was struggling to post at the trot. Now he is fearless, tearing up and down the field! I'm so proud to have been a part of his polo journey," said Finato.

Although Johnson is the first in the family to venture into polo, his equestrian roots are based in a lineage of Texan cowboys.

"My grandfather raised Quarter Horses in Texas about 90 miles north of Houston in a town called Madisonville," Johnson explained. "We still have a family ranch in Madisonville with horses where my family raised cattle and every year they participate in an annual cattle drive for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo."

Traveling to his company's Buenos Aires satellite office to design a program and write software, Johnson came across a piece of the sport during a work trip, which immediately caught his eye.

"I was in a leather goods shop when I saw this beautiful pair of boots so I asked the shop keeper what the boots were used for and he said polo," Johnson recalled. "I had seen polo depicted in



*Dale Johnson*

movies like 'Pretty Woman' and I thought it would be really fun to play, so I said to myself I'm going to get into polo one day."

Three months later, he reached out to Finato in the local Bay Area and set out on the path to make his dream into a reality.

"I loved horses, but I gravitated to polo because of the sheer athleticism of the game," Johnson said. Since then polo has quickly moved to the forefront of Johnson's world, motivating and driving him to be even more successful in other areas of life.

Already a high-performance athlete before entering the sport, currently dead-lifting 500 pounds and squatting 450, Johnson knows the discipline necessary to achieve results and has devoted the past eight years to the physically demanding rigors of Olympic weightlifting. Focusing on strength training, power lifting and functional fitness, Johnson has found the latter key in helping him to move seamlessly into the sport of polo.

"I advocate for a lot of functional fitness, which simulates common movements, when training for polo," Johnson said. "As polo players we are highly-



*Johnson rides off Oliver Williams at Naimara Polo in Argentina.*

trained athletes and I don't think a lot of people recognize that about equestrian sports. The next frontier for polo is training with the mindset of an athlete because I believe that's what ultimately will change the game."

Incorporating mobility and cardio training into his polo regimen, Johnson has been able to virtually bypass the common issue of saddle soreness due to the intensity of his workouts. Applying his training philosophy of consistency in the gym to his polo routine, Johnson focused on building up confidence and strength in his abilities and working with his equine partner in preparation for a long polo career.

Riding over 30 different horses and working with

*Dale Johnson with his beloved polo pony Sunny*



several coaches over the course of his introductory year, Johnson discovered the benefit of diversifying and cross training with other disciplines to strengthen his seat for polo. Exploring jumping with Susan Bosserman, Johnson emphasizes a strong riding foundation as the key to unlocking a greater confidence to make plays on the polo field.

"If you are new to riding, polo can be intimidating because you have to reach over to hit the ball on the nearside, which doesn't feel natural," Johnson said. "I wanted to work on building confidence in the seat outside of a polo atmosphere so I started jumping and learning how to motivate the horse to go over the fence."

Implementing lessons from jumping, including how to use your legs effectively to direct the horse, Johnson improved his ability to be in the right spot at the right time on the field.

"I was able to push many of the jumping fundamentals over to the game," Johnson said. "When playing polo I have to motivate the horse to be where I need to be in order to hit the ball or make a play."

Now that Johnson is able to ride five to six days a week as a horse owner, he and his red roan mare are strengthening their connection on the polo field.

"We, as the horse owners and polo players, have to be the stewards of the sport and share our love of horses," said Johnson.

Although not planning to purchase a polo pony until after his third year in the sport, Johnson gradually formed a bond with a fiery mare named Sunny and was unwilling to part with her. Rehabbing from a small injury, Sunny was kept at South Bay Polo Club and Johnson's trainer asked if he would like to ride her.

"At first she was bucking and running me up against the wall, but I patiently worked with her three days a week and we finally started to hit our groove," Johnson said. "I really wanted to play, so when Sunny's owner offered to lease her to me for the season I said yes. After playing together the entire season she had opened up and played beautifully."

When the owners were looking to sell Sunny, Johnson had a decision to make and although it went against his plan, he knew what the answer would be.

"A part of me couldn't let her go, so when Susan asked if I would like to buy Sunny, I said of course, but I didn't know what I was getting into because I had never owned a horse before!" Johnson recalled with a laugh.

Making his first commitment to horse ownership, Johnson relocated Sunny 20 miles south of San

Francisco, closer to his home and within an easy distance to visit her every day. Offering many people the opportunity to visit and ride Sunny, Johnson is a large proponent of opening up the world of horses and polo to a broader audience through exposure.

Encouraging his wife Christine to participate in the game as his involvement with polo grew, Johnson's infectious enthusiasm is spilling over into his family and sphere of influence.

"I didn't want Christine to always be field side while I am playing polo every day," Johnson shared. "She started playing a year after me because polo is a sport we can do together. I told her I would arrange for her to go to the clinic too because I really wanted her to see why I love the sport and the polo community."

Also introducing his young nephew and friends to the game, Johnson has become a positive ambassador for the sport and an inspiration, having recently picked it up himself.

"Where I come from in East Oakland, horseback riding is not common," Johnson said. "I have a lot of connections there and many of those people follow me on social media, and they couldn't be more excited, supportive and encouraging of me playing polo. When you start to see more women and other representations, it begins to bring more people into the fold and the sport changes for the better."

Using his social media platform to highlight and peel back the layers of a sport, which is often in the backdrop, Johnson's genuine connection to the game continues to bring polo to the forefront, touching and engaging demographics both near and far.

Goal-oriented and intentional by nature, Johnson's education from Santa Clara University in California has taught him to look at his goals in polo in terms of sustainability.

"I have secured a horse and trailer and now I'm working on logistics, which has ultimately been the biggest part of my second year in the sport," he explained. "I've learned to ride and play, but now I am focused on setting up the basic infrastructure necessary to continue my game long term."

Making a point to invest in his financial portfolio to the same degree that he invests in the sport, Johnson is building a viable model guaranteed to allow him the funds to play for the next 30 years.

"Not only do I want to physically sustain my body, but I want to be economically sustainable and that means that there are some things I have to pull back on."

While Johnson exercises financial responsibility through investing, he also encourages younger polo



*Johnson and his wife Christine enjoy quality time on the polo field.*

players to look at the potential longevity of their time in the sport and consider playing more gradually.

"You have to find that balance and be creative," Johnson said. "It's not easy doing all your own grooming, but when you get to the point of having help, it's definitely worth the extra work because you will know the ins and outs. I hope it will serve me well in the future."

Naturally progressing in just a couple short years with a passion and a plan, Johnson has only begun to unlock his potential in the sport. Serving as a micro influencer for polo, Johnson is proud to share the game, which has transformed his world with anyone interested in understanding the intricacies of the polo life.

"I've worked really hard and for me my biggest accomplishment has been having the opportunity to talk to people about the sport," Johnson remarked. "People reach out to me through direct messages on Instagram all the time just wanting to know more, and for me that is very rewarding."

Transitioning from track and field and rugby to weightlifting and now polo, Johnson has found a new way of life and greater fulfillment because of the sport.

"Polo has helped me find so much purpose and personal motivation," Johnson shared. "Having the ability to influence others and show them that there's a way to play this amazing game is really special."

Exercising prudence in the day-to-day to ensure a lifetime in the sport, Johnson's foundation has been built upon preparation and vision, protecting his passion from fizzling out and preserving an enduring blaze for many years to come. ○