



## Realizing goals

Former I/I player starts club from the ground up



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When you pull past the garlic farms and into South Bay Polo Club in Gilroy, California, your first greeting will likely come from a bounding little pug named Bug. Following closely behind will be his owner, intercollegiate alum and South Bay Polo Manager Francesca Finato, smiling from ear to ear and eager to get you on a horse.

Though Francesca has grown South Bay Polo into a bustling club, her polo journey started much earlier. Francesca was introduced to polo at a young age. Her great-great-uncle was L.C. Smith, one of Eldorado Polo Club's founding members, and she grew up next to polo player Wes Linfoot. She has fond memories of Wes riding sets through her parents' property and being inspired to ride up next to him on her pony. Always ambitious, inquisitive and friendly, she'd pepper Wes with requests to teach her to play polo, but heavy involvement with Pony Club kept her from really giving the sport a go until later on in high school.

One fateful day, when Francesca was working after school at the local deli—horses always top of her mind and first topic out the gate—she began chatting with Tracy Connor, a member of the Menlo Polo Club. Impressed, no doubt, by Francesca's passion for horses and strong Pony Club foundation, he offered her a grooming job. During that time, he taught her everything from tacking to riding those

same sets she'd always seen Wes on to identifying and treating injuries. Playing as much as she could, it didn't take much or long to truly get her hooked.

When she got to college at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, she knew she wanted to continue with polo and participate in intercollegiate competitions, but unfortunately the team was inactive. Luckily for Francesca, however, Cal Poly Polo founding member and alumnus Megan Judge had bought the program's tack and horses in the hopes of restarting the program. In a very "Field of Dreams" moment, Megan built a beautiful arena off campus and they—led by Francesca—came in droves. Active once again, Megan coached Francesca and the team through three very competitive intercollegiate seasons.

Today, Cal Poly has built upon the solid foundations of that early group to become a West Coast powerhouse program for both interscholastic and intercollegiate play, but during Francesca's stretch, UC Davis just could not be unseated. Even though Francesca and the Cal Poly team weren't able to topple the Danika Rice and Lindsay Joseph-led Aggies, participating in I/I opened the door to a host of other polo experiences and created a number of lifelong friendships.

Indeed, I/I opened the door to grass polo. Francesca was able to play her very first grass chukkers with former 8-goal player Joel Baker at his



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*Francesca Finato's goal was to run a polo club. Today, she is doing just that.*

farm in Buellton. Joel and his friends trusted college students to join their green horse chukkers because they knew they'd play with the same discipline and respect on the grass that they'd learned in the arena.

Her first time on the grass, Joel told her to go up for a pass and she gamely cantered out about 30 yards. Amused, Joel suggested she may want to "go a bit further" so she did. Again, she stopped and looked back only for him to wink and send her up again. Once she crossed midfield, he delivered a pass right in front of her stirrup, impressing upon her how much accuracy, precision and talent professional players possess along with the discipline required to attain it. Inspired by her experiences in I/I and the various industry professionals she'd encountered, Francesca knew that one day she wanted to pursue a career in polo full time.

Like many I/I players, after graduation Francesca accepted an entry-level job working in the purchasing department of a local home builder and polo had to take a backseat for a few years, but she never lost sight of her dream. During that stretch, she'd meet up with her friend Brian Englund and they'd talk about their goals—she to run a polo club, he to become a restaurateur.

When opportunity came knocking in the form of working for Erik Wright, Francesca made the jump. She worked for Wrightway Polo in Menlo and Indio

for two years, learning everything possible about managing horses and clubs. From there she took the leap and started out on her own in 2012, with the help of Tim Westin and Santos Arriola.

The first season, players were only charged chukker fees and tournament fees. The second season, with a full schedule intact, the club was off and running with eight paying members. The club nearly doubled in size the following year, and now runs with a consistent 20-member roster. Her club naturally grew to include an I/I contingent—both interscholastic and middle school—during the winter season, while the fields and members take off. This allows the school horses to be kept in work, and helps to offset the costs, while also introducing the sport to the next generation.

Francesca's goal for her program is to have an impact, not only on the sport but on the individuals. She thrives on the growth her players have both on and off the field, introducing them to leadline, through middle school, high school and onto college.

Though still a very young program, several of Francesca's players have graduated and gone on to play polo in college, including Hannah Smith (U Texas), Amy Lang (U Wisconsin), Anya Moturi (USC) and Toby Watters (Edinburgh). The success of these students further exemplifies the growth and impact her club has on the next generation. ○