





Players change ponies regularly to prevent them becoming too tired

Anyone for POLO?

The sport of kings is thriving in Somerset. We visit one of the UK's oldest polo clubs to find out more about this ancient game and how you can get involved

WORDS: Catherine Welton PHOTOS: Dapper and Jude Photography

Hooves thunder past and riders in smart white breeches lean from their mounts at perilous angles, jostling for pole position. There's a thwack as a mallet hits a ball, a cheer goes up as it flies through the air between the towering, white goalposts. A stylish crowd is gathered at the edge of the pitch, barely metres from the action, enjoying the spectacle and the sunshine. Hampers are eagerly being tucked into and, somewhere, a cork pops.

This is polo, the sport of kings – and Somerset is home to one of the oldest clubs in the UK, Taunton Vale Polo Club.

Matches are played at their Orchard Portman grounds every weekend between April and September, British weather permitting, of course. Apart from at a few major tournaments, entry is free for spectators, who can also enjoy the licensed bar in the atmospheric thatched clubhouse which dates to 1911.

It's an exhilarating sport to watch and so fast-paced that players have a string of ponies, changing them regularly during the match to prevent them becoming too tired. And although it's a highly strategic game, you can easily enjoy the thrill of watching polo with just a basic understanding of the rules.

Understanding the rules of polo

Two teams of four players compete to hit the ball through their opponents' goal, using a long-handled mallet. Every time a goal is scored, the teams change ends. The game is played as a series of seven minute 'chukkas', with between four and six chukkas in a match.

It's one of the few sports where men and women compete together, which might come as a surprise given how 'no holds barred' it seems. Polo is definitely a contact sport, and to the inexperienced eye it can appear as if anything goes, but there are strict rules. Players mustn't cross another player's path, but they are allowed to ride alongside them to prevent them having access to the ball. This is known as a 'ride off'. Players are also allowed to 'hook' each other's mallets to stop them hitting the ball, but a 'foul hook' is when a player attempts this move from the other side of the pony. Up until the First World War there was a height limit on the horses used, hence why they're referred to as 'polo ponies'. Today, horses of any size can play although, due to how agile they need to be, turning on a sixpence when the direction of play changes, most are under 15.3hh. >



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Perhaps unsurprisingly given the speed required, many ex-racehorses find themselves excelling on the polo field.

The players are rated using a handicap system, or 'goals', which relates to their skill and experience, rather than a specific number of goals they've scored. The handicaps are decided by committee, and may go up or down during a season, depending on how well a player is performing.

From Persia to Somerset

The game is steeped in tradition, in fact it's thought to be one of the world's oldest team sports, dating back over 2,000 years. It originated in Persia and was developed as a way to train the Persian cavalry, before it spread to other countries including India and China. It was in India that the British played polo for the first time and in the

1860s established the first formal set of rules. British officers enjoyed the game as part of their training, and it spread with the British Empire as far as Argentina and Australia. The first match on British soil took place at Hounslow Heath in 1869, between the 10th Hussars and the 9th Lancers. In 1875 the first English rules were drawn up and remain largely unchanged.

The Taunton Vale Polo Club was established in 1911 and kept polo going throughout two world wars. It even played host to royalty in 1974. King Charles (Prince Charles as he was then) was captain of the Royal Navy polo team, and lost against the Mariners, a retired naval officers' side from Taunton Vale. Some of the tournaments still played at the club today date back over a hundred years.

In 2024, Taunton Vale took part in an historic charity match – it was the first time polo had been played on Dunster Lawns in 85 years. This summer will see them return to battle it out again in the shadow of the castle.

If you fancy getting even closer to the action, the club offers 'Have a Go at Polo' days. With no prior experience of polo required, enthusiasts will spend the morning being taught how to use the mallet to hit the ball, before mounting up on one of the club's more experienced ponies to attempt it from horseback. There's even the opportunity for a short game, and the chance to have a go at scoring a goal. Participants have lunch at the clubhouse and are invited to stay and watch the professionals afterwards.

Polo might be the sport of kings, but at Taunton Vale, everyone is welcome to enjoy the spectacle. ●



Taunton Vale is one of the UK's oldest polo clubs



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Taunton Vale Polo Club – 2026 Principal Provisional Dates

JUNE 6 & 7: Aden Trophy
(0-2 Handicap)

JULY 4 & 5: Friar Park
(0-2 Handicap)

JULY 8 & 9: Houldsworth
Trophy (0-2 Handicap)
2026, Dunster Lawns

JULY 31: Charity Polo Match
(Start time 18.00)

AUGUST 29: Exmoor Artisan Food,
Drink and Crafts (Start time 14.30)

For more information visit:
tauntonvalepoloclub.com