

# the golden boy

As a teenager, Adolfo Cambiaso created a deafening buzz in the polo world. The youngest ever player to achieve a 10-goal handicap, and with remarkable subsequent success, he's one of the best to have ever graced the field

WORDS SARAH EAKIN

The year is 1991. A 16-year-old boy has just arrived in England to play in the high goal with a reputation that precedes him by way of the transatlantic polo grapevine. He sits fieldside at Cowdray Park Polo Club on the front of a car he is too young to drive. The joke among polo followers is that while he might show other polo players how to 'drive the bus' on the polo field, he needs a chauffeur to get to the club.

'Always try to be the best, never think you are the best,' he replies, when asked what goes through his mind as a young player in his first professional year. It is a mantra passed down to him from his father, Adolfo Cambiaso Sr, who in turn borrowed it from one of motor racing's greats, Argentina's Juan-Manuel Fangio. 'I still think it's right,' he says today. 'Every day everybody is trying to beat you. Every day you try to improve. If you think you are the best then you are in trouble.' It is this self-critical attitude that ensures his continuing reputation as the world's greatest polo player.

Cambiaso grew up at the La Martina Polo Ranch just outside Buenos Aires, where he played from an early age alongside half-brothers Salvador and Marcial Socas, and went from two to ten goals in five years. When he arrived at 15 years of age in Palm Beach at the instigation of Ernesto Trotz, he was already drawing comparisons with the all-time greats. Dubbed 'The Boy Wonder' by the polo press, he caught the eye of Sinclair Hill. 'He has a gift,' the Australian former star player told *Polo Magazine* at the time. 'He plays as if he had 20 years experience. He can only be compared with Juan Carlos Harriott for his anticipation and hand-eye co-ordination.'

Two years later he became the youngest player to ever reach 10-goal, but he took it in his stride. 'At 17 you don't even know you are 10,' he reflects. 'You don't think about it until your twenties.' In his first year as a pro he even surpassed the expectations of those who knew him well, winning the USPA Gold Cup in Florida with Cellular One and the British Open Championship for the Gold Cup in England with Tramontana.

Cambiaso is a natural, but he is also a winner who works hard for his success. He claims to think of just one thing when playing: putting the ball between the goals. He practices every day, yet when it comes to a match he eschews tactics and team meetings in favour of spontaneity. 'Not even my teammates know what I'm going to do,' he laughs. 'I try to do what the other guy is not thinking; I take responsibility to win or lose.' It goes without saying that this very rarely results in the latter.

He ended last year with a win in the Argentine Open defending the world's most coveted polo title with his own team La Dolfina - and scored 505 goals, the biggest total in the tournament's history. It capped a year that saw an impressive return to the competitive world of Florida high-goal polo, winning the Ylvisaker Trophy and Hall of Fame Cup at the International Polo Club, Palm Beach with New Bridge La Dolfina. In England Cambiaso claimed victory in the Queen's Cup with Dubai before returning to

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the US later in the year to claim the USPA Gold Cup with New Bridge in Aiken, South Carolina. In January this year, New Bridge and Cambiaso won the 22-goal Joe Barry Memorial Trophy at IPC at the International Polo Club, Palm Beach. Cambiaso shone throughout the tournament, was MVP in the finals and won best playing pony for his horse José. But after years of success, he admits that the Argentine Open, the US Open, the British Open and the Queens Cup

are the only tournaments that continue to motivate him.

For three US winters Cambiaso was sequestered in the private polo barn of Jedi's patron Eric Koch. When he returned to the competitive arena for the 2006 season in Palm Beach he was exceedingly hot property. Seven years into his own breeding program in Argentina, he felt his horses were ready and when approached by a friend, Matias Magrini, he agreed to play with New Bridge. His criteria for signing for teams are simple. 'If you don't have a good relationship you don't end up having a good team,' he said. 'If you don't like the other player or if you don't like the way he is... I prefer not to do it. I don't think about the money. I like to celebrate and play with friends and not with somebody that I don't like. If I can do it, I will keep on doing it.'

The only noteworthy blip in a 12-month winning streak for Cambiaso came in the semi-finals of the Gold Cup at Cowdray Park when his supremacy was challenged by two of the pretenders to the throne - the Pieres brothers Facundo and Gonzalo - and Cambiaso lost in overtime. 'There are Facundo Pieres, Pablo MacDonough, Juan Martin Nero - the way I see it four or five top, top players and I think they are playing another level,' he says of the new crop of Argentine players who have the talent and game skills to take him on. 'They are young and very good players so you have to keep improving and getting better horses and get ready for them.'

For the time being, however, Cambiaso's position is unassailable, and he is routinely likened to giants of other sports.

'Tiger Woods is Tiger Woods,' he responds. 'Maradona is Maradona, Jordan is Jordan. Different game - different things. In this game it depends which teams you pick, how many tournaments you win during the year. If you have good horses and a good team you can do good. If you have one year that all those things are not together, you are no more the best. I don't like to talk about me. I just play, I like the game and



that's it. To be the best you have to show it, not just hear it.'

Cambiaso is universally recognised as a nice guy, loyal to his friends and a hard worker for charity. One cause particularly close to his heart is the plight of children, and he regards it as a scandal that there are children in Argentina without enough to eat. One of his most proud associations is his charitable collaboration with the ShowMatch TV programme.

His association with such causes is made even more valuable thanks to his marriage to Argentinian supermodel Maria Vasquez. Their status as a celebrity couple makes them the polo equivalent of the Beckhams. With the help of his wife he recently launched his own lifestyle brand in Argentina 'La Dolфина' (after his nickname 'Dolphin') at [www.ladolфина.com.ar](http://www.ladolфина.com.ar), and the site is graced with smoldering shots of 'Adolfito' sporting his own clothing line. He plays this down, saying he 'hates modelling', but he believes in the project. ('I thought it could work as a brand, because it's a true story, it's real.') This year Cambiaso and fellow Argentine Eduardo Novillo Astrada signed with Jaeger-LeCoultre and were sporting their exclusive 'Reverso' edition at the Argentine Open.

It is a tasteful and well-matched partnership that could spark a series of further polo endorsements for Cambiaso and others besides. Polo has seen an influx of logos and insignia, and cable coverage of the sport is already in place. Cambiaso is ready to take the route offered but sees the relationship with sponsors as a two-way street. Turning down offers from other companies to endorse their products he signed with Jaeger-LeCoultre with the proviso that they put much back into the sport. In the same spirit, Cambiaso sees La Dolфина as a vehicle for popularising polo, and he ruffled a few feathers when he kitted his team out in the colours of his local football team, Nueva Chicago. 'Fans took to it,' he recalls. 'But some people didn't want to change - I hate that.'

This philanthropic, populist side to Cambiaso is part of a complex personality - organised and professional, he also has a sense of fun and an almost cavalier approach to his performance on the field that is the luxury of those few sportsmen whose talent comes naturally. 'I'm not really good on mornings,' he admits. 'I'm better at night. I take polo as a hobby. Even if it's a final or if it's a practice I take it the same way. It's another game for me. I really don't think about what I eat, if I sleep or I don't sleep. I just go and play. That's the way I am.'

'He has incredible confidence,' says Russ McCall. 'If you are a goal down in the last chukka he will say, "Don't worry, we will win".' And with or without all the marketing potential in the world, a player who can deliver those results is priceless. So what does it take to stay at the top? Horses, for



**Previous page** Cambiaso in the 40-goal Andrew Seavill match at Stedham in June 2006

- 1 A 20-year-old Adolfo in 1995
- 2 With his two children, Mia and Adolfo Jr, in January 2007
- 3 Picture perfect: Adolfo with his wife, Maria Vasquez



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one, business acumen for another, with dedication a sure third. And Cambiaso seems to have all three. 'The horses recharge the battery,' he believes, 'and sometimes that motivates you more than the tournament, when you win Best Playing Pony and you breed the horse.'

Finishing his career holds no fears for Cambiaso, who says he prefers breeding his horses to playing polo. He is happy to stay at his stables surrounded by the ponies he loves and the people he trusts. 'I like the horses but I also like the water,' he says. 'So I

know how to windsurf, to surf and to play golf - sports that have nothing to do with polo. I would play tennis if I wasn't a polo player. When it comes to vacation I can go to the beach and do other things that are disconnected from the horse. But I really like to be connected with the horses because I don't take it as a job. I'm lucky to get paid to play the sport. I would play it for free if I had enough money. I would keep on playing but the difference would be in picking the places where I want to play.'

Away from sport, does he harbour other ambitions - a career in politics, perhaps? 'No,' he smiles. 'You have to be corrupt for that.' Polo administration? 'If I can help, yes,' he answers thoughtfully. 'If not, no.' Then there is the next generation. Cambiaso thinks it unlikely that four-year-old daughter Mia will become a polo player but his expression changes when he considers his son. The chances of one-year-old Adolfo Junior following in his father's illustrious footsteps are the nearest thing in polo to a racing certainty. Cambiaso laughs. 'If not,' he says simply, 'I kill him!'