

Polo comes to Powys and wows the crowds

Polo came to Powys this weekend and provided a nail biting match to remember for 2,000 spectators who packed the Glanusk estate in Crickhowell to watch Wales play South America.

The exhibition match on Saturday July 18 was the first in the county with teams drawn from the ranks of professional and amateur polo players who showed the crowd just how exciting the sport can be.

The game was also unique according to Wales player Ricky Cooper, who's also known for his skills at another sport - ice hockey.

Cooper, whose mother comes from Bridgend, said: "There's no national Welsh polo team, so in that respect our side was unique. It was fantastic to represent Wales, although I have played (ice hockey) in seven world championships for Great Britain I never got a chance to choose a country to represent."

With two professional players and two amateurs on each side, Wales had a five goal team of professionals Tarquin Southwell (four goal handicap), Richard Blake Thomas (three goal handicap) and amateurs Stuart Leigh Davies and Ricky Cooper, both on a minus one goal handicap.

The six goal South American team was Argentinian professionals Oscar Mancini and Daniel Otamendi (both on a four goal handicap) plus amateurs Ben Riordan and Chris Christodoulou (both on a minus one goal handicap).

This meant Wales started with a one goal handicap lead and in the first chukka it was Tarquin Southwell who scored first for the Welsh side.

He drove a 60 yard penalty shot right up and over the top of the goal, making it 2-nil to Wales until Chris Christodoulou drove a powerful hit into the goal for his South American team to snatch back some of Wales' lead, with the board now reading 2 – 1 to Wales.

It was Daniel Otamendi who scored next for South America as he put the ball through the goal with a big drive and brought the score to level pegging at 2 all.

And then Otamendi put another goal through to put his team one goal ahead despite some heavy defence from Welsh player Richard Blake Thomas and the score was then Wales two and South America three.

The next goal was scored from a 30 yard penalty by Tarquin Southwell for Wales and again the score was level at 3 all.

Southwell's team mates Ricky Cooper and Richard Blake Thomas both tried to follow his lead, cheered on by the crowd and commentator Peter Grace, but must have been frustrated when they missed goals and the opportunity to put Wales ahead.

Southwell succeeded where his team mates failed and snatched the lead for Wales when he drilled the ball into the goal with a beautiful hit in the third chukka and the score was 4-3 to Wales.

By the end of the third chukka it was tied again at 4 all after an end to end run from Oscar Mancini.

As the match resumed in the fourth and final chukka the excitement built because both teams had all to play for with the score at four all.

Mancini came through the defence like a rocket threatening the Welsh goal but failed when he hit it wide, under pressure from Blake Thomas.

Play went up and down the ground as both teams strived for the winning goal.

Mancini's horse lost its footing and slipped over when he changed direction, forcing a change of mount but luckily neither horse nor rider were injured.

The Argentinian proved he was not put off by his earlier fall, when half way through the chukka Mancini, in a tight play, stole the ball and slipped the opposition to score putting South America in front with the score at 5-4.

Later Mancini collided with Welsh player Richard Blake Thomas and the result was an altercation and a 60 yard penalty to Wales that went just wide of the goal.

Now Wales had to score to draw level and the team threw everything into attack. In the resulting melee Mancini again managed to steal the ball and he had a final run down the ground in the last few seconds to score the concluding goal. The match ended on a score of 6-4 to South America.

After the second chukka, half way through the four chukka game, players came back onto the ground during the break along with the umpires to let the public get their autographs and a close up look at some of their quieter polo ponies.

It's customary in polo games for spectators to help tread down the divets caused by the ponies stopping and turning in the game which churns up the ground. They had their work cut out on the damp field which had a lot of marks by half time.

The rain had poured down for days before the event and had threatened to start again before the 3.30pm match and spoil the fun but luckily it held off.

But the weather did claim its victims during the match, one of Blake Thomas' horses fell during the warm up, straining the player's shoulder but not enough, he said, to put him out of action.

And Cooper's polo pony slipped on a turn during play, resulting in an impromptu dismount for the player but no injury to him or the pony.

Another victim of the wet, Mancini whose horse slipped and went over during the final chukka, made light of it later saying: "My horse found a bit of a wet patch and it was little bit ouch, ouch! But I got another horse and it was fine."

He added: "I am very pleased with the results but the Welsh put up a good fight. It's the first time I have ever played polo in Wales and I have really enjoyed it - the people are really friendly and I would come back tomorrow if asked."

The sentiment was echoed by South American team mate Christodoulou who said: "It is great to win but the Welsh team were really strong players and we had a good fast game."

The consensus amongst the Welsh team was that they were eager to come back to Powys next year despite the defeat.

Carmarthenshire-born Stuart Leigh Davies said: "I am looking forward to playing here again, it was a fantastic venue and a really good spectacle. It was a tough match but we couldn't have had a better crowd."

Blake Thomas added: "We started with a good lead and looked after it fairly well, but they (South America) delivered us the death blow in the last few minutes. The ground held up pretty well and it was a good fun game. We'll be back next year to avenge our defeat."

Harry Legge-Bourke, whose family own the Glanusk estate, said the event had proved more popular than they had hoped and he was thrilled that so many young people had visited the venue.

He said it was the wish of his father William, who died aged 69 in March, that new events could be brought to the area and that young people in Powys be encouraged to take part in new interests.

Money raised from a raffle and auction at the event is being donated to The Princes Trust, one of The Prince of Wales' charities that supports young people.

Peter Grace, Chairman of Surrey-based Ascot Park Polo Club, the largest polo teaching club in Europe, was responsible for bringing the players to Powys in conjunction with St David's Polo Club in Cardiff.

Mr Grace and St David's have been staging polo in Cardiff for the last ten years and are bringing the first beach polo match to Swansea on August 8 this summer.

He said: "It's particularly appropriate that we have staged this event in this part of the world. The first civilian polo club in the British Isles was set up in 1872 just over the border in Monmouthshire and they played their first match in the summer. Let's hope it's the start of good things to come regarding polo in Powys and more polo in Wales."

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