

THE T&C PROFILE



Nacho's Dilemma

Armed with charm, passion, and a smile that makes women and men alike swoon, the dashing Argentine is out to make us actually care about polo. *By Josh Dean*

“IT IS NOT EASY to be here,” Nacho Figueras says quietly. It’s not a complaint so much as a statement of the obvious, uttered by the world’s most famous polo player—well, the world’s only famous polo player. Currently he is sitting in what passes for a remote corner of the VIP tent at the Mercedes-Benz Polo Challenge, an event held every Saturday for six weeks and ending on Labor Day weekend, at the Two Trees Farm in Bridgehampton, where everyone in attendance knows his name.

Nacho—he’s a distinctly first-name sort of celebrity—is the thirty-three-year-old captain of the Black Watch team, which has the day off today. For Nacho, spectating is legitimately more exhausting than playing, since anyone who lives in a city with billboards and bus-station ads can spot the swarthy Argentine with artfully tousled hair from dozens

of yards away. As the face of Ralph Lauren’s fragrances, as well as the model for Lauren’s Black Label collection, Nacho is one of the most recognizable men in fashion. But that’s not really how he’d like to be known once it’s all over and done.

Nacho is on a mission to spread the gospel of polo.

Typically on match days when he’s off, Nacho can be found standing in the Ralph Lauren Black Watch booth, shaking hands and holding babies and—quite literally—wiping lipstick off his cheek from the endless stream of women who stop by just to bask in his presence. He appreciates the attention because he appreciates any attention he can bring to his sport. But if it were up to him, he’d be sitting across the field, with the spectators who don’t have access to the glam-



Top: Snow polo on a frozen lake in St. Moritz, Switzerland, during the 2009 Cartier Polo World Cup. Above: Nacho Figueras on the field at the International Polo Club in Palm Beach.

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Nacho, captain of the Black Watch team, on the field at the second annual Veuve Clicquot Manhattan Polo Classic on Governors Island in New York. Nacho was one of the driving forces behind the event.

orous scene of the sponsor tents, the land of seersucker and flowery hats. It worries him that his sport doesn't exactly give off an air of inclusiveness. "I think there's a big misconception. People think, 'I'm not invited,' or, 'What am I going to wear?'"

Athletes tend to come in one of a handful of molds—robotic and controlling (Tiger Woods), aloof (A-Rod), friendly in a rehearsed and actorlike way (Derek Jeter), or dull and mumbly (too many to name)—but Nacho is a different, almost anomalous sort

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altogether. He is fawned over but not arrogant, genuinely friendly, thoughtful, well-spoken, and, no matter how many ways he is being yanked at a particular moment, always available. At a place like Bridgehampton, Nacho Figueras is both Michael Jordan and Brad Pitt, star athlete and sexy celebrity, and there's always someone in his face, even in the quietest corner of a tent, even protected by a velvet rope and a bouncer.

A miniature towhead, in gingham, ap-

pears before him. "Excuse me, my mom would like to get a picture with you," he says. Nacho hears only "I would like a picture," and Nacho says, as Nacho always does—he is impeccably polite and especially would never turn down a child (he has three himself with his wife, model turned photographer Delfina Blaquier)—"I would love to have a picture with you." But the towhead turns and walks to his mom, an attractive blonde lurking nearby who says, her voice laced with flirtation, "With me."

"Oh, okay," Nacho says, and stands for the photo anyway.

This is why people like David Lauren, son of Ralph and senior vice president of advertising, marketing, and corporate communications for his father's company, adore him. "He's a combination of athlete, eloquent spokesperson, and elegant leading man," Lauren says. "You are immediately drawn to him." Nacho looks like a bona fide model and plays like a bona fide professional athlete. At

a polo match, Lauren observes, you look out at him and he's "like an ad come to life."

But for Nacho, the modeling and the autographs are merely elements of his larger scheme. If it takes a few hours of air kisses and awkward conversations and posing for photos that will inevitably end up on Facebook in order to get people out to a polo match, fine. He nevertheless manages to project warmth toward whomever he happens to be talking to, be it the CEO of LVMH (who just stops by the tent to say hi) or a kid in search of an autograph. "Nacho," says polo historian and journalist Alex Webbe, who often covers Nacho when he's playing winters in Palm Beach, "treats everyone like a VIP."

In return, Nacho simply hopes that these same children and fashion execs will watch at least a little of what he thinks is the most underappreciated game on earth. From the first day his father sat him on a horse and handed him a mallet at age nine, Nacho has been in love. He is quick to point out that in Argentina the polo culture is far more democratic than in most places where the sport is played; while it's not exactly cheap, you don't need to be rich to play in a country where open spaces and horses are somewhat commonplace. "I didn't grow up with money," he says.

Soccer may be king in his native land, but polo is probably queen, and the disconnect the rest of the world has with it frustrates him. Approximately ninety of the world's top 100 polo players are Argentine. (Nacho is not at the top of that list, though he's considered very good.) "In Argentina you grow up with the game," he says. "You live it. You breathe it. You dream about it." That sports fans are hesitant to give polo a chance is bewildering. Its appeals are so obvious to him. "Just watch," he says as two players on horses thunder by at full speed, literally shaking the earth. Polo to him is not Champagne and chic *chapeaux*; it's beautiful animals racing at 35-mile-per-hour speeds, carrying humans with superhuman coordination who strike a small ball that flies at up to 100 miles per hour, all the while fending off attackers. It's man and beast anticipating each other's needs, working in almost perfect sync.

The U.S. Polo Association likes to point out that the game has as many participants as it's ever had—which amounts to a measly

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3,700 members. There are few enough players worldwide that the mallets are still all made by hand. There is no real TV coverage of the sport and, beyond Nacho, there are no breakout stars recognizable to anyone but the most die-hard followers. And yet, Nacho envisions the sport one day looking like, say, Formula 1: established players traveling the world in a unified tour, teams wearing familiar uniforms that can be bought and worn by kids who aspire to play themselves, 600 million fans worldwide. “It’s not a fantasy,” he says. “It’s a plan.”

As winning and generous and—above all—determined as everyone who knows Nacho agrees he is, it can sometimes seem he’s on a lifelong fool’s errand. For better or worse, polo conjures images of wealth and privilege and, maybe most of all, exclusive, remote country redoubts hidden behind hedgerows. Turning it into a mainstream sport would require the seemingly impossible feat of not only making polo feel more accessible—a task for which an impeccable and glamorous Ken doll such as Nacho is a dubious executor—but making it actually more accessible.

That was the whole idea behind Governors Island. In 2008, Nacho, working with Veuve Clicquot, organized and staged the

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first annual Governors Island Polo Classic, a free event played on an island in New York City’s harbor, in full view of Lower Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Statue of Liberty. For the past two years, Black Watch has faced off against a team captained by England’s Prince Harry, and the last event drew more than 13,000 people, which was considered a great success. “I believe making the games in New York City is important,” Nacho says in English that is nearly perfect but with just enough accent to sound exotic. “People don’t have to go far, and then they get curious and say, ‘Okay, maybe I will go to the Hamptons, or to Greenwich, and watch more.’ Bringing polo to the people is what I need to do.”

It turns out New York City isn’t such an odd place to stage polo. The first matches ever played in the U.S. were staged in New

York, indoors, at a place called the Dickel’s Riding Academy in 1876, the same year Custer was ambushed at Little Big Horn. (And the famed Polo Grounds, once home to baseball’s New York Giants before they decamped for San Francisco? That name was literal.) The game’s popularity spread outward from New York, mostly thanks to its adoption by the country’s most powerful families, who tended to own land and horses. Vanderbilts and Whitneys played polo, says Webbe, and the association with these captains of industry was a large part of the appeal for the general public. And not just in the east. In Hollywood, the nouveau riche of the entertainment world also fell in love with the sport; Walt Disney, Spencer Tracy, and Darryl Zanuck were all polo players. “These people were bigger than life, and because of the primitive media coverage at the time, the best way of getting to see them was on the polo field,” Webbe explains.

In fact, in the early 20th century, “more people were going to polo games than football or baseball games,” says Peter Rizzo, executive director of the U.S. Polo Association. Some 40,000 fans would regularly turn out for matches at Long Island’s Meadowbrook Polo Club, the oldest such facility in the

country. (It has moved from its original location, which is now a highway—an apt metaphor, perhaps.)

Nacho has all of these images in his mind when he stages his events, and though he’s far from drawing 40,000 spectators—or even regular coverage in papers like the *New York Times*, which used to have a dedicated polo writer—his Governors Island event has drawn more high-profile media attention than any polo match in decades. But even a man as charismatic and passionate as Nacho cannot single-handedly launch a global phenomenon. Luckily, he has allies. In London, Rory Heron, a former executive of the sports-management company IMG, recently launched the World Polo Tour, which now stages an event called Polo in the Park at London’s Hurlingham Club, a hallowed



Nacho with his wife, model turned photographer Delfina Blaquier, and their three children in New York City last summer.

polo ground that once had regular games (the governing body that oversees rules in the United Kingdom is still known as the Hurlingham Polo Association) but which hadn’t been used for a polo match since World War II. Last year’s match drew 29,000 people to watch players—including Nacho, of course—engage in a modified version of the sport: the field was shrunk (a typical polo pitch is the size of nine American football fields), there were only three players per side instead of four, and if players shot from outside a semi-circular line, they were awarded two points instead of one to promote the sort of big hits that crowds love. (If the sport is ever to land TV coverage, these kinds of changes will be critical.)

Heron now has his eye on other sites around the world, including the Middle East and Asia. Meanwhile, polo enthusiast Janek Gazecki has been staging Polo in the City events since 2006 in Australia’s major cities. But right now, each of these initiatives exists in a vacuum, often dependent on the funding of one wealthy individual. The next step—the crucial step—is to turn polo into a global industry by uniting these various movements. “Right now there’s no continuity,” Nacho laments. “The community is so fragmented.”

So far, he is the only thing that connects them. He’ll be at December’s Polo in the City event in Melbourne and at the first-ever indoor “arena polo” match, which will be staged by the entertainment company AEG at London’s O2 Arena in February, and countless others will follow. “There’s a lot more to do,” he says, once again observing the obvious. “I’m working very hard.”

In mid-September, Nacho is back in Man-

hattan. His Hamptons season has recently ended, in unsatisfying fashion, with a one-goal loss to Great Oaks. "It was very disappointing," he says, sounding only slightly disappointed. He's just completed a half day of business meetings and is stopping for a coffee break in Bryant Park before heading up to Lincoln Center for Marc Jacobs's Fashion Week show. Jacobs, he explains "is a good friend of my wife's"—Blaquiere moves as easily in the fashion world as her husband does. The couple and their brood technically reside in Argentina, but the reality is that they, like all professional polo families, live the life of well-heeled gypsies, perpetually following the game around the globe. Winter is Palm Beach, spring is England and maybe Australia, summer is the Hamptons, and every fall the polo carnival moves to Argentina, where Nacho and his fellow professionals enjoy three months of the world's best polo, covered daily in the newspapers and—in the case of big tournament matches—aired live on national television.

It's hard to get past the reality that without that type of media exposure, polo in the U.S.—or anywhere else, for that matter—will have a tough time escaping marginal status. With its gigantic field and pace of play, the game doesn't lend itself well to television. (For a few years in the mid-1980s, Peter Brant, whose White Birch team plays out of Greenwich, Connecticut, convinced one network to air an annual tournament, but polo has rarely been glimpsed on American TVs since.) Nacho is not necessarily a fan of what he and other top pros view as stuntish events like arena polo and beach polo, but he sees the value of exposing an unfamiliar public to even a bastardized version of the game. "At heart, I am a player and I respect the game," he says. "Polo has more than 100 years of history. We don't like to upset the polo gods. But I'm playing at O2 Arena—indoors, with three players, under a roof." He laughs. "This will make the gods very upset, I think."

Here in the city, Nacho has traded his ruffled polo shirt and boots for a navy-blue Ralph Lauren suit, a blue striped RL shirt, and a gray knit tie by—who else?—Ralph Lauren. He is clutching a pile of papers—a rough draft of the materials for his inaugural Los Angeles Veuve Clicquot Polo Classic at

Will Rogers State Park on October 10, 2010. ("Get it?" Figueras says. "10/10/10.") A style consultant had been hired "to bring back the 1930s epoch—the Will Rogers era—and the glamour of polo back then." Nacho makes a point to note, however, that the event is free to the public; that, in his mind, is the most important thing. He plans to stage the L.A. event annually, as well as the one on Governors Island, and to slowly expand the concept globally, rolling out similar exhibitions in Brazil (perhaps as early as next year) and China (by 2012), with the Middle East and India to follow. "It's like dominoes," he says. India has one of the oldest polo traditions on the planet; it's where British soldiers learned the game, and the oldest existing polo club in the world is in Calcutta, though the fact about India that most intrigues Nacho is that it was the setting for the largest crowd ever at a polo match: 150,000 people. "I would like to bring that back."

But first he needs to meet up with his family, fly home to Argentina, put his kids in school, and spend some time with the horses at his breeding operation. Then there's a meeting in New York and the event in L.A. and, well, you get the idea. It's no wonder he's jealous of his American horses, who will soon be enjoying a two-month vacation. As he waits for his coffee before the Marc Jacobs show, he explains that before leaving the Hamptons, he packed the horses up for the trip to Virginia, where they will leisurely nibble at grass until they are called back to duty in Palm Beach in mid-November. For his season in Argentina, he has another set of horses, the fruits of a massive breeding operation he set up that will soon become a big supplier of horses for amateurs and professionals.

"Excuse me," says a man with long, roguish gray hair standing next to Nacho in the coffee line. "Are you talking about polo?" he asks. Nacho responds that we are indeed. "My friend plays in Greenwich," the man replies. "It's a great game."

"I'm sorry to have interrupted," he adds, "but it's not often you hear people talking about polo."

"Not yet," says Nacho, who of course isn't bothered at all, "but you will."

"Someday," he says with a confident smirk, "people in all the coffee lines will be talking