

'Sport of Kings' Looks to Build Russian Polo Following

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Polo and horse racing have long jockeyed for the title of "the sport of kings" and breaking into polo — one of the oldest ball games in the world — is no mean feat. Nevertheless, the game is finding a following in Russia.

The expansion of the sport locally can be attributed to Alexis Rodzianko, the head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia, who bought the Moscow Polo Club at Tseleyevo from Victor Huaco and Grigory Berezkin in 2005. The club, which was founded in 2003, will host a full season of tournaments this summer and winter.

"Russian polo is my father" said Misha Rodzianko, Alexis' son, who succeeded him as director of the Moscow Polo Club three years ago. The statement is not just a son's pride. When Alexis Rodzianko bought the Moscow Polo Club from Huaco and Berezkin the club was a logo, 25 horses and a set of goal posts. In 2009, construction began on the barn at Tseleyevo and in 2010, the horses were moved in. Five years on, the polo field itself has been described by the British Polo team as one of the best they have ever played on.

Under the Rodziankos' careful leadership, Russia is now starting to appear on the international polo map.

When asked what had changed in the sport in Russia over the past decade, Alexis Rodzianko said, "The majority of the players now on the field are Russian."

It is no longer necessary to bring in foreign players to field a full team. Only one foreigner, 16-year-old Frenchman Marceau Heou, took part in the Russian Open in late June.

Marina Belyakova, who was awarded the Most Valuable Player award at the Russian Open, has been playing only a year, but is completely hooked and describes polo as an "addiction." "I can't get enough of it. Any time I can, I have to get out there and seize the opportunity to play polo," she said.

Misha Rodzianko also described his initial attraction to polo as an adrenaline rush (and a great hangover cure). Now, however, polo is his life. The younger Rodzianko wakes up at 6 a.m. not just to ride, but to personally oversee all the operations at the Polo Club.

"I love everything about it, I love the game, the team spirit, the adrenaline, the ponies ... whereas a lot of people play just for the kudos of being able to say they are playing in a tournament, for the attention, the glamour," he said.

And there is no shortage of glamour at Tseleyevo. The field itself — stretching the length of nine football fields — is beautiful, set in a remote part of the Moscow region with a vast forest as a backdrop. While the location, which involves either a two-hour drive from Moscow or a one-hour trip on a commuter train, could be considered a deterrent for spectators, those who gathered for the Russian Open declared the opposite to be true. The fact that the club is situated off the beaten track is almost a reason to visit it. "It's like a secret escape," said one guest who preferred to remain unnamed, "not many people know about it [yet], but those who do are privileged enough to enjoy a break from Moscow, breathe fresh air and watch a beautiful sport."

The Russian Open attracted a fairly large crowd composed of socialites and sponsors along with a few serious polo fans. The game was opened with a beautiful rendition of the Russian national anthem by singer Yelena Romanova, who described the sport as "romantic."

While "romance" isn't typically an adjective associated with polo, "luxury" is, and this is perhaps one of the attractions for Moscow's elite to a sport they don't quite understand. Plenty of "what's going on?" could be heard over the commentary. Many spectators knew the players and were coming out to support their friends.

However, what they lacked in polo knowledge, the guests made up for in spirit and were keen to learn more about the fast and furious sport. In true Russian style, the female contingent wore their best stilettos, and if these made stomping the divots in the half-time drizzle difficult, they did so with huge smiles and great gusto, contributing to the atmosphere of camaraderie and tangible excitement.

The next polo match, the Franco-Russe Polo Cup, will be held at Tseleyevo on July 25. For the dates of the upcoming polo matches, visit moscowpoloclub.com

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