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CARLOS GRACIDA: MONARCH OF THE SPORT OF KINGS

He is regarded as the perfect player, unique in his ability to anticipate the game and “read” it. 51-year-old Carlos Gracida (+9) has won more high goal tournaments in the history of polo than any other player. POLO+10 went along to meet the polo legend.

BY TRACEY SHEERAN PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID LOMINSKA



1 Carlos Gracida also won the Queen's Cup at the English Guards Polo Club where Queen Elizabeth II traditionally presides over the winners' ceremony 2 Princess Diana and Gracida 3 Gracida played with a handicap of +10 for 21 years 4 Prince Charles, who has been a passionate polo player for 40 years, was also one of Gracida's pupils.

Carlos Gracida is considered by many to be a living polo legend, having won more high-goal tournaments than any player in the history of the game, including every major title in the world. He was a member of Kerry Packer's famed Ellerstina team and also La Espadaña, considered by many as the best polo team of the last twenty years.

Polo commentators claim that Carlos Gracida is the perfect, complete player, who is unparalleled in his anticipation and ability to "read" the game. He has won the British Open Gold Cup ten times (more than any other player), the US Open nine times and the Argentine Open five times. He is the only player in history to win the Grand Slam, a feat he achieved in 1987, 1988 and again in 1994. Carlos has won Player of the Year in America five times (a record he shares with his brother "Memo" Guillermo) and he is the only foreigner to win the Olimpia de Plata, Argentina's Most Valuable Player Award, which he won in 1988.

At the age of 51 and still playing off an impressive +9-goal handicap in Argentina (+8 in the USA) Carlos continues to play all over the world. On 17th February, Carlos will be inducted into the Living Hall of Fame at the Museum of Polo in Wellington, Florida, where Carlos now lives with his wife and two sons, Carlitos (aged 21 and +2 goals) and Mariano (18 years old and +3-goals). To mark his award, Carlos spoke exclusively to POLO+10 World and when asked about the honour he was incredibly modest. "I don't see the award in terms of recognition, but an opportunity to celebrate over 30 years as a professional polo player with my friends, family and savour a special moment in my life, surrounded by those I cherish most." His brother Memo was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997 and there has always been a healthy level of rivalry between

the two: "Being the younger brother, as a kid I always wanted to beat him, even in practice games, but as we have gotten older and are no longer playing the big tournaments, that has calmed down and we have a really great relationship – he's my best friend and we still play together a lot. We would really like to play together as a Gracida team with Roberto and Julio – we could field a pretty good team of +24 goals and have a lot of fun."

With so many incredible wins to his credit, it is hard to choose a career highlight, but Carlos's most gratifying and fulfilling achievement was in 1988 when he won the Argentine Open for the second time, playing on the La Espadaña team, scoring an incredible +10 goals during the finals. Asked about the secret of his success, Carlos replies simply, "the love of the game; it has to be your number one passion, your reason to live. It is only when I started playing in the US that I became totally obsessed with polo, as I had been playing +16 goal polo in Mexico up until then (there was no high goal polo in his native country) and not entirely convinced that I wanted to turn professional. I was incredibly lucky, that I managed to start winning at a competitive level in America quite quickly and then got completely bitten by the polo bug."

Like all top players, Gracida credits much of his good fortune to the quality of his ponies. "I completely believe that you win the game before you set foot on the field – having the right ponies, the right team and the best possible mental preparation. Good horsemanship is also really important if you want a long-term career in high-goal polo, you need to understand the horses, which is why I am spending a lot of time breeding and developing my own ponies." Indeed he is so passionate about his ponies – which he likens to finely tuned Formula 1 cars – that he has established breeding



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programmes in Argentina in conjunction with Adolfo Cambiaso and Matias Magrini and a cloning operation in association with Daniel San Martino at his embryo centre in Pilar. The first foals from Carlos's top mares (including Romanza, who won 7 US Opens in addition to the Gold Cup and Palermo) will arrive next spring.

In 2011 Carlos launched Gracida Polo (in association with the New York based G2 Investment Group) as a lifestyle brand focusing on luxury products, real estate development and athlete management. Gracida Polo has already begun the development of its initial real estate projects in China, Mexico and the UK. Getting polo onto TV is another of Gracida's goals: For a player steeped in generations of tradition and four generations of Gracida players, Carlos is surprisingly forward-thinking. "I really believe that getting polo onto TV is key to developing the sport and, for it to work well, the rules of polo should be simplified to ensure a faster, more flowing, open game that can be broadcast in an exciting way. What could be more thrilling than watching a fast, well filmed 40 minute match featuring the best international high goal players?"

Staying at the top for so many years is hard work. "My father always told me that the most difficult thing in life is not to get there, it's to stay there! I first reached +10-goals in 1985 and the last time was in 2006, so it was 21 years – on and off – at 10. When you are +10 goals, you always have to prove yourself but I still want to be as good as I can possibly be... and for my age, I think I'm still doing OK", he laughs.

Carlos is a renowned polo coach, having given lessons to Prince Charles, Princes William and Harry, King Constantine of Greece, the Sultan of Brunei, the Prince of Jordan and Sylvester Stallone among others. "Hard work, dedication and always look for a good teacher", is his advice to players wishing to improve their game. Wise words from a legend celebrating a third of a century at the top of the game.