



Mizzou's
ROUGH



POLO, English style, was a sport for the elite — but not at Mizzou, where polo was played from 1924 to 1941.

Instead of country club and royal players, Mizzou's polo team boasted ROTC students like Ernie (Pug) Jones of Sedalia, Mo., "who would as soon knock you down. . . ." And instead of polite applause from genteel spectators, Mizzou's team heard cheers sprinkled with clinking beer bottles from students watching the game from cars or the grass surrounding Crowder Field.

Only ROTC students were allowed to participate in the Missouri Polo and Riding Association, a club sport founded by ROTC. The polo boys supplied their own boots, mallets and headgear. Long underwear worn under their riding pants "kept our skin from coming off," says Dorsey Bass, captain of the 1937 team.

One of the team's toughest opponents was Oklahoma, whose players had gone to Oklahoma Military Institute and had played high school polo, says Bass, a Columbia resident. Their sneakiest tactic reared its head in 1934, says Frank (Sonny) Martin Jr., BJ '36, polo player from 1933 to 1935. "What we thought was the polo team kept us up [drinking] till three or four in the morning; then when we went to play the next day, a different group of guys were on the field. The real polo team had gone to bed at 10 the night before.

"Oklahoma wore knee pads made of plaster. When they were riding off a player [similar to running interference in football], they would throw that plaster knee into you and try to unseat you."

Bass agrees. "A kid from Oklahoma and I ran head on into each other once and knocked out both horses. Polo was no country-club game here."

It was hard enough to stay in the small and flat English saddles, says Chester (Chet) Hill, AB '41, AM '47, a polo player at Mizzou from 1937 to 1941. "I grew up riding western saddles so the English saddles were hard to adjust to," he says. Hill was student government president in 1941, but "that didn't interfere with my polo."

HIDERS

ONLY THE QUICKEST of the ROTC government ponies were chosen for polo. "Those ponies could turn on a dime," says groom Olen Thornton. Martin remembers the anticipation of the ponies on game day. "When the grooms applied the boots (pads on the horses' fetlocks), the ponies knew they were going to play and they'd get real excited," says Martin, now publisher of the *West Plains* (Mo.) *Daily Quill*. "The ponies liked to play the game as much as we did. When we were riding off another horse during the game, they'd get great fun out of putting their shoulder into the other horse."

Thornton, who was maintenance supervisor of the football stadium for 30 years, and Louis (Tony) Antimi were assigned by the Army to the ROTC unit at Mizzou in the 1930s to care for the military mounts. These mixed horses, unlike the thoroughbreds used by the finer polo clubs, also were used for women's riding classes and for pulling carriages and artillery. Stabled on the southwest side of the football stadium, the ponies were readied for games on fall and spring days by Thornton, Antimi and the other grooms. They would walk their strings of four ponies down the hill for the game at Crowder Field, now Reactor Park.

With four men to a team, it took 24 horses for a match. Each player rode a different mount in each of the first three chukkers (periods), then swapped horses with the opponent for the final three chukkers. Neither team had an advantage of the better ponies, as both teams usually shared the home team's mounts.

The ponies were ridden hard and would get so tired sometimes they would be temporarily blind. "My horse did that once and ran right past the picket line (where the horses are tied) down the hill and hit Hinkson Creek on a dead run," says Martin.

Bass, who says the games were usually "rough as hell," played the number two position, which required him to "run all over the field." Playing on the same team were Henry Kraft at the number one position, responsible for scoring and chasing the ball; Tom McHarg at the number four position, which brings the ball down and protects the goal; and Jack Manning at number three, a backup for the number two man.

After losing only one game during the 1934 season, Mizzou was selected to compete for the United States intercollegiate championship in Rye, N.Y.

The 1935 *Savitar* states: "The team, composed of

Parks, Gregg, Brown, Smith, Jones and McHarg, and the coach, Captain Beiderlinden, found that the University could not defray the expenses of the trip; but, not being daunted, they rode to Rye with the horses in a freight car."

"WE HAD A LOT OF FUN riding to New York on the train, seeing all the sights from the boxcar," Antimi recalls. "My family was from Pittsburgh, so when we stopped in the train yard there they brought spaghetti and wine for the team. We had a nice dinner and then the train pulled out."

Princeton, the defending title holder, defeated the Tigers 9-4. "The boys fought hard but were defeated due to the added experience and superior horses of their opponents," the *Savitar* notes. The Mizzou riders played exhibition games to earn their carfare home from New York.

Away games were an adventure. Usually, the polo players traveled to away games in an elongated station wagon. Once while hurrying back from a game with Illinois to go to a Mizzou sorority dance, the driver made a wrong turn. The wayward wagon went 200 miles the wrong way, forcing the team to miss the dance.

Despite the shortcomings of Army horses and club sport status, the polo teams averaged more wins than losses per year. Usually, less than 200 fans watched the games, but as many as 1,000 showed up for big games. The 1940 *Savitar* states: "Polo is becoming very popular at Missouri, despite the average student's complete ignorance of the game before coming to the University. The field lies in a picturesque setting on the Hinkson, and students spend lazy spring afternoons watching the pony boys play."

UNKNOWINGLY, THE POLOISTS began the last year of polo at Mizzou in the fall of 1940. Paced by co-captains Dean Sprout and Chet Hill, the polo team won four of its five fall games. No mention is made of polo in the 1942 *Savitar*. With World War II, gone were the polo ponies and the polo players.

Three transfer students from an eastern college made a futile attempt to revive polo at Missouri several years ago, says Wayne Loch, supervisor of the student horse facility.

"They wanted to play and there is a place for them to practice," Loch says, "but they didn't have any horses." — *Terry Skinner*