

CHAPTER XII

POLO FIELDS AND RACE-COURSES

Polo : Measurements of Ground—Construction—Upkeep—Race-Courses—The Mechanical Condition of the Soil—The Selective Treatment of Turf—Mowing—Winter Racing—Summer Racing—The Jumps—Renovating—Harrowing—Rolling—Miscellaneous.

Polo : Measurements of Ground

A full-sized ground should not exceed 300 yards in length by 200 yards in width, if unboarded ; and 300 yards in length and 160 yards in width, if boarded. The goals to be not less than 250 yards apart.

It is not often that a polo ground is made in this country, so it is hardly necessary to go into close details in regard to the construction.

The game itself does not demand a true, level surface, but if the necessary funds are available it is obvious that one should be provided if the speed of the ponies and the skill of the players are to be exercised to their fullest extent.

Construction

The actual making of the ground should be carried out in the way recommended in Chapter XI, see " Levelling a Pitch," and " Working up a Pitch out of the Rough," but as the game is played in the Spring and Summer it will not be necessary to put in a cinder foundation, and only sufficient drains to keep the turf healthy, and carry off surplus water.

The Upkeep of a Polo Field

The polo season is relatively short, but whilst it is in progress the turf is put to very hard wear, consequently every effort should be made to produce the toughest matted turf possible, and one that will give the ponies a sure foothold without cutting up badly.

At the end of each game replace the turf torn up by the ponies, roll and keep the ground in playing condition, and on no account allow the grass to grow long and produce seed, as nothing weakens turf more than this.

At the end of the summer cut the grass as short as the machine will take it, and examine the field carefully.

If it is badly worn or the turf thin, dress with Carters General Purposes Fertiliser No. 3 at the rate of 5 cwt. per acre. Harrow and cross-harrow the turf with a Parmiter Grass Harrow, with the double object of working in the fertiliser and loosening the surface soil, particularly where the turf is worn or thin.

Sow with a mixture of grass seeds specially prepared to suit the soil and the game at the rate of 3 to 6 bushels per acre, according to the state of the turf.

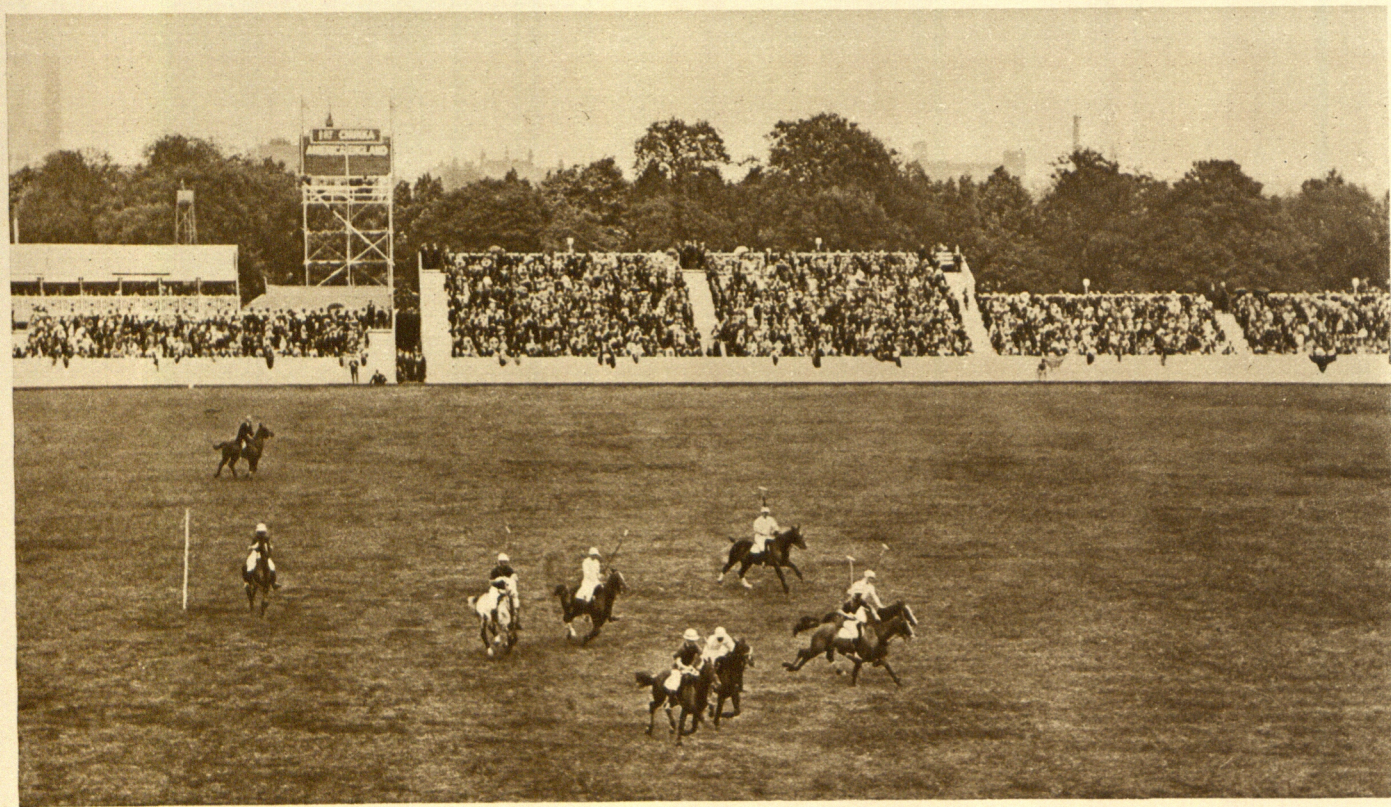
There is a general impression that any rough grass seeds will do for polo, and this is one of the reasons why the turf wears badly, and under certain conditions the ponies slip. Coarse grasses will grow close together, but will never form a close, dense mat, with the result that under certain conditions a pony when pulling up or turning will cut the turf right out of the ground and slip badly. It is the fine, dwarf grasses which creep, form a dense matted turf which gives such a splendid foothold and wears so well. Harrow and cross-harrow again in order to work the seed well into the turf, and cover it as much as possible.

Roll with an ordinary agricultural cylindrical roller.

In the late Autumn test the soil for lime, and should it prove to be deficient dress the turf with Pulverised Chalk (Carbonate of Lime), at the rate of two tons per acre. In the early Spring give a second dressing of the No. 3 Fertiliser, if required, roll and generally work up the field for play.

It is impossible to give a cut and dried programme for the upkeep of a polo field, but the above may be regarded as a good basis upon which to elaborate a system to suit any particular ground.

It goes without saying that the worms should be destroyed, see Chapter XX, and obnoxious weeds removed, see Chapter XV. Special articles will be found dealing with Mowing (Chapter XXIV), Rolling (Chapter XXVI), Top-dressing and Fertilising (Chapter XVII), so it is hardly necessary to go into these subjects here in detail.



POLO AT HURLINGHAM--AMERICA v. ENGLAND.



EPSOM—FINISH OF THE DERBY.

Race-Courses

Racing, either under the Jockey Club or National Hunt Rules, takes place all the year round; in fact, I believe there is a meeting for every day in the year, with the exception of Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day.

There are so many race-courses already in existence that it is difficult to think that licences will be granted for many more new ones; and if there are, one may be quite sure that accessibility rather than suitability will be the deciding factor in the choice of the sites.

The ideal soil for a Race-Course is found on the Downs, and more often than not it is but a thin layer of loam, possibly not exceeding 4 inches on the average, over chalk.

On land of this description the turf is very old and composed of tough, wiry, creeping grasses, which not only form a very close carpet, but the perfect drainage encourages an abnormally strong, springy, root mat.

These conditions are absolutely perfect, and where they exist, horses with doubtful legs can be kept in training even in the driest seasons, on account of the spring or give of the turf, when the going generally is so hard as to cause the trainers much anxiety.

A perfect gallop like this should be jealously guarded and not used, if possible, in very wet weather, otherwise, in common with all other classes of turf, it will cut up.

The courses nearest to perfection in the country are Goodwood, Salisbury and Lewes, where fine galloping conditions can be relied upon no matter how dry the season happens to be.

It goes without saying that separate courses should be devoted to Flat and National Hunt racing, if anything approaching perfection is aimed at.

Unfortunately, these conditions are not often met with; some courses stand on light soils which when dry are very dusty, a few are on medium soils that do not suffer from any serious disabilities, whilst others are on heavy holding soils or clay.

The last class is undoubtedly the most difficult to keep in good galloping condition, because when dry they are so hard that there is always a serious chance of the horses' legs being damaged by concussion; if wet on the surface and dry underneath the foothold is treacherous; and when sodden and yielding, not only is speed lost but there is the danger of valuable horses straining themselves.

Heavy soils, particularly plastic clays, are difficult to drain effectively, owing to the slow movement of the water in the soil, but as it is the only way to keep them in good galloping condition, an efficient system should be adopted.

The upkeep of race-courses can roughly be divided into two parts—one dealing with the mechanical condition of the soil, and the other with the production of a strong, durable, springy turf.

The Mechanical Condition of the Soil

Light soils which crumble and become very dusty when dry can be improved very much if they are dressed as many times as is necessary with sifted loam, old rotted short straw manure or fresh peat moss manure at the rate of 20 to 40 loads per acre.

The dressings of manure, if used, should be applied as soon as the season closes, particularly on courses used for Winter racing, in order to give it plenty of time to go in and become part and parcel of the soil and so avoid any chance of making it rotten or tender.

These materials will add humus to the soil, which not only tends to conserve moisture and so subdue the dust, but being the natural home of the beneficent soil bacteria, it also contributes to the fertility of the soil.

Medium soils, as already explained, are the ideal mechanically, and consequently do not require this class of treatment.

Clay soils should be dressed with sharp sand or, failing this, fine breeze. These materials will cut into the soil, and if regularly used will improve the surface drainage, and so make the going more springy when the ground is dry, and firmer when it is wet.

Heavy soils are perfectly good from a galloping point of view when they do not suffer either from an excess or deficiency of moisture, but they are terrible for the horses when they do, so every effort should be made to improve the condition of the soil.

There is a prejudice against the use of breeze because rumour says that a jockey once suffered from a piece entering his eye; but as he might just as well have picked up a piece of earth or a small stone, it seems a pity to bar its use for this reason.

If the sand or breeze is applied when the ground is soft,

and well rolled in, as long before the next meeting as possible, the chance of such an occurrence is very remote.

It is excellent for filling up cracks, because, when so used, it makes faults in the otherwise impervious clay and so improves the drainage.

Soil of a light nature, old rotted dung, or fresh peat moss manure will also improve the soil mechanically. See Chapters XVI and XVIII.

The process of making any appreciable improvement to the mechanical condition of the soil, on such a large area as a race-course, is so costly, and takes such a long time, that it is rarely attempted.

The Selective Treatment of the Turf

In most cases little or nothing is done to improve the condition of the turf by cultivating the most desirable varieties of grasses, in spite of the fact that much can be done at a very moderate outlay. As a matter of fact, cases are often met with where exactly the opposite happens, and undesirable plants, such as clover, are encouraged by the spasmodic use of the wrong sort of fertiliser.

Turf, in the ordinary course of events, is composed of several varieties of grass growing together, and it just depends upon how it is managed as to which particular varieties will predominate and spread to the exclusion of others.

I will endeavour to make this point quite clear.

If one were to take an acre of grass land, divide it into five equal plots and systematically dress one with chalk, another with nitrogen, the third with phosphates, the fourth with potash, keeping the last as a control, in the course of a few years startling results would be obtained.

By applying the fertilisers year after year, to the same plots, the grasses and plants most responsive to such fertilisers would gradually crowd out and supersede species least responsive to the same fertilisers.

The result of this selective treatment can frequently be observed on old tennis courts; I know of one that has not been marked out for at least 20 years, and yet the position of the old chalk lines is easily visible even to this day, particularly in high summer, when they stand out strong and green, while the rest of the lawn is burnt brown.

This certainly proves that the quality of the turf and the galloping condition of a course can be improved to an

almost unlimited extent by the selective treatment, provided only that the correct fertilisers are regularly used over a series of years.

The selective treatment gave wonderful results at Epsom, and I am getting even better results at Kempton and Hurst Park, where the soft meadow grasses are gradually being crowded out by the tough dwarf matting grasses.

If the ground is deficient in lime an annual Winter dressing of two tons to the acre is to be recommended, followed by Spring and Autumn dressings of Carters General Purposes Grass Fertiliser No. 3, at the rate of $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 cwt. per acre, according to the condition of the soil.

It is naturally very difficult to lay down hard and fast rules for the treatment of a Course without examining the problem on the spot. See "Inspections," Chapter XXXI.

Mowing

The accepted practice is to leave the grass long for Winter racing under National Hunt Rules, and about 4 inches long for summer racing under Jockey Club Rules. As continuous mowing in the growing season takes a most important part in the production of thick, fibrous, springy turf, I intend to argue the point fully from the racing point of view, although the subject has been dealt with generally in Chapter XXIV.

Winter Racing

When the grass is left long, the Autumn rains beat it down, and in this condition it undoubtedly protects the soil from the frost. Apart from this, it can do nothing but damage to the turf, because it weakens and most effectively prevents it from forming a close turf with strong, matted, springy root growth.

If the grass is left moderately long and it mats well, it certainly acts as a cushion and keeps the horses out of the ground to an extent.

The best way out of the difficulty is to keep the grass quite short from the end of the season until about mid-August, feeding it well in the interim.

This will give it time to produce a thick aftermath by the time the next jumping season is in full swing.

Summer Racing

The reason for leaving the grass 4 inches long is to reduce concussion arising from a hard surface, to protect the soil from the heat of the sun, and so conserve moisture.

In cases where water is laid on, all of these arguments fall to the ground, but where it is not they remain. There is no doubt at all that where grass is regularly mown and cut short, such as on the fairway of a Golf Course, not only is the root mat stronger, but the turf produces at least four times as many blades per square foot as it does when allowed to grow long. The length of the leaves does not contribute in any degree to the springiness of turf, only the root mat can do this, so it is more than doubtful if anything is gained by allowing the grass to grow long.

If one were to mow closely a strip across an average race-course, it would first of all have the appearance of modified stubble, and the soil would be plainly visible between the plants, which shows that the long grass hides a multitude of sins; but if the mowing was continued it would quickly develop into a close turf and it would no longer be possible to see the soil, and it is the soil that causes concussion.

Let us compare Polo with Racing—they are both galloping games, the former is played on closely mown turf and the latter on half-long turf.

A game of Polo may consist of seven Chukkers of 8 minutes each, which gives a total duration of play of 56 minutes, during which eight players are galloping up and down a small ground, stopping, starting, turning, twisting, bending, all at top speed.

Two or more games may be played on the same ground weekly for a season of six or eight weeks.

With Racing it is seldom that a meeting lasts more than two days, and if it does, it is probably the only meeting of the year, and in any case weeks or months elapse between the meetings.

There are never more than seven races a day, and I do not suppose that the average field amounts to ten.

It is obvious, therefore, that Polo fields have to stand much harder wear and tear than any race-course, and yet they suffer less. It is only fair, however, to remember, that the Polo season falls in the early summer, when the very best weather may be expected.

If a race club would break with tradition and keep its flat courses mown short, they would wonder why it had not

been done before, and others would soon follow their example.

It would not be advisable to make a sudden break, nor rush to extremes, but if the system was given a trial, by keeping the grass short between the meetings, even if it was allowed to grow to the customary length for the race days, the improvement in the turf and its galloping condition would soon be recognised.

The more frequently turf is mown, the closer it grows, and the constant removal of the leaves stimulates the root growth, more fibre is produced, and a springy matted turf is formed.

It is much easier to repair and keep mown turf in good condition, because every fault is plainly visible. I do not know if galloping through long grass checks the speed of a horse, but it certainly does a running man.

The Jumps

Horses do not have much of a chance of showing true form if they have to take off and land on soft, waterlogged, holding clay, particularly those with small feet, so this part of a Steeplechase Course should be given special attention.

If the soil is a hopeless clay, dig it out to a depth of 12 inches, put in a system of drains if necessary, then 6 inches of chalk, gravel or ashes well trodden and rammed into position, cover with 4 inches of light loamy soil and finish off with turf cut two inches thick. This is only to be recommended in very difficult cases. When it is adopted the work must be done with the utmost care and given as long a time as possible in which to settle, otherwise the remedy may be worse than the disease.

Renovating

All worn places should be made good, every Spring and Autumn, with turf or seeds, according to circumstances.

If seed is used, and the grass is long, it should be watered in with a hose, otherwise it has but a poor chance of reaching the soil.

If the grass is short, the ground should be raked or harrowed, according to the size of the area under treatment, sown with seeds which in both cases should be selected from the varieties best suited, both to the soil and for the production of a close turf composed of those fine wiry creeping grasses which wear so well and form a strong mat of

roots, which makes it springy and takes all the jar out of the ground.

Harrowing

All well-managed grass lands should be harrowed at least once in the Spring in order to remove the dead grass and allow the light, sun, and air to get to the soil.

The best implement to use is the Parmiter Flexible Grass Harrow, see Supplement.

Rolling

This depends so much on the nature of the soil that it is difficult to lay down any hard and fast rules, but the subject has been dealt with so fully in Chapters XXVI and XXVII that it is hardly necessary to discuss the matter further, except to emphasise the importance of rolling after frosts, otherwise the surface will be puffy and treacherous.

There are one or two points that are worth stressing. If the ground is over rolled, it will become hard and the horses will suffer from concussion ; and if it is rolled when wet, it will cap and probably crack.

It should be rolled once after the last frost, and then the rollers should be put away until the late autumn.

The ideal to aim at is a firm smooth surface that is neither too hard nor too soft.

Miscellaneous

At the end of a day's racing, or, if necessary, between the races, the divots of turf cut out by the horses should be carefully replaced.

Weeds should be kept down as much as possible, because many of them lose their foliage in the winter, and leave ugly bare places which may cause a horse to slip and rick itself. See Chapter XV.

The public should be kept off the courses as much as possible, and in cases where it is necessary to cross over one course to reach another, as is frequently the case in the jumping season, the turf should be protected by duck boards which can be put in position and removed in a few minutes.