

Eduardo on the ball for La Cañada during the last Argentine Open

STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

Eduardo Novillo Astrada tells Camilla Alfthan that consistency is the real secret to becoming a good player

Suddenly in 1999 the Novillo Astrada clan became the focus of attention, when they made it to the finals of the Argentine Open, and lost by only two goals against Indios Chapaleufú II.

Alejandro 'Pikki' Diaz Alberdi had broken his collarbone, and his replacement never quite managed to enter the match.

To most people, the three brothers



Eduardo at full gallop during the 2000 Open

seemed to come out of nowhere, and expectations for last year's Abierto were high. This time, however, injured horses and bad weather conditions meant that the Novillo Astradas only made it to the semi-finals, losing by two goals against Cambiaso's team, La Dolfina.

Nevertheless, we have far from seen the last of their La Cañada team, named after the family polo club, La Cañada, which is also the largest polo club in Argentina with seventy members.

Altogether, there are eight Novillo Astradas on the fields of play – the three 9-goalers, Eduardo, Miguel and Javier, 7-goal Ignacio and 4-goal Alejandro, all aged between nineteen and twenty-eight. Their three cousins, Julio, Santiago and Juan are all 4-goal players, aged between sixteen and seventeen.

The first family member to shine on the national polo scene was the brothers' grandfather, Julio, who is now eighty-six and who played the galloping game in the 1930s.

Julio held a 5-goal handicap and his son, Eduardo, now fifty-two, was 9-goals at his peak. He won the Hurlingham Open and the Tortugas and played the Open several times, once making it to the final. Eduardo played with his brother, Julio and with friends at La Cañada, which they had established with a cousin.

La Cañada is also where they keep most of their horses, says eldest brother, Eduardo, who works in his father's real estate business.

"We started playing when we were very young – about five or six years old. We would stick and ball and ride a lot. We spent our holidays here in Lujan, and also played with our four cousins in the Tortugas country club.

"Our father would teach us to play, as well as our uncle. We also learned a lot from our groom, Raoul Simerez, who has been with the family for more than thirty years, and who now runs the organisation.

"It's easier to learn how to play well when you have a good player on the field. We have played practice games with teams of 20 to 25-goals, since we were very young. That's why the young stars get to play so well, because they practise with great talent, and they watch and learn."

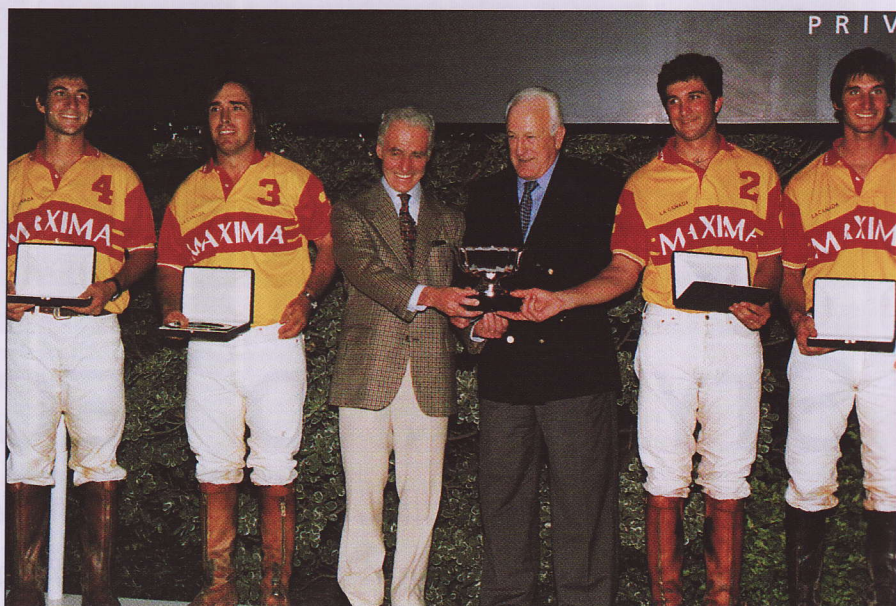
Eduardo also played at the Irish Catholic Newman College and later participated in the annual Potrillo tournament.

He and his brothers also practise at their Lujan-based family *estancia*, which has another three fields.

"Our father used to shout at us a lot. He said that we always have to get the man first, and then the ball. That's the golden rule in polo. If you are looking at



Eduardo and Nachi Heguy race for possession at Palermo



La Cañada won the 1999 Abierto semi-finals



Winning the Midhurst Town Cup with Coca-Cola in 1999

MIKE ROBERTS

PUIZ RUSSELL-STONEHAM

the ball, trying to get it, the man will get it before you.

"But if you worry about him first, you can always get the ball afterwards. All high-goal players can hit the ball very well, so tactics become more important at this level. Also you have to be a very good rider, in order to be a good polo player.

"For many years we would ride without stirrups, to learn how to use our legs well. I always say that you have to be a mix of an Indian and an English rider, to combine a natural style with technique."

Having other interests than polo did not prove to be a problem either. When younger, Eduardo played rugby in the morning and polo in the afternoon, and then when he was eighteen and had finished school, he opted for polo.

He then went on to study business administration at university.

All four brothers have steadily improved their handicaps, while they are getting better horses each year.

"There are no secrets to being a good player – it is all about consistency," said Eduardo. "It is a case of playing every week, all year around, with the best people. Some people come to Argentina, and learn for a few weeks and then they leave. But this is impossible; you forget everything that you have learned.

"Henry Brett, the Gracidas, Mike Azzaro – they all come here to learn for long periods and this has been significant in their progress.

"The way we do it here, is by starting at the bottom. You have to know how to do everything yourself. Our parents don't give us six horses and a groom – they give us one or two and then we have to manage with that. We take the horses from the paddock ourselves, we feed them, we do everything. We are our own grooms. That's the only way you can become a good player.

"Just as in a business, you have to know all the levels of the job in order to be really good. You can't play high-goal, if you don't know the basics of good horsemanship."

For Eduardo and his brothers, polo was always a way of life, even if he will sooner or later concentrate on his business career and play only in Argentina.

"We are trying to put together a team with four brothers. So, when I retire, the youngest will take my place," says Eduardo, who this season will play his first British high-goal season for Black Bears, alongside Javier.

"We fight every ball as if it were the last – this is very characteristic of our family. We have a good defence and we are difficult to beat. We play a lot together and know each other well. That's a great advantage."



Eduardo Novillo Astrada



Eduardo pursued by a brace of Heguys