

## Feature



# Ladies first

Claudia Hodari, one of the newest figureheads of the female game, tells **Chris Ashton** why she's throwing herself into polo all over the world

Shrinking violet is not a term you associate with polo, whether players, patrons, officials or spectators. Strutting peacocks fanning tail-feathers are closer to home. Yet peacocks are scarcely visible compared with Claudia Hodari, the forty-something, Argentine-American, larger-than-life founder-director of FEM Polo, international impresario of the ladies' game.

With tousled brown hair and luminescent grey-blue eyes, the mother-of-four talks like a river in full flood, a life force bigger than Ben Hur. Take her role in harnessing polo to promote world peace: "Horsing round on the internet in July this year I discovered that the UN in 2001 had unanimously declared 21 September as Peace Day," she recalls. "If we all add one grain of salt... so across various internet sites and by word of mouth I began to promote Polo 4 Peace."

From Argentina to England, from Pakistan to the US, polo clubs in some 20 countries commemorated United Nations Peace Day with tournaments, speeches, receptions and moments of silence, each in its own way. Berlin Polo Club trumped all others, hosting games between the Iraqi Army and Berlin and Hanover polo teams.

Marshalling none other than Nelson Mandela to her cause, she quotes the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate: "Sport has the power to change the world, the power to inspire, the power to unite people in a way that little else can."

Between late September and early December this year, Argentina staged 10 ladies' tournaments hosted by clubs outside Buenos Aires. "In the past three years the increase in

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ladies' polo tournaments in Argentina has been exponential," says Claudia. She predicts continued growth in the quality and quantity of women players and tournaments; and not only in Argentina but elsewhere. In June, with Nigerian player Uneku Atawodi, she staged a five-day tournament in Kaduna, Nigeria, the first all-female contest in West Africa.

In Argentina, FEM Polo hosted the first in this spring's series of ladies' tournaments (Polo 4 Peace, 21 September) with another planned for early December. The venue was the San Diego Polo Club,

Pilar, Argentina's largest country club, which has 350 homes, a supermarket, golf, tennis, swimming pools and restaurants, as well as five polo fields, stabling for 300 horses and 80 polo players among its 3,000 resident and non-resident members.

"If you'd told me four years ago I'd be playing polo," says Claudia, "or that I'd organise women's polo or women's polo on snow, I'd never have believed you!"

Snow polo? In August last year at Bariloche, famed in summer for its lakes, forests and the nearby Andean Cordillera and in winter for its skiing, she hosted a week-long ladies' snow-polo tournament of 18 players of a dozen nationalities from South and East Africa, North and South America and Western Europe.

"It took me a year to organise," she explains. "For \$2,000, each player got seven nights' five-star hotel accommodation, tours, tango shows – everything! – and they loved it. I made friends from all over the world. I'm glad it



**Opposite page:** Claudia and her 11-year-old triplets are all smiles for the snow polo in Bariloche

**This page (clockwise from top left):** Claudia celebrates a goal in the Fem Snow Polo Cup in Bariloche, Argentina, in 2007; *Polo Times* photographer Alice Gipps leads the charge in the 2007 Fem-Halloween tournament; Claudia and her pony cut long shadows in an early evening match; Claudia officiates with aplomb at Bariloche; Claudia's daughter, eight-year-old Isla, also joins her in Bariloche

was in Argentina and in Bariloche, which is in the same league as Aspen, Colorado and St Moritz. I didn't make any money but I was the happiest woman alive!"

Her induction into the game began when, then living in Texas, she accompanied her father to Argentina for his 70th birthday celebrations. "We went to an asado at a country club. Somebody asked me if I'd like to stick and ball and I jumped at the chance. Then a cousin offered to lend me mallets, saddlery and five polo ponies, all quiet and well-mannered. I couldn't believe my luck! Someone suggested I rent a house at the club for a couple of weeks and I stayed for two months. Can you imagine that anywhere else except in Argentina?"

She has since bought her own house in the San Diego Club, living there from March to May and September to early December, on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday mornings playing six practice chukkas of 4-12-goal polo.

She accepts she will never scale the highest pinnacles of ladies' polo. The point, she insists, is the sheer pleasure, the friendships it kindles and the fun of organising tournaments for low-goal

players, both men and women, starved of opportunities for match play. To watch her presiding at trophy presentations is to know that, in another life, she was a stand-up comedian.

Claudia was born in Buenos Aires. When she was two, her father, a doctor, and her mother, a pharmacist, migrated to the US, convinced it offered better prospects for their children. Claudia's schooling alternated with holidays in Argentina, followed by a business degree at Chicago University. She then settled in Buenos Aires to manage her father's property investments, ultimately building up her own hospitality-related businesses.

In 1992 she married a Texan, Jeff Frazier, a lawyer with a passion for blues, folk and country & western music. Following the birth of triplet sons in 1996, she put her business career on hold. The family's domestic arrangements now are labyrinthine in their complexity: the boys are at US boarding schools; eight-year old Isla lives with Claudia; and Jeff is based in Ecuador, a human rights activist leading class actions against environmental despoliation. The family gathers at intervals, in particular for Christmas, at what is

now the family home, a beach-house on Galapagos Island.

Claudia can ruffle feathers. She relates an incident soon after she began polo: "It was a wet Saturday afternoon and polo was cancelled so the polo club manager and I organised cards – the gaucho game, truco – with the grooms, and we had an asado. One of the women players, whose groom had joined us, rang and told me, 'You can't do that, he's my groom, I pay for him.' She promised me I would never play women's polo in Argentina."

Claudia was unfazed. The boycott, if indeed there was one, is long passed. She enlisted leading Argentine women for her Bariloche snow-polo, after which others have played in all her FEM Polo tournaments since.

Next year? Ecuador, Texas and San Diego Club in the Argentine autumn are possibilities, but only Polo 4 Peace on Peace Day, 21 September (also at San Diego), is set in concrete. And beyond? "I want to improve my riding," she shrugs. "I'd like to play polo for the rest of my life, but maybe I'll take up dressage when I get older."

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