

History of the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club

655 Holmes Road, Pittsfield, Massachusetts

Zenas C. Colt

Along about the year 1929 directly behind Judge Hibbard's house on Cold Road, there was an old time hay barn down in the hollow known as Colt's Lots. Judge Hibbard was fond of horses; and Charlie Hibbard kept his fine old mare "Topsy" in that barn for a while. Brenton Pomeroy and Donald Weston lived nearby; and the old barn had often caught their eye. Brenton and Don were horsemen with military service in the horse cavalry and field artillery, both in Mexico and in France. They were looking for some action and had the idea to move a couple or three horses in there, set up a jump or two in the cow pasture using bars from the surrounding old timber fences, and, while they were at it, maybe hit a polo ball around the field.

Fred Crane, an ocean sailor and Navy man was also a horseman; so was Bill Rice. It didn't take long for four horsemen to get together and underway in Colt's Lots; and as soon as they did, there was plenty of friendly company—and, not nearly enough room. Marshall Crane, Gus Gifford, Loring Robbins, Brace Paddock, Charlie "Tug" Wilson and Bill Eaton all wanted to do some riding. Don Weston had moved to Holmesdale and he suggested everyone come over to Holmes Road where there were several barns and plenty of room and fields for horses to move around in. This was news. The invitation was accepted with enthusiasm. It was the birth of the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club, for these groups of horsemen were organizers of the first order.

In the spring of 1930, the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club, a non-profit corporate association, received on July 11th, a state charter for the purpose of gathering and disseminating information and knowledge as to horses and horsemanship, maintaining a polo field, promoting games and equestrian sports of all kinds; and, maintaining stables, paddocks, and bridle trails. Now they needed a manager. As it turned out, it wasn't necessary to look far. Leo Gilson had a riding stable pretty far out Williams Street, and Brenton and Don persuaded him into moving lock, stable, and barrel over to Holmes Road to manage the club. This move was a stroke of genius, as Leo could do anything with horses and had a marvelous way with anyone interested in horses. Besides that, he had a great family to give him a hand. The Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club was off and running in the beautiful countryside. It was a product of the times; the location was perfect, and the sportsmen were there.

The first musical ride was held August 7th that year under the guidance of Cynthia Eaton; and the first junior horse show was held that September with Mary Robbins as chairman. The first annual horse show under George Reynold's leadership was only a step away. It was soon to become a fixture on the Berkshire County horse show circuit. The Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club was now picking up support within the community. Eugene Brielman, D.V.M., lived just next door. Jim Hagar, John R. Toby, Ralph O'Connell, Mo Woolverton, Darwin Morse, Harold Bridgeman, Merle Graves and Milton B. Warner, attorney extraordinaire, were all taking a hand. There was careful attention by the directors to the development of community interest in the club; and often offers of honorary season memberships were made by formal invitation to prospective members. In many cases, "in appreciation of splendid work and of keen interest and cooperative spirit." This was one of Brenton Pomeroy's ideas and he was a super salesman. But polo was on everyone's mind.

There was a club in New Lebanon playing polo. Gordon Cox and Blanchard Rand, joint masters of the fox hunt there, and Major Albert Callan and Captain Sidney R. Smith, both with Army polo background, made up the team. Brenton, Don, Bill and Fred all thought – let's get some horses and take them on. There was room for a good polo field at Holmes Road, and after some persuasion, Marshall Crane chipped in and it was levelled off a bit and seeded down, while a couple of goal posts were put together. The ball was ready to be 'thrown in' on what was to be known as Z. Marshall Crane Field.

The four horsemen figured they could read up on polo, learn the game, and take on the boys from over the mountain, and they figured right. All they needed was a few ponies. So one weekend they went out to East Aurora, New York, near Buffalo and visited Seymour Knox, where polo was a way of life. They came back with about ten ponies, and now as far as Pittsfield polo was concerned, the ball was really "thrown in!" The Buffalo horses were okay; they handled well and had had enough playing so our boys had a field day with them. They were good riders.

Copies of the famous book, "As to Polo" had been located – written by W. Cameron Forbes of Dedham – the former governor of the Philippines where polo was a prime sport. This classic book first published in 1919 was the polo player's Bible, and covered in depth every detail and approach to the game. It even explained the "Shandy-Gaff" as the proper drink to have after the game – one-half beer and one-half ginger ale! Skol!

The first home game was with New Lebanon. It was a thing of beauty and a thrilling success. I couldn't believe how well both teams played. Gordon Cox was a real star for New Lebanon, and Brenton and Don were outstanding for Pittsfield. Don had two horses – one was named “Po” and the other “Lo.” They both looked exactly alike, and he hit beautiful long shots off either side of either horse. More games were in the offing. Farmington Valley in Connecticut and Loudonville, New York, both had polo teams. There was no question we had a polo team.

Some of us couldn't believe what was going on. Here was this fascinating game starting up right here almost in our own backyard. The word went out – for interested recruits to join the club, ride, and practice polo. Don Miller showed up; Frank Paddock, Steve Hibbard, and Mel Boyd who would ride through the barn door if the ball was there! These, along with myself, were early pioneers. While interest in all sports in the Berkshires was expanding during the early and late thirties, polo was new and really a horse of a different color. The challenge for the player was to learn the game; and at the same time try to explain to friends what it was all about. After all, as Joe Hollister (“J. H.”) of the Springfield Republican once observed: “Everybody admires the beauty and grace of the ponies and the high degree of intelligence they share with the riders.”

In the meantime, Bill Rice broke his leg very badly skiing and the team needed some help. None of us beginners really qualified, although we thought so. But “Bronc” Choate showed up from Dedham as a sort of player-coach. He had to be good with that name. But it was a long commute for him in those days, and he was followed by Sam Hopkins from Danvers who had been a member of the 1929 Yale Intercollegiate championship indoor team. Sam could teach and was a fine player and terrific, but gave up polo for farming, and moved to Rhinebeck. Before he left though, he introduced the club to Art Mason, Jr. from Danvers who then moved to Pittsfield; and coached and played polo while working along with Leo on horse shows and the club's riding activities. Art Mason's father had been the polo manager at Myopia in Hamilton, the oldest polo club, formed in 1890, and had taught him well. With Art playing for Pittsfield, the team could hold their own a lot better with Farmington and Loudonville, and later on with the West Point Cavalry Officers; Dedham, Myopia; Montreal; Fairfield, Middleburg, Virginia and others. Pittsfield polo picked up momentum during the thirties and forties.

From the beginning, special attention was given to present the game to its followers in Pittsfield and around the county with clear explanations of the field rules, fouls, penalties and scoring. In this respect, the club was lucky. The Berkshire Eagle's sports staff under Abe Michaelson, John Flynn and Francis Callanan,

provided superb and detailed coverage of all the polo, horse shows, etc. WBRK's Dan Healy became the club's official announcer for polo games and radio promotion. His low key accurate play-by-play descriptions were dependable masterpieces. David T. Dana, Sr. from Lenox, a fine horseman and former M.F.H., began to play a little practice polo and then offered to referee on Sundays. The team was mighty lucky to have his help, as refereeing is a specialty, and David had all the qualifications necessary. His sportsmanship was catching.

The club was getting more player candidates. Chuck Gilson, Leo's boy, could ride and handle any horse; John McWilliams, Carey T. Kinney, Jr., a marvelous sportsman, Phillip Weston, a natural athlete, Larry Scocco and Artie Houghtailing and Cliff Hunt from Lenox. Sam Colt, Jr., a golfer who became a good polo player, and Captain Horace Harding, a regular Army officer with Army polo experience, stationed then in Pittsfield, all became valuable additions to the team. Also, Jack Rice played some polo. Frank Butterworth, a star player from the Farmington team, started to play some games with Pittsfield. Bill Rand, a member of the 1936 Yale Intercollegiate champions, now played with Pittsfield. Art Mason persuaded Paul Fox from Myopia to play on occasion. Paul lived in Springfield and played splendid polo. Pittsfield was building a foundation that would see it win national championships in the late forties and beyond, playing against teams from Texas, Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Broadmoor and San Mateo, all in U.S.P.A. sponsored title competition.

In 1940 with World War II approaching, the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club rose to the anxious times with the formation of the SUPERTROOPERS ("Wipe Dat Smile"). About 12 to 15 hardy souls, including Jim Kittredge, former Yale hockey star, and Kenn Hill, a Harvard athlete famous for pitching a no-hitter against Yale; also Colonel Stedler of the U.S. Army Reserve who added some respectability to the group, presented themselves saddled, and groomed, ready for inspection on Wednesday drill nights, having studied the R.O.T.C cavalry manual to learn map reading and how to protect October Mountain – if necessary. On September 29th, 1941, a benefit high goal polo match for the British War Relief was put on. Stewart Iglehart, one of the four best players in the world, and his wife, Marjorie, along with the Armstrong brothers from Texas (riding in chaps, what else!) made mincemeat of the Pittsfield team as they played at Z. Marshall Crane Field. This was a magnificent exhibition which was thoroughly enjoyed, and left the Pittsfield team stunned. It was the last game until 1947, when polo resumed in Pittsfield.

During the war years, the Riding and Polo Association owed much to those in management who actually held the club together – Carey T. Kinney, Sr., Walter

Paxton and Hope Eaton Simpson Whipple – all worked regularly with Leo Gilson in those uncertain times. Miss Hall’s School maintained a riding program, which was a big help.

In 1947 after the war, Art Mason, right out of the Navy, brought Herb Pennell, just out of the Army, from Danvers, to work for him. Herb knew horses, but not polo. Art and I both worked with him and got him started right; it must have been right as he came a high goal player in what seemed like no time. Today, Herb is the manager of the largest polo stable in the world – at Palm Beach.

Shortly after polo started again in 1947, Pittsfield buried the hatchet with their long-standing rival team, Loundonville. The Wheeler brothers, Tom and Charlies, both fine players, joined up with Pittsfield, and the combination turned out to be a natural and added a lot of strength and talent. With Tom and Charlie and Herb Pennell, we had three terrific competitors, and quickly became the best team in New England; going on in 1948 to Chicago where we beat ten 12-Goal teams from all over the county to win the National 12-Goal championship. The final game, won in overtime, was something to remember as Charlie Wheeler put in the winning goal with a smile.

In the late forties, Pittsfield Polo steamed along; and in the year 1950, over 36 match games were played by various Pittsfield teams. These included United States Polo Association sponsored intercollegiate games all held at Pittsfield, with teams from Harvard, Williams, Yale, Princeton and Cornell competing. These games were of very special interest.

In 1951, the Pittsfield plan for sponsored polo teams of equal strength was originated and run off in tournament doubleheaders. It was an effort to gain financial backing by sponsored participation. This was called Sweepstakes Polo and was successful on all fronts – the sponsors, the players, and the spectators, as well as gate receipts for the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Club. The presentation of Sweepstakes Polo was important, although ahead of its time. Sponsored League Polo, with a slightly different format, may develop from the Pittsfield experiment. In Sweepstakes Polo, each horse is ridden once by each side, and U.S.P.C.A ratings, if any, are not used.

The great interest in polo and the all around horse activity generated by the Pittsfield Riding and Polo Association through “the splendid work, keen interest, and cooperative spirit” of its membership lasted nearly 30 years. But the bottom line seemed to be that Pittsfield was really not, after all, “horse country.” The riding

months are short, and without an indoor riding hall or the availability of an all sports arena, the end was near in Pittsfield for what Derry D'Oench of the Berkshire Eagle had called "...probably the greatest game in the world to play and the fastest to watch, yet at the same time, one of the most difficult to promote."

Zenas C. Colt

Wakefield, Rhode Island

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