

Kate Dalrymple (Oakdale High Class of 2005) will graduate from Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo in June. She is studying agribusiness, with a concentration in finance and appraisal. Dalrymple and the Cal Poly polo team recently played in the college national tournament in Virginia, and here are her thoughts on the sport, college and the health benefits of riding:

Q: How did you get started in polo and how did you get on the Cal Poly team? Why did the team do so well this season: Is it due to great horses, experienced riders or is it a combination of both that leads to success?

KATE: I was introduced to the sport my freshman year in high school. My 4H horse group had a polo clinic with Mike O'Ferral, my horseshoer at the time, and the current UC Davis polo coach. After the clinic, I started playing polo twice a week or so for a couple months. Once Rodeo season started back up again, I stopped going to the polo practices because my weekends were taken up with barrel races and high school rodeos.

In college, I competed for Cal Poly rodeo my freshman and sophomore year, and took my junior year off due to expenses. The summer before my senior year at Cal Poly, I joined the Cal Poly Polo Club because I was no longer competing for Cal Poly rodeo. I wanted an equestrian horse sport to be involved in my last year, and I knew I had enjoyed polo in the past.

I think the team was so successful this year, as they have been in the past, because it is made up of seasoned players. The two main starters for the team have been playing polo for four-plus years each. The team is made up of six girls, but there can only be three teammates playing at one time in arena polo. With such a large team base, and alternates to sub in, the women's team is diverse.

Also, the team practices three to four times a week together, and I think that having so much time together as a team really brings us closer. Not only is it beneficial to know your own strengths and weaknesses, but it's important to know about your teammates because you will learn where to fill in the blanks. I think a lot of our success is due to our great coach, Megan Carter Judge. As a Cal Poly polo alumni, she has tons of experience in the sport and at the collegiate level. She has worked hard to build the reputation of the Cal Poly polo team during the last seven years or so.

Q: How many horses on a field at once and about how big is the field (size of a football field?)

KATE: In collegiate polo, we play arena polo in a sand arena with a regulation size of 300 feet

by 150 feet. In arena polo, three people/horses from each team are allowed to play at one time for a grand total of six people in the arena. Grass polo, which is usually what professionals play on, is 300 yards by 160 to 200 yards – about three times the size of a football field. In grass polo, four people/horses per team are allowed for a total of eight horses on the field.

Q: Does everyone ride their own horse and can regular horses be trained for polo? When you take long trips, like to Virginia for the national tournament, do you take your horse or do you get one there?

KATE: It depends on the game location and level of play. For example, I am using my barrel horse to practice polo during the week, so he can get some exercise. If given the choice of riding him or an experienced polo pony in an important game, I would definitely choose the experienced polo pony.

Given a few years of playtime, I think my horse would do well in a high-level game; he is already adjusting extremely well. When we play home games, we will sometimes use my horse and another teammate's polo pony if we are short on horses. Otherwise, we have around 20 polo ponies to choose from at home. Typically, if we travel to a game within a four-hour drive, we will take a string (six horses) with us if the opposing team doesn't have enough horses for us to play on.

On our trip to Virginia, we used a string of horses provided by an all-girls high school in Maryland. It is too long of a drive to take a large number of our horses across the country.

Q: Anything different about the saddle for riding and polo? How long is the mallet, how heavy is it? Is the ball wood and is it heavy, too? How wide are the goals?

KATE: An English saddle is used for polo, so unlike a western saddle, it doesn't have a horn to hold onto. The mallets range in size; players will change mallet sizes depending on the height of the horse they are riding. Mallet lengths range from 49 inches to 53 inches. The mallets aren't too heavy, but some are considered heavier than others. The ball for arena polo has to weigh 170-182 grams. The goals are 10 feet wide, 15 feet high and 1 foot deep – it's built into the wall, so there is a one-foot indentation for the 10-foot width of the wall. The ball must pass completely across the goal line to be considered a goal.

Q: It looks pretty easy riding atop a well-trained horse, but tell me about the physical

demands of staying on the horse while controlling it? Now add in swinging a mallet to hit a ball on the ground, leaning down. How much strength does that demand? Are you sore afterward, and what part of the body hurts the most?

KATE: Good riders make riding look easy. Being a good rider requires strong and simultaneous use of the legs and seat. Add polo into the mix, and you are now also requiring the strength of your arms to control the horse at a high speed, and hitting the ball with the other arm. The stomach and abs are worked quite a bit with all of the leaning left, right, and reaching down to get the ball. Being an avid rider, I was not too sore after the first few weeks of polo practice since I am used to the physical demands of riding. However, since playing polo, I have been required to ride a variety of horses, and I have come to realize certain horses give me a terrible backache. Some horses are extremely bouncy or harder to ride, requiring more physical exertion on my behalf.

Q: How tall is your horse, what does he/she weigh and how long have you been riding horses in general?

KATE: My personal horse is 15.2 hands tall. A hand is considered to be 4 inches, so in essence, my horse is 62 inches tall at the withers, which is the highest point of the back. Since he is a quarterhorse, he is pretty stocky and weighs around 1,200 lbs. I first rode a horse around the age of 4 or 5, but when my family moved to a ranch in Oakdale with acreage, I got my first horse at age 6. Since I got my first horse, I have been riding every day or every other day. I started competing in 4H horse shows at age 9, starting competing in speed events (gymkhanas) at 12, and started competing in rodeos at 13. My riding skills greatly improved from age 13 to 18, when I took professional barrel racing lessons on a weekly to bi-monthly basis.

Q: Is polo the sort of sport you can see yourself playing after college? What do you like about it?

KATE: I would love to play polo after college, and I intend to practice and help out with the Cal Poly Polo club this next year after I graduate from Cal Poly, if I stick around SLO for another year. If I move away, there are numerous polo clubs across the country that I could be involved in down the road.

The best thing about polo is the horses and the people. Everyone that I have met in the sport,

so far, has been overwhelmingly accepting and friendly. The horses are amazing, and fun to ride. I started out this year playing polo for fun, and now that I have gotten more serious about the game, the horses I ride remind me that at the end of the day that I am in this sport for fun.

Q: What are some of the important parts of polo that we, as mere viewers, should know about? Is there an element of danger, and what are some of the risky parts?

KATE: Polo can be dangerous if a novice rider attempts to jump into the sport. Usually, people who have a long history of riding can acclimate to the intensity that comes with playing polo. Novice riders will probably need to brush up riding skills before attempting to ride a horse, lean off the side, and hit a ball, while getting hit on the other side by a 1,000-pound horse and rider. Spectators should be aware of where the ball is at all times; a lot of times, balls will get hit out of the arena and could possibly hit someone's face causing injury. If spectators stand right up against the arena, they should also consider stepping away from the rail when the players run by; it would hurt if a spectator were to get hit in the face when a player runs by!

Q: Horseriding, in general, is it a good sport for promoting physical fitness? What parts of the rider's body are put to work when atop the horse and how does the exercise benefit the horse?

KATE: For the person, same demands as previously mentioned above. Riding is extremely good exercise for the horses, and is usually necessary unless there are health issues. I try to ride my horse four to five times a week, one to two hours a day, to keep him in good shape. I don't like to do the same thing with him everyday. I might work him in the arena doing different exercises one day, condition him on the track the next day, play polo the next, go trail riding around the ranch, and then maybe take him to the beach on the weekend. Horses are just like people; they get bored and less motivated to do something if it's the same activity all the time.

Q: Do you remember the first time you got on a horse and can you briefly describe it? How about the first time you fell off? Any idea how many times you've tumbled and any injuries? What happens when you fall in polo?

KATE: I believe the first time I got on a horse was at a trail riding barn in Olympia, Washington, where I spent the first six years of my life. I was about 4 or 5, and I rode a little pony through the

forest. I was hooked, and within six months of moving from Washington to California, I started taking western riding lessons, and then got my first horse as a Christmas present.

Well, the first time I fell off was shortly after I got my very first horse, Rosie, at the age of 6. I was riding her in my pasture at home in Oakdale. She was an older horse, so she tripped on a little incline in the pasture, and I came off ... landed right in a pile of cow manure! I grew up on a dairy farm, so the heifers would frequently be turned out into the pasture I would usually ride in. At least the manure made for a soft landing, and I was just fine.

I've been fortunate to only fall off three times. Two of those times I bailed off (came off by my own will) the horse when they started to buck and rear. I try to ride smart avoid dangerous situations if at all possible, and I think that's why I have luckily not

Q: What is your major and do you graduate this spring?

KATE: I am an Agribusiness senior with a concentration in finance and appraisal. I am graduating in June 2009, working a summer job riding horses out in Colorado until October, and then attempting to get my first real after graduation job in SLO after the summer!