

From Shepherds to Polo Players Irish-Argentines from the First to the Last Chukker

By Guillermo MacLoughlin Bréard

It is almost impossible to delve into the history of polo in Argentina, from its introduction to the present day, without noting the influence of Irish-Argentines.

The origins of the game itself are disputed. Some records show that it was played by the Persians as far back as 2,500 years ago, but the Chinese also claim that their playing tradition goes back as far. The modern word for the sport is derived from the word for ball in the Tibetan language, 'pulu'. By medieval times the game was popular in India and was fostered by the Mogul dynasty in the fifteenth century. During the British Raj, the first polo club was founded by British tea planters at Silchar, in Assam state in 1862. The first club outside India, the Malta Polo Club was founded in 1868 by British army and naval officers who had come from India.

The game was first played in Britain at Hounslow Heath in West London in 1869. The game quickly spread with the first polo club in England, founded in 1872. The All Ireland Polo Club was also founded in the same year by Horace Rochfort of Clogrenane, County Carlow. Soon, an enthusiastic American of Irish origin, Gordon Bennett, having seen the game played in Hurlingham, England introduced the game to the United States of America. The Irishman Captain John Watson (1856-1908) of the British Cavalry 13th Hussars, formulated the first rules for the sport. Like many traditional sports, it had up to then been practiced in India without any limitations on time or space or a fixed amount of players.

Polo was introduced by British landowners in Buenos Aires in the mid-1870s, although it is not known precisely the exact date of the first match. There are references to games being played in the Caballito neighbourhood, in the

city of Buenos Aires, as well as on the estancia (ranch) 'La Buena Suerte' in Azul in the province of Buenos Aires, on 8 January 1874, as noted in the Polo Encyclopedia by Horacio Laffaye. However, the first recorded match was held at the famous estancia 'Negrete', in Ranchos in the province of Buenos Aires, on 30 August 1875, between the teams 'Ciudad' and 'Camp'. It was organised by the owner of the property, David Shennan, a Scottish landowner.



Roberto L. Cavanagh (1914-2002), member of the Argentine team that won the gold medal at the 1936 Olympic Games (Berlin). During his career Cavanagh won the 1949 USA Open (Hurricanes), the Argentina Open in 1944, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950 and 1951, the Pan American Championship (1951)

and the America Cup (1950). He achieved a 10 goal handicap in 1954 and maintained it until 1963
(*Archivo El Gráfico*)

The Standard, an English-language newspaper edited by the Mulhall brothers from Dublin, in its issue of 2 September, reported that 'Shennan's estancia could not be more beautiful with its grounds filled with flags to celebrate a match of Polo. [...] Each player used two horses: one to play and another as back-up. [...] Campo dominated the whole match and made three goals in less than one hour. Some of Ciudad's players had never seen a match before, which explains why it was so hard for them. Shennan and King had excellent performances, well supported by their fellow teammates. After the game, both quarters were cheered with hoorays by all thousands who travelled to enjoy such new event'.

While none of the players had Irish ancestry, the land belonged to Peter Sheridan from County Cavan, an Irish pioneer in sheep breeding, who had owned the place for many years, in partnership with John Hannah. Also, it should be noted that one of the farm managers was Dennis O'Keefe, who was responsible for the sheep herd.

The sport rapidly expanded, both in the province of Buenos Aires and in southern Santa Fe province, known as 'la pampa gringa', and other regions of the country. Over time, two distinct styles developed - 'polo-estancia', played in the country, and 'polo-ciudad', played in the urban areas. The first polo clubs began to emerge in the later 1870s. Among those in the first wave were Venado Tuerto and Cañada de Gómez in Santa Fe province, and Flores and Quilmes in Buenos Aires province. Venado Tuerto Polo & Athletic Club, founded on 14 May 1887, is the only one still in existence. Throughout its history it has been the nursery for some of the most distinguished players in the sport, including its current president, Guillermo Cavanagh, whose great-grandfather, Edward Cavanagh, came to the country in 1851, aboard the emigrant ship the William Peele. Although most of the founders of the club were British, there were also some Irish people among them, including George O'Donnell and James De Renzi Brett, the latter being the agent for Eduardo Casey, the most prominent Irish-Argentine founder of colonies and promoter of horse racing in Argentina.

The following year the Hurlingham Club was founded on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Named after the famous London club, it was initially founded to organise horse races 'a la inglesa', but later became a centre of excellence for polo, with players becoming renowned nationally and internationally. Today it is one of the most prestigious institutions in the country and annually organises one of the most important tournaments in the polo calendar, Campeonato Abierto de Hurlingham.

Finally, in 1892, a governing body, the 'Polo Association of the River Plate' was founded and gave rise in 1922 to the establishment of the Argentine Polo Association.

The Dominance of Traill

First held in 1893, the Argentine Open Polo Championship has become the most prestigious and important competition in world polo. Every year thousands of people travel from many different countries to Buenos Aires in November to witness this spectacle, turning the Palermo grounds where it is played into a veritable tower of Babel.

In the early years the Championship was won by teams composed of British players, with names such as 'Hurlingham', 'The Casuals', and 'Flores'. One exception to this was 'Las Petacas', a team formed by criollos (natives) including the brothers Joseph and Sixto Martínez. Indeed, for two consecutive years, 1895 and 1896, the team won the Open. One of their players, the number three, [1] was Frank Kinchant, born in 1868. It remains unclear whether he was born in Ireland or in Argentina, but he was certainly of Irish parentage. The year before, in 1894, the Open had been won by Frederick Bennett, who was also a founder member and board member of the 'Polo Association of the River Plate', and who is also believed to have Irish roots.

In 1898 The Casuals won the Open for the second time, having first won it three years previously, with a team formed by the brothers Roberto and Eduardo Traill. Six years later, in 1904, 'North Santa Fe', achieved their first victory and would go on to be one of the most successful teams of the era. The victory was noteworthy as the team comprised three brothers and a cousin: Roberto, Eduardo, Juan and José Traill. Thereafter, a Traill appeared on the winners' podium in the Open on six occasions. An all-family affair again ensued in 1908 when the three Traill brothers and their cousin José won the Open.

The Traills owed much of their success to their pioneering pony breeding, as *The Polo Monthly* recorded: 'They were the first breeders in the Argentine to play ponies bred by themselves for polo, and their ponies by their first stallion, Spring Jack, marked a change between the old-fashioned Argentine pony and the blood of today'.

The most outstanding member of the family was Juan A. E. Traill, the first to obtain the maximum handicap in Argentina of ten goals, in 1913. Although Argentina claims Johnny Traill as her own, he had, in a sense, triple nationality. By descent, he was a member of an old Anglo-Irish landed family, settled in County Down, by upbringing he was Argentine, and by birth English, as he had been born in London. He was born on 8 December 1882. All of his brothers and sisters were born in Argentina, on the family estancia 'La Esterlina', in the north of Santa Fe province.

The 1911 polo season was memorable for Johnny. Playing for North Santa Fe, with his cousin Joe, Francis Geoffrey and Leonard Lynch-Staunton (a native of County Galway, who was three times winner of the Argentine Open), they took part in thirteen matches, winning every one, scoring a total of 175 goals to 11. The fame of the 'asesino latinoamericano', [2] as he was known, transcended national borders and he soon began playing abroad.

In the 1920s, after marrying Irish-Argentine Henrietta Roberts, he settled in England, where he had a distinguished career and was considered one of the best players of the era. He won numerous tournaments, such as the Ranelagh Championship in London, the Westchester Championship in New York, and others. Along with his cousin Joe, he joined the Ireland team, which represented the country in the Patriotic Cup. With his sons Jim and Jack he formed his own team, 'The Traillers', winning a number of tournaments in the 1930s. He died in 1958 and the family polo tradition continues to this day with his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One of his descendents Lucía Escriña Traill features in the current Argentine handicap list.

The Era of Luis Lacey

Another outstanding player who excelled in the early years of the twentieth century was Luis (Lewis) Lacey (1887-1966), who also achieved a ten goals handicap. Born in Canada to a family of Irish origin, his father, William Lacey, a former cricket player, had been hired by the

Hurlingham Club in Buenos Aires to teach sports to the members of the newly established entity. What Lacey did not know was that his son would learn to play polo at the club, becoming one of the best polo players in Argentine history. His first major victory was in 1915 when he won the Argentine Open with his team 'El Palomar', formed with Lindsay Holway, Samuel Casares and his brother Charles (who replaced my grandfather Saúl Bréard on the team).

Subsequently he interrupted his career to enlist in the King Edward Horse Regiment during World War One, where he reached the rank of first-lieutenant and was known for his courage and bravery. He then continued his brilliant career in the post-war era in Argentina and England. In Argentina he won the Open six times and also won the most prestigious British tournaments, such as the British Open, Whitney Cup and Roehampton Open Challenge Cup. Such was his brilliance that the Hurlingham Polo Association in England also awarded him the ten goals handicap in 1922.

He declined to participate in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924, when he was invited to join both the Argentina and the Great Britain teams. He decided that it would be inappropriate to divide loyalties and play for either of the two countries. He lived in Argentina but spent long periods in England where the Prince of Wales, (following his abdication as King Edward VIII, he became known as Edward Windsor), always wanted him to play on his team.

Lacey's last game of competitive polo in 1937 was particularly memorable. His team Hurlingham won, once more, the Argentine Open, having last won it in 1929, featuring Eduardo Rojas Lanusse, Jack Nelson and Roberto Cavanagh. General Agustín P. Justo, [3] Argentine President, attended the final to pay tribute and homage to this great player. His last years were spent in Argentina, devoted to teaching the sport to younger generations. The main field in Hurlingham Club in Buenos Aires is named in his honour.

The Irish-Argentine Duel between 'Venado Tuerto' and 'El Trébol'

The reign of the dominance of British-born players in Argentine polo was beginning to come to a close by the 1930s, giving way to the younger criollo generation. No longer would the surnames be exclusively British, indicating that the insularity of the community was being eroded by inter-marriage, and also that other players of non-British origin had arrived on the scene.

Among these new criollo players were a number of people of Irish origin including Kenny, Kearney, Nelson, Harrington, Lalor, Cavanagh and Duggan, who for over forty years between the 1920s and 1960s appeared among the winners of the Argentine Open and foreign competitions. They also made a name for themselves as sports ambassadors, or simply as breeders, forging the strong contemporary Irish roots of Argentine polo.

A great moment for Argentine polo was winning the first gold medal for the country in any sport in 1924, during the Summer Olympic Games in Paris. The team was formed by Enrique Padilla, Juan Miles and two Irish-Argentines Juan Nelson and Arthur Kenny. They defeated the teams of France, England, Spain and the USA in succession, demonstrating the excellence the country had achieved in the sport. The feat was repeated in Berlin at the Summer Olympic Games in 1936, with a team comprising Andrés Gazzotti, Manuel Andrada and Irish-Argentines Luis Duggan and Roberto Cavanagh.

Jack Nelson (1891-1985), the son of John Nelson from County Kildare, came to Argentina to build up the meat-packing business. He was an outstanding player and rancher. According to his obituary, published in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires' leading daily newspaper, 'he excelled in whatever sport he took up: polo, golf, tennis, rowing, cricket, show jumping, gentleman rider, athletics.' As president of the Argentine Polo Association he continued promoting the sport, locally and abroad. He recalled his own experience when with his brother Luis/Lewis Lacey and other

Argentines, he played in the 1922 English season. Their reception was quite frosty, but the English were forced to acknowledge the Argentine teams' superiority as they won almost every match they played.

The 1940s was characterised by a duel of titans between the teams of Venado Tuerto, formed by Juan and Roberto Cavanagh and Enrique and Juan Alberdi, and El Trébol (the shamrock) formed by Luis and Heriberto Duggan and Julio and Carlos Menditeguy. Both teams played many a memorable final in the grounds of Palermo, alternating on winning the Argentine Open Championship. Also, Cavanagh, together with Alberdi, won the Polo World Cup in 1949, as well as Argentine Open on several occasions and the Cup of the Americas (several other players of Irish origin excelled in these competitions as well). Luis J. Duggan of El Trébol was only the second Argentine, and the first Irish-Argentine, to attain the ten goals handicap, in 1943.

Recent Times

Passion for polo is passed down from generation to generation among Irish-Argentines, who excel at various levels of the game. Indeed many have achieved success and recognition in European and American competitions, demonstrating the excellence of Argentine polo. Irish-Argentine surnames such as Maguire, Donovan, Ham, Dowling, Moore, Donnelly, O'Farrell, Morgan, Rooney, Hope, Cullen, Schoo (Shaw), Hearne and many others, form a legion of players, of different ages, who are considered outstanding in the sport.

On different family estancias with Irish connections many teams and clubs have been formed, as was the case with 'La Alicia', a team that won the Bartolomé Mitre Cup in 1968. The team was composed of Miguel and Juan Lalor, Alberto O'Farrell and Douglas MacDonald, all Irish-Argentines.

A player who merits special mention is Eduardo 'Gordo' Moore, who not only excelled as a player, but was instrumental in the development of professional polo in Argentina. His best pupil was, without a doubt, Gonzalo

Pieres Garrahan, who won many championships with his family club 'La Espadaña' and with 'Ellerstina', including winning the Argentine Open eight times and achieved the highest handicap of ten goals. Following his retirement from playing, he has become an important promoter of the sport in Argentina and abroad, and is at the same time the most important breeder of polo horses in Argentina.

Pieres is the grandson of Thomas Garrahan, owner of the estancia 'La Espadaña', and a member of a large extended family, who excelled in the sport. Other surnames inextricably linked with Argentine polo and who are descendents of the Garrahan family include: Crotto, MacDonough and Buchanan. Also among them are Alvaro Pieres, national-team coach, Gonzalo (Jr.) and Facundo Pieres, both sons of Gonzalo and possessing the maximum ten goals handicap. Last year Pablo MacDonough joined their ranks, obtaining the maximum handicap.

Besides being a polo player, Alfredo Lalor, grandson of John Lalor, a native of Blessington, County Wicklow, who arrived in the country in 1880, became involved in the administration of the sport. Alfredo Lalor was Chairman of the Argentine Polo Association (APA), the governing body of the sport in Argentina, and for many years, president of the Jockey Club. He promoted both national and international competitions. The Jockey Club's main field, where the 'Mundialito Cup' is played, bears his name. His brother Luis Lalor, also an Open winner, and Jorge O'Farrell, have presided over the APA. Another Irish-Argentine Carlos Lacey was the first secretary of the APA in 1922. As it was mentioned before, Jack Nelson had three tenures as president of the Association.

In women's polo, Irish-Argentines have also made their mark, not only on the playing field, but also as writers and chroniclers of the sport. One such writer was Isabel Hope de Harrington, author of *An Irish Criollo*, a biography of her husband, Alfredo Harrington, winner of the Argentine Open in 1930 with the 'Santa Paula' team. Another was Laura Isabel

(Betty) Cárdenas Lynch de Boadle, author of *The Tale of the Hurlingham Club, 1888-1988*.

Schools with Irish links have also been avid promoters of polo, such as the prestigious Cardenal Newman school. The school recently won the annual intercollegiate Santa Paula's Cup, which included some players of Irish origin. Indeed many of the players from other schools in the competition also have Irish roots. In the field of polo journalism, Luis Garrahan Jr. is the director of the magazine Buenos Aires International Polo, promoting the successes of Argentine polo to an international audience.

Though he has no Irish roots himself, Juan Carlos Harriott (Jr.), the Argentine considered the best polo player of all time, is married to Susana Cavanagh, the daughter of Olympic champion Roberto Cavanagh. Another Olympic champion, Manuel Andrada, known as the 'Paisano', was married to Isabel Barrett. His grandchildren played a match in the 2007 Argentine Open in Palermo, but did not participate in the Argentine Open itself. Agustín and Juan Manuel Jr. Andrada both have a handicap of two goals.

'La Dolfina', winners of the last three Argentine Opens, has in its ranks Mariano Aguerre, who also has a ten goals handicap and is married to Tatiana Pieres, great-granddaughter of Thomas Garrahan and sister of Gonzalo Jr. and Facundo Pieres. Her brothers are members of the 'Ellerstina' team, who, with their cousins Paul and Matias MacDonough, were runners-up in the 2007 open.

New Generations

Polo in Argentina continues to have a disproportionate number of Irish-Argentines in its ranks. The latest Potrillos' Cup for Under-14s and Potrillitos' Cup for Under-11s [4] brought together many Irish-Argentines. The same was the case with the Juniors Cup, hosted by the Argentine Polo Association, which in 2006 was won by the team 'Glascorn', recalling the name of the ancestral home of the MacLoughlins in County Westmeath. The team

was formed by brothers Guillermo and Francisco MacLoughlin, Guillermo Cavanagh Jr. and Nicolás Ruiz Guiñazú. In the 2007 Competition, Francisco MacLoughlin was also a member of the winning team.

In addition to those named, there are many younger Irish-Argentine players with official handicaps, including Ina Lalor, Santiago Kelly Jr., Dylan Rossiter, Edmundo Donnelly,

Santiago Trigo Achával O'Farrell, Marcelo Garrahan Jr., Felipe Llorente, Pedro Harrison and Eduardo Seré Kenny. There are also many other players in the under-16 level bearing Irish surnames and assuring Irish links with the sport for many years to come.

Guillermo MacLoughlin Bréard



'Glascom', the winners of the Argentine Junior's Cup 2006.
(left to right): Nicolás Ruiz Guiñazú, Guillermo MacLoughlin (jr.), Guillermo Cavanagh (jr.) and Francisco MacLoughlin.
(Alicia MacLoughlin, 2006)

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Notes

[1] The number three is the pivot man, and he is usually the long ball hitter and play-maker for the team, and also hits the penalty shots.

[2] The Latin American murderer.

[3] General Agustín Pedro Justo Rolón (1876-1943) was President of Argentina from February 1932 to February 1938.

[4] A junior polo competition held at Club de Polo Los Indios in San Miguel in Buenos Aires annually in December.

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Appendices

a) List of 10 handicaps

The Argentine Polo Association has given the highest valuation, a ten goals handicap, to the following players with Irish roots:

- 1913 - John A. E. Traill
- 1919 - Luis Lacey
- 1943 - Luis J. Duggan
- 1954 - Roberto Cavanagh
- 1984 - Gonzalo Pieres Garrahan
- 1984 - Alfonso Pieres Garrahan
- 2005 - Gonzalo Pieres (Jr.)
- 2005 - Facundo Pieres
- 2007 - Pablo MacDonough

Also, Eduardo 'Gordo' Moore, deserves mention. He obtained the ten goals handicap in 1978 in England although he only obtained a nine goals handicap in Argentina.

b) Open Winners

Throughout the history of the Argentine Open, many Irish or Irish-Argentines were among the winners. On a number of occasions, the four members of the team had Irish backgrounds, and these are as follows:

- 1904 - North Santa Fé: Joseph E. Traill, Eduardo Traill, Juan A. E. Traill and Roberto W. Traill.
- 1908 - North Santa Fé: Joseph E. Traill, Eduardo Traill, Juan A. E. Traill and Roberto W. Traill.
- 1913 - North Santa Fé: Joseph E. Traill, Leonard Lynch-Staunton, John A. E. Traill and Roberto W. Traill.
- 1925 - Hurlingham: Arturo J. Kenny, John D. Nelson, Eustace Leonardo Lacey and Luis Lacey.