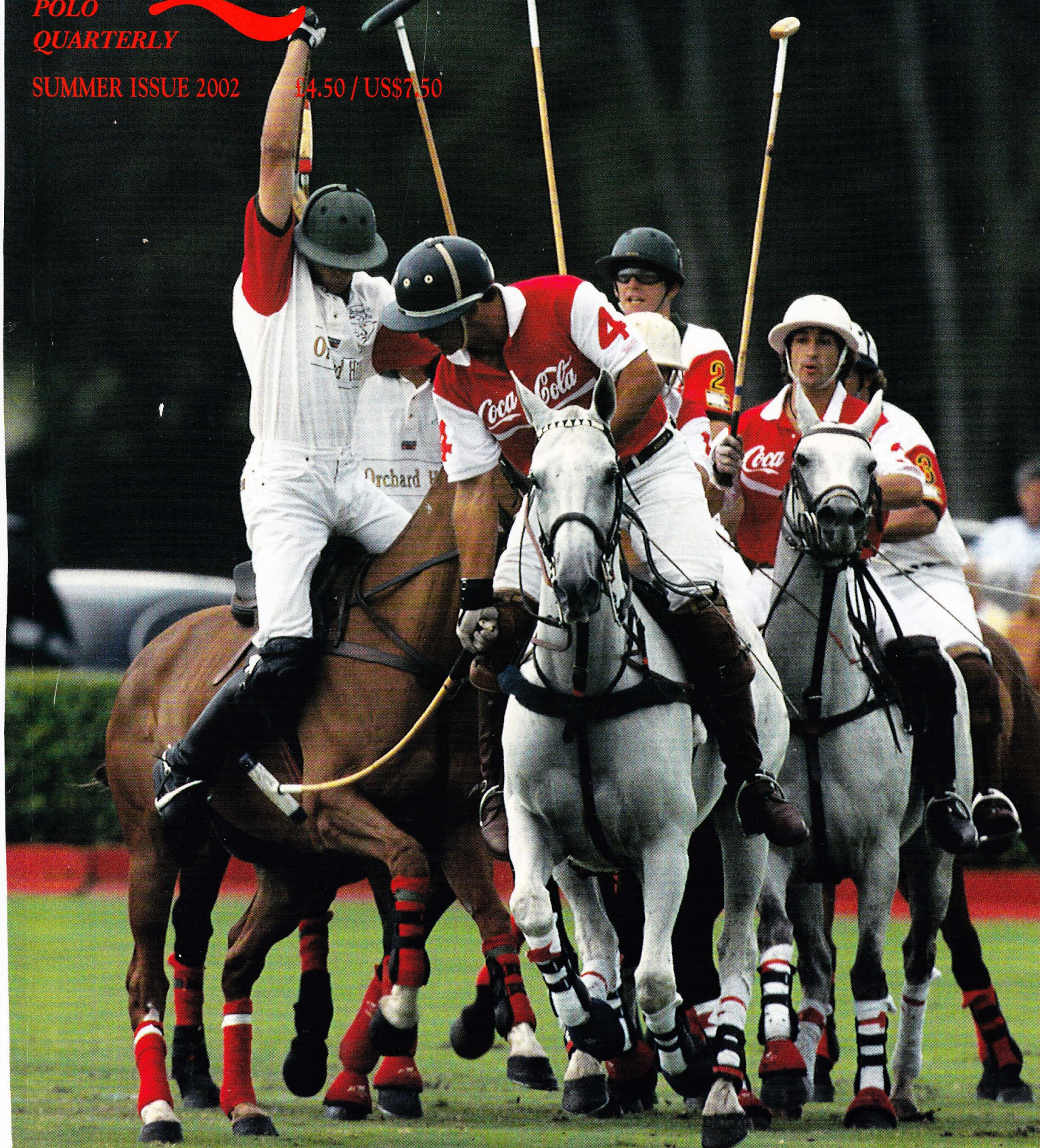


PQ *international*

POLO
QUARTERLY

SUMMER ISSUE 2002

£4.50 / US\$7.50







COURTESY BARON ELIE DE ROTHSCHILD

The celebrated 19-goal Laversine/Casarejo team, 1958 – Cano Gracida, Pedro Domecq La Riva, Baron Elie de Rothschild, Pato Gracida

NOT FOR THE GLORY

Baron Elie de Rothschild regards himself as a survivor from a long-lost polo epoch, as Camilla Alfthan discovered

Polo has changed, and so has the acceleration of the world, since Baron Elie de Rothschild first took up the game. The tall, Parisian member of the banking family had an abrupt end to his polo career – a game he defines as a ‘ruthless, virile sport’.

“I had decided to emulate Prince Philip and stop when I was fifty. Then I played in Paris with my son when I was fifty-one – it was just a members’ game. At one point my son was yelling at me, ‘Get the hell out of the scramble’, and before I knew it, the ball hit me in the face and I lost an eye.

“After that I really gave up playing. I was not allowed to play with one eye.”

Baron Elie is an impressive figure – tall, elegant and with a charismatic per-

sonality. A *bon vivant*, he is no stranger to hardship. As a young soldier he spent five years in a German camp – ‘something which taught me a lot about life’.

At the age of eighty-four he still keeps an office in the Paris building of the family wineries, Domaines de Rothschild (Lafite), even though his lifelong secretary had to be replaced recently. “She didn’t want to leave, you know, but she was eighty.”

His office interior is *art deco*, with large, modern paintings – the Baron is an avid collector – and a painting of his wife, Lillian, to whom he has been married for over sixty years.

A polo sculpture is one of the few traces of his involvement in a game in which he made a lasting impression,

adding the prestige and glamour that only he could procure.

Baron Elie has won six Paris Open titles – the first in 1958 – three Gold Cups at Deauville and the Cowdray Park Gold Cup for the British Open, twice.

“Most of my trophies I have given away. One I use for my toothbrush – it is very good, it never falls over,” he says with his typical sense of humour. Banking was always the most important thing in his life, even if polo became a passion and a family tradition.

Indeed, among the many players and patrons on the French polo scene, it was the Rothschilds who did most for the game, on and off the field.

“My father, Robert, was the first to play, before the turn of the twentieth

century," recalled Baron Elie. "Some of my cousins also played, because it was fashionable. Here, my father was the only real player. He had two polo grounds in Chantilly, where he built stables. He founded the Deauville club and built a stable for the Duc de Gramont.

"My father was very important in France – I just followed in his footsteps."

Baron Elie began to stick and ball on a Shetland pony at the age of nine. After that he would 'stick and ball all his life'.

In 1950 he won the inaugural tournament in Deauville. For nineteen years he played at Bagatelle in Paris, and was president there for eight years, having previously been treasurer and vice-president. In 1968 he renovated the club, with friends, and also founded the first polo school in France, handing over all his ponies when he stopped playing.

During his time he has known – and assembled – some of the greatest players in France and England.

"Originally it was a case of *polo de salons*. Then Tommy Hitchcock introduced the American way. The best players in the old days were Americans – but there were also a number of good English and Argentinians. They were all in the Army and were gentlemen.

"When the Americans were good, they were good. When the Argentinians were good, they were assassins."

As a survivor from a lost epoch, the Baron regrets the old days, when everyone was an amateur and when players, despite heated exchanges on the field, would join in after a match for a 'third half-time', which lasted until late at night.

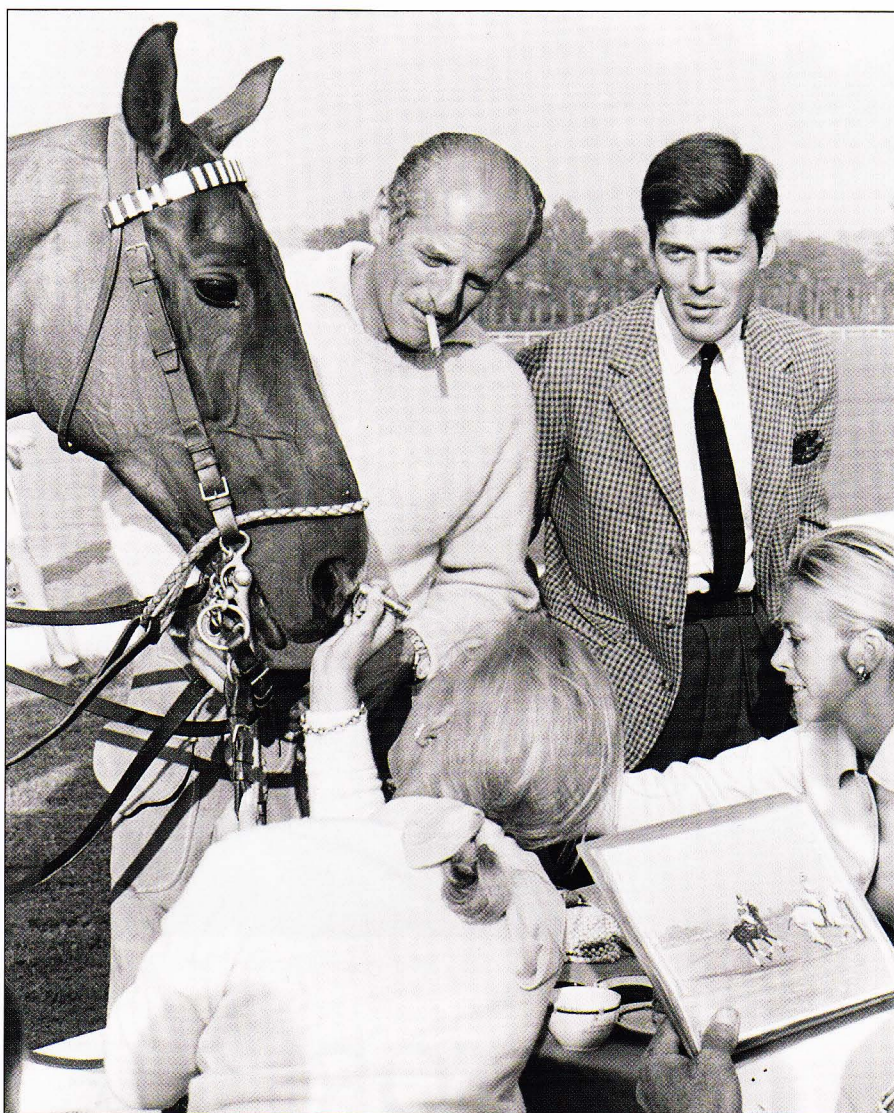
"When certain modern patrons came in they changed the game," said the Baron. "They would pay \$50,000 for a pony, which we did not want to pay \$5,000 for, and up to \$200,000 for a player.

"Before, the Argentinians would just sell a few horses to pay for their trip and make their money from cattle. Now, I think, they only live from polo – breeding and playing.

"A few years ago I went back to Deauville. The players were having dinner at the pool, and then they went to bed at ten o'clock. In my day we were like a big family – after a match we always had a *fiesta* with the grooms and did not get to bed until seven in the morning. Then we played in the afternoon."

Baron Elie's best team-mates, Cano and Pato Gracida and Perico Domecq La Riva were also great friends.

"We played for more than ten years and there was never a bad word between us. We had so much fun – we were painting the town red – we played for the fun



Equestrian admirers in the 1960s



Castile, 1958

of it, not for money or glory. We did not bet, either. We just played for the enjoyment of the game.

"I had a 3-goal handicap – and once went to 4-goals – and usually I played at No 1 or No 2. Cano was 8-goals, Pato 8 or 7-goals and Perico was 4-goals."

On the continent, their team was known as Laversine, while in England it was called Casarejo. Among the Baron's fondest memories of those days are the matches against Windsor Park, captained by the Duke of Edinburgh.

"We used to fight a lot. The Duke was very competitive and very rude. He would use foul language. The Queen once said to my wife, 'don't forget that he is a sailor.'"

"When he broke his leg in a match, I sent him a case of Chateau Lafite, saying that it would help his bones heal. He replied that his bones were already full of Lafite."

When Baron Elie won his first Gold Cup in England, with Casarejo in 1959, he stayed with Lord Cowdray at Cowdray Park. "I was rather a playboy, driving a red Ferrari, but always with my wife!

"When I was ready to return to France, I said that I was taking the cup with me. Lord Cowdray objected, saying that it was the first time the cup had left England and that something might hap-



Father and son – Baron Elie with Nathaniel

pen to it.

"I said 'It is the first time you have lost it' – and took it with me. When I won it again the next season, I took it back to France once more, and then had a replica made in Paris."

In the 1960 Gold Cup final, the Baron met his English cousin Evelyn's team, Centaurs. "It was very funny – we were two Rothschilds, one French and

one English, and we had four Gracidas, two on each side.

"The commentator had a lot of fun with this – he kept mixing up the names of both teams. 'Gracida takes the ball from Gracida and scores a goal – Gracida fights back, so now Centaurs are in the lead, or is it Casarejo?' We beat the hell out of them!

"The Queen was watching the



Being received by HM The Queen at Guards, 1959



Discussing tactics

match, next to my wife, Lilian. The Queen was asking her questions such as 'Does your husband ride the same pony as last year?' which made Lilian very uncomfortable, as she did not have a clue."

By the following day the final, between two Rothschilds, had become a sensation, and made headlines in the local newspapers.

Although the lush green turf, soft from recent rain, was soon badly cut up, the match proved a 'royal' battle with fast and thrilling play.

Casarejo went into a 3-0 lead before Centaurs opened up their account, and the home side were always trailing. But they fought magnificently to lose by 8-7. After the match came the presentation ceremony... and a sensation.

The gallant, debonair Baron took the Queen – and everyone else – completely by surprise by walking up and proffering the cup for her to drink the first toast. She accepted, however, with a typically radiant smile, and amid cheers from the crowds...

Then the Baron invited the Duke to have a drink, but he declined, saying with a broad grin, 'No, let the players have it. I don't deserve it'.

Later, Lord Cowdray said he could not remember whether it had ever happened before but added: "There are no rules about such things."

Certain rules do, however, apply to polo – not least on today's fields. As Baron Elie de Rothschild has noted, the world has changed, but one should not forget that polo brings with it a certain sense of duty. "One is privileged to be a part of it and one should respects its ethics, the *savoir vivre* – and one's fellow players.

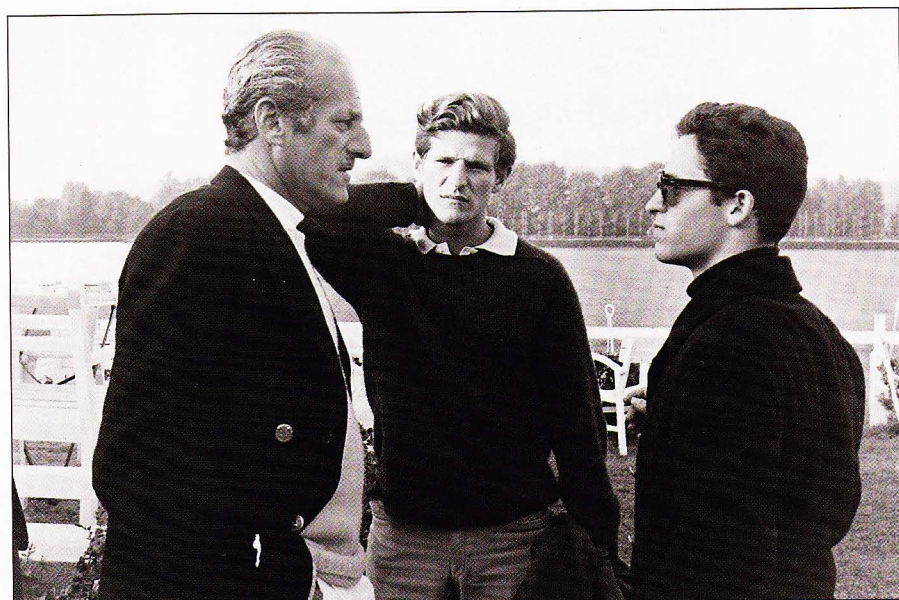
"At the age of eighty-four I don't want to have to remind people that an education exists."



Into action at Bagatelle, Paris, 1966



Baron Elie in the commentator's seat



Polo trio – Baron Elie, Eduardo Moore and Guy Wildenstein