Harvard Polo

Horsing Around

IN THE HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS OF POLO IN ASIA

We *all meet up during the six-hour stopover in the Beijing Airport. The invitation comes from the Genghis Khan Polo Club to play in Mongolia and then to head back to China for a university tournament at the Metropolitan Polo Club in Tianjin. Say, what? Yes, polo! Both countries are resurrecting the ancient sport—a tale of two cultures—and the Harvard players are to be emissaries to help generate a new ballgame in Asia.*

In a cavernous airport restaurant, I survey the Harvard Polo Team: Jane is captain of the women's team; Shawn, captain of the men's team; George, the quiet one, is a physicist; Danielle, a senior is a German major; Sarah, a biology major; Aemilia writes for the Harvard Crimson. Marina, a mathematician, will join us later. Neil and Johann are incoming freshmen; Merrall, still in high school, is a protégé of the actor Tommy Lee Jones—the godfather of Harvard polo. And where are the grownups? Moon Lai, a friend of Neil's parents, is the photographer from Minnesota. Crocker Snow, Harvard alum and head of the Edward R. Murrow Center at Tufts, is tour director and coach. I am along as cheer leader and chronicler.

We stagger onto the late-night plane to Ulan Bator (UB), the capital of Mongolia, pile into a van and drive into the darkness—always in the constant traffic of trucks. Our first camp of log cabins is near an official site of *Naadam*—Mongolia's traditional summer festival of horse racing, wrestling and archery. Where are we? What time is it? The outhouse is down a rocky path. The night is cold. Morning comes too soon. Breakfast in the main log cabin: two eggs over easy, lightly-cooked bacon, potatoes and coffee. And then we're off to *Naadam.*

Go Nomadic

What hits you is the Big Absence: There are no fences in Mongolia. The land is "public." All creatures are free. The animals wander. The people wander. Here is the Nomadic Way of Life. That alters everything. There are fewer than three million people in Mongolia—and ten animals for every person.

Man and beast is more a partnership here, in contrast to the power hierarchy of domestication in most places where the owner/master dominates the animal with fences and barns and feeding times. You feel the difference. Does domestication crush vitality? (Just ask a rebellious teenager, or an unhappy wife.) You sense the freedom in the endless view of rolling fields where the nomadic imperative of traveling light has kept at bay the consumer culture of settling down and acquiring property.

"Mongolia is the last best horse culture," explains our host, Christopher Giercke, a film maker who started the Genghis Khan (GK) Polo Club in 2005. "Mongolia is the last best country with no fences." Christopher's wife, Enkhe, is a direct descendant on her mother's side of Genghis Khan's brother, Khasar. They have three children, a winter address in Kathmandu and a contract to supply cashmere for Hermes scarves in Paris. Their summer camp by the Orkun River is the home to the polo club.

After all, didn't polo originate here? (Or maybe in Iran, or Afghanistan, or China?) The legend is that Genghis Khan used the heads of his enemies as polo balls, but this smacks of historical paranoia because everyone who was conquered—Europeans, Russians, Persians, Arabs, Chinese—loves to hate the Mongols and stereotype the galloping hordes of old as ruthless

barbarian warriors. Which they were. But not always, and no more so than their opponents. Besides, that was then: thirteenth-fourteenth century. This is now.

Christopher, who dresses in black and is a Prussian aristocrat on his mother's side, wants to revive polo and use the "sport of kings" to reclaim Mongolia's past glory, as the country moves to the future. With its vast mineral riches, Mongolia is suddenly a magnet for foreign investment. Will success spoil the last best country with no fences?

We arrive at the official site of the *Naadam* horse races. The rolling treeless hills, so sweet with the smell of sage and rosemary, are about the same elevation as Denver. Grasshoppers jump as high as your face. All around are *gers*—the round house yurt made of white felt and canvas with a place for a fire stove in the middle—a landscape of bleached circles decorated in Mongolian geometric design with bright colors of blue and orange and red. The doors and windows are carved wood with pictures of birds and horses .

Christopher travels with a troupe of carpenters, grooms, cooks, healers. James from Ireland coaches the boys team; Ashley from New Zealand manages the girls team. The one who becomes our guardian and guide is Tsogt: a large regal man who wears the traditional Mongolian hat: an inverted saucer with a plume-spout sticking straight up on top. He knows everything. He fixes everything. He makes everything happen.

Dominating the site is the race track and grandstands. It is here that the long-distance horse races will end. Our makeshift polo field is parallel to the race track. An open air *ger* is set up with food, water and chairs. The ponies are lined up nearby.

The play is rugged. The field is choppy, full of stones and holes and roots—not the level cut lawn associated with Ralph Lauren polo. The Mongolian horses are "wild"—meaning normal nomadic, very small, 13 hands to the horse savvy, with short stubby legs, big chests, thick necks, long bulging heads: very ugly, according National Velvet standards. But effete has no place on the steppes. Strength and endurance are what matter. After all, the Mongolian horse got to Budapest and back when the empire of Genghis Khan stretched from Asia to Europe.

Unlike polo on lawns with a string of pretty ponies, players usually get only one pony for the whole game. That is, four *chukkas* or periods of seven and a-half minutes each, during which a rider tries to hit a small white ball through two goal posts down a field the size of three football fields. In polo, it's all about the horse.

First match: Women's teams—Harvard vs. GK Polo Club—four on each side. It is overcast and cold. We huddle under our temporary *ger*. First, it sprinkles. Then it rains. The wind howls. Another gust and our *ger* is blown down. The heavens open with a downpour. The girls keep playing. It is the first game for the Mongolian team with "outsiders." The horn blows. Thirty seconds. "It was great," says Sarah, beaming, as she rides off the field. Harvard wins, 5 – 1.

In the next game, the Harvard boys are up against the Kiwis, a New Zealand team. Size can be a complication. Harvard's Johann is bigger than his horse, his long legs dragging on the ground. The two start out, looking more like an ad for donkey croquet, when suddenly his horse does a gymnast turn, flipping Johann off, but Johann holds on to his neck and pulls the horse over as though he were wrestling a golden retriever in front of the Christmas tree. Both end up on the ground. The field is wet, the rain is steady. We shiver in the cold. A large bowl of *airack*—sour-tasting fermented mare's milk—is passed around. In between chukkas, Nara, the bone setter, massages a player's arm or shoulder. Harvard ties the Kiwis 3 – 3.

Christopher sits down for a quick massage. He grew up in East Germany—smart and restless. Rebelling against German grayness, he took German can-do enterprise with him as he bolted convention and constriction and traveled to North Africa—Morocco, Algeria, Egypt—and to Asia. He managed a rock band. He shifted to movies and was casting director for "Apocalypse Now." He moved into documentaries and was making a film about Mongolia, when he met Enkhe. The Dali Lama blessed their marriage. Enkhe is very beautiful and rail thin. She wears splendid traditional dress—a long coat of gold brocade, a felt orange layered jacket. She talks softly about Paris, about her sons: Ich Tenger, D'Artagnan; her daughter Alegra, and the importance of joy. Christopher is a whirlwind of charisma; his accent faintly British with a *hochgeboren* lisp, his manner Prussian Imperial, his gait listing slightly, his attire in black—the morning coat, the cravat, the riding boots—he wants to put Mongolia—the last great Nomadic Culture—on the map of the global elite. Polo is the vehicle. We call him the field marshal.

Horse Racing and Balloons

The President of Mongolia is coming to Naadam to watch a game. A few history pointers from Christopher: Mongolia was on the side of Germany and Japan in The War. The Axis lost, and Mongolians paid the price. The Chinese took Inner Mongolia. The Russians crushed what is now all of Mongolia. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Empire did Mongolia gain independence, its constitution established in 1994.

The president and the first lady and their daughter arrive—official black cars, lights, horns. The men's game has already started: Harvard vs. the G K Polo Club. Second chukka: the announcer from New Zealand gives the running narrative: *Shawn picks it up. . . Ich Tenger's got it. . . . Johann comes in for the hook. . . Mamuna out in front.* The president is dressed in a traditional robe of light sage green silk with a scroll design of darker green and the Mongolia red hat with a blue "tie" down the back. The women on the

Harvard team are introduced and tell the president what they are studying: art history, biology, German. The president smiles. He wears glasses and spent time at Harvard Business School. Crocker presents him with an etching of top polo horses—*poloplomacy*. Meanwhile in the distance, a show of horse gymnastics is going on, with riders standing on galloping horses, waving red and blue flags as Mongolian Chariots-of-Fire type music blares from loud speakers. At a signal, a dozen horses in formation lie down; the riders in position with rifles. Overhead giant balloons in red blue and yellow waft over the race track. Fireworks explode.

One minute to go in the polo match. Ich Tenger—which means Big Sky—goes for a goal. *It's gone through!* Mongolians 5—Harvard 1.

Over by the grandstands, the crowd awaits the finish of the final race: 27 kilometers from the starting point, 500 contestants. The horses are four-year-olds; the jockeys are boys and girls as young as five. Horse racing is the Great Ritual of Mongolian Identity. All children love the horse and know how to ride. But once they get to 15, they are too big to race.

In previous races, several horses make the finish line. . . without riders. In the *UB Post,* Ulan Bator's newspaper, an editorial cites reports of two deaths and 24 injuries during *Naadam* races across the country and discusses a statement by UNICEF that criticizes "the use of children as jockeys" as "exploitation" and a violation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. But in the land of the Eternal Blue Sky, the horse race is sacred.

As the moment of victory nears, the crowd roars. Three horses quite far apart come into view; then bunches of horses, galloping to the finish. With each cross of the finish line, the cheers go up. *Wooooo Wooooo*. Music starts up—*Oh Beautiful Mongol Horse.* Giant balloons dance overhead. We're told the winner gets a Land Cruiser.

For Christopher, the racing children make up the pool of future polo players. There are 40,000 15-year-olds in Mongolia, he explains. They are master horsemen, like their ancestors. So they already know the basics of polo. Doudoi, the star of the girls' team, has won a *Naadam* race. She is the model for regenerating polo in Mongolia. Think of all the players who could emerge on the world stage of international polo. Why should Argentina have a lock on the sport?

With the official *Naadam* games over, we drive five hours into the steppe to the summer camp by the Orkhon River. Up, up, up to almost 6,000 feet; the plateau, once an ancient seabed, is surrounded by mountains girded high up with a ribbon of dark green pine trees. The road is a collection of tracks heading in the same westerly direction. The van swerves from one pathway to the other. Always overhead is the sky, a dome of the deepest blue that seems to suspend the land like a suction cup. We pass livestock—those funny-looking, raggedy haired yaks, along with horses and goats and sheep. We come to the famous Mongolian Granite: rounded rocks marking endless fields like candles on a birthday cake, and then suddenly a tower of granite boulders heralds the entrance to the camp. The students pile out of the van and run up the tower, 75 feet in the air. We've arrived!

The camp is a collection of two dozen *gers* of different sizes, alternating red and blue geometric design, the door of each one decorated with scenes of birds and horses, riders and archers, mountains and rivers. The main "village" sits high on a plateau, overlooking the lazy river with two main tributaries running down the valley, flowing out to Siberia and Lake Baikal in Russia. Grasslands are green in high Asia, but it's hot and dry and dusty. Way below are half a dozen *gers* for the staff and a large stable *ger*. The horses are camped nearby.

We come to the Circle of Stones, a burial ground from 2000 BC, Christopher tells us. We do not walk over the stones, we walk around the circle three times. It is so still and quiet as though time has stopped; not even any bugs to keep us in the present.

Bonding on the Steppe

In the camp are many mansions: the kitchen *ger* where we have breakfast; the bathing *ger* where we dunk in two large wooden tubs filled with hot water; the massage *ger* where Nara, the bone setter, and Gerlee leap on our back and work the sore muscles from head to toe; the dining *ger* with a grand piano where we all gather in the evening. There is also the party *ger,* but that one is for the students. Crocker and I don't know exactly where it is, but it's probably down in the hill near the horses. Other guests fill in several more *gers*. We all meet for dinner.

There are tables for 8 – 10 people, candle light, good wine, haute cuisine. The grownup table has expanded with friends of Christopher (FOC): Johnson, museum director and art curator from Hong Kong and Danah, physicist and philosopher from Britain, the author of *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*. (Known to the kids as Quantum Lady.) "You'll see, miracles happen here," she tells me.

We start the evening with music. Concert pianist Odgerel Sampilnorov, who grew up in UB and is now based in Bologna, plays for us every night, going from Baroque to modern: Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Liszt, Debussy. She begins with Bach's prelude in C Minor: complicated, but joyful. Danah says: "Do you think Bach was bi-polar?" Conversation bubbles: how the music goes from depths to heights.

In the morning, Crocker holds a strategy session for all the players. Polo is like the game of chess. "You have to anticipate, not just react," says Crocker. Sometimes you tap the ball like a pawn; sometimes you crank it like a bishop or a castle; sometimes you blast forward like a Queen and race ahead of the pack towards the goal. As on a chess board, you can only move in prescribed space, which is determined by The Line of the Ball—that is, the imaginary line between the rider who hit and ball and the direction of the ball. No one else can cross that line. When the ball is hit again, the Line can change direction, and on and on. It's not just keeping your eye on the ball; it's keeping your eye on the Line and looking for the open space and a teammate. "You're not playing the game alone," says Crocker. "The worst thing to do is just smack it," he continues. "You need a plan."


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One evening we all gather on Nature's terrace in back of the dining *ger*, facing down to the river and up over the mountain to the setting sun that blows out the blue in swaths of orange yellow red and salmon. James fills our glasses with champagne. The cake is made by Mingma from Nepal; the frosting by Allegra. The singing starts: *Happy Birthday. . .* I am overwhelmed! My birthday, here on the steppe! I pull around my shoulders the soft salmon cashmere shawl that Christopher and Enkhe have given me. Tsogt begins to sing: *My Mongol Country touches my heart/ My heart is one with you. . . All the landscape is full of flowers. . . .* Tsogt trained for the opera in Paris. He can also do throat singing—holding two notes at once in his throat. I listen to the song and hear the cheers: we are all bonded now.

For five days at the camp, the Harvard team plays polo by day and soaks up the *hoch ger kultur* of the steppe by night. The students adopt a one-horned yak and call him Humboldt. We explore the land--up the mountain Untersant for a picnic, a three-and-a-half hour ride from camp to the summit. And dip into history on another gallop of several hours: to Karakorum, once the capital of Genghis Khan's empire. These are cross country races over ditches and rocks, across meadows and gullies, passing through rivers; the herd of horses fanning out on the grassland, going their own way, scraping bushes, darting around boulders: hard riding, a constant gallop that tests every muscle and saps every breath. Every so often the riders stop and count: did we lose anybody? Then off again at a gallop; on the way to Karakorum, George, Sarah and Christopher fall off. Doodoi is thrown and has to go to the hospital; she recovers quickly.

Karakorum today is a dusty town with dirt roads, small houses with red and green metal roofs. All that remains of past glory is a giant granite turtle, probably the base for a stele or pillar for a house. In the museum are pottery and coins with scripts in Arabic, Mongolian and Chinese—testament to the global trading network the Mongolians created when they controlled the Silk Road from East to West. I consult Jack Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World.* How far-reaching was Mongol Empire that destroyed feudal Europe and founded the Yuen dynasty in China. And then, boom, it fragmented and collapsed. Seduced by power, money, sex, silks and fermented mares milk, the heirs to Genghis grew fat and cruel in the intoxicating steam of luxury—easy prey to newer rivals with rawer ambition.

In Karakorum, the ghosts are hidden behind tourist shacks with bags and jackets for sale. A Buddhist monastery stands lonely in a walled field of unkempt grasses that was once home to 15,000 monks, one of 150 grand temples that used to thrive in Mongolia. Only three have survived Soviet purges against religion, we're told. But Buddhism—Tibetan style—is coming back. The monastery is now a school. The 50 monks who live here are teachers. They wear the traditional red dress, fill the rooms with incense and prayer, pass around the bowl of *airack*.

Private Naadam

In the final days we hold our own *Naadam* at the camp. Word is put out on the steppe about a horse race. Sixteen children show up: a 7-year-old girl in a blue party dress, another girl in a red robe, a 4-year-old boy led by his father. Johann, Danielle, Aemilia and Sarah enter the race, too. Eight kilometers. The children head off to the start of the race, singing to their horses. *Praise to the Altai mountains*.

At a low, bright blue, decorated table near the finish line sit four monks in traditional blue and purple robes. They chant Buddhist mantras, in old Sanskrit, Mongolian, Tibetan, and play tambourines and cymbals. A woman in traditional orange-yellow dress starts to play a giant zither instrument. The monk in purple picks up a box violin, the *morin khur;* the one in blue, a mandolin. Music is sacred to Mongolians. *Listen to the world/we are the ones. . ./ The bird is flying on/ kneeling beneath the blue sky/ all the world is bowing to Genghis Khan/ listen to the world/ hey, hey hey!* Lovely melodies against a rhythm that would make the Rolling Stones proud.

As the horses come into view, the Mongolians overtake the Harvard riders, *hello! Hello! Hello!* they say as they pass by. Johann's horse loses heart, so he jumps off and pulls the beast up the hill to the finish line, Danielle, too, walks up her horse. The winner is a barefoot boy, riding bareback. The winning horse gets a prize.

On to wrestling: the Mongolian men in blue bikini bottoms and red arm sleeves. They do the formal walk around, arms up, flap arms, flap thighs. So do Neil and Merrall**.** And then the Mongolians pull the Harvard boys to the ground. Next: polo. Christopher yells: "Crocker, get over here and show us your balls!" And Crocker brings over two white polo balls to the umpire.

In the evening we gather for the great goat festival dinner. Christopher explains the intricate dance where two goats are "chosen" to be slaughtered for the celebration, but first a relationship must be established between man and beast with understanding, respect. . . . Then the departed chosen goats are then strung up on a line, hot stones inserted in the body to cook from the inside out, hair blown away with a blow torch. Crocker and I are asked to make the first cut into the cooked goats.

Candles light up the large *ger*. Ogderol plays Rachmaninoff. A new guest has arrived: an FOC from Los Angeles, who grew up in Mongolia and is back to start a dairy company to collect milk from the herders and market milk and cheese to China and Russia. (Known as Milk Man to the students.) So much milk is wasted, he explains. What's not immediately used is thrown away. He will take the surplus milk and create an industry: Mongolian goat cheese, Altai gruyere. Tap into the global green craze for organic foods. What could be more free-range than cows and goats on the steppes? *Go Nomadic—Eat Mongolian!* It's not just copper that is spurring Mongolia's commercial re-awakening.

Enkhe stands up and starts belting out Mongolian songs. We all stand and sing. Conversation rises. Laughter gets louder. Christopher throws out: "What is a wife worth? Two sheep!" Enkhe throws him a look. And anyway: what's a husband worth? A yak and a half? More singing, the festivities go on.

We say our farewells the next morning and head off to a *poloplomacy* visit with government officials in UB. Crocker, putting on his Morrow Center hat, gives a talk on public diplomacy—people-to-people dialog to enhance a country's visibility and influence. Gifts are exchanged, and Shawn makes an impassioned speech on the beauty of the land, the blue of the sky.

Hot Time in the Desert

The team takes a break from polo when we fly to Hohhot in Inner Mongolia where Crocker adds a project in public diplomacy to sports diplomacy. Our host is environmentalist Byong Hyon Kwon, the former Korean ambassador to China, an expert on climate change and desertification.

In the Kubuqi Desert we step into the crisis. About 800 miles west of Beijing, the march of giant sand dunes is sucking away the land. Windstorms threaten the air in Beijing and send plumes across the Korean peninsular to Seoul. To fight the eastward spread of the desert, volunteer students are planting trees and shrubs in its path. "We are on the frontline of a huge Chinese dust bowl advancing east, and we would like to stop the desertification here," explains Ambassador Kwon. "I am convinced we can do it."

We gather at the desert's edge, about 50 of us, many of the Chinese and Korean students with bright colored parasols. The sun is brutal. "The end of nowhere," says the ambassador's son, John Hyukdae Kwon, the representative in China of Future Forest, the nonprofit organization started by his father to combat the ravages of deserts on the move. With an annual budget of about $1million dollars, the group of young volunteers mainly from China and Korea has planted about 6.2 million trees since 2006. Every year, 30 percent of the new trees die and have to be replaced.

The project is a small part of the overall effort of the Chinese government and other nonprofit organizations to plant millions of trees to stop desertification. The programs, with mixed results, have generated controversy over the effectiveness of instant forests, which may put even more

stress on vulnerable water resources. The Kwons, father and son, want to demonstrate that carefully selected shrubs and trees can detour the sandstorms and restore the land.

We start walking from the road, crossing about two and a half miles of desert, up and down dunes and ridges sometimes as high as ten staircases, slipping as the grains tumble underfoot, taking the hand of an experienced volunteer to keep from falling, pushing to get to the top and see the sea of sand undulating in the distance. Once, as recent as 50 years ago, this was grassland, the ambassador tells us. People lived here and raised sheep.

In a deadly dance between polar melting (including the melting of the Tibetan Glacier or the Third Pole), rising temperatures, water stress and soil degradation, "one-third of the earth is exposed to desertification," explains John Kwon. "A Mars-like surface may indeed be our future."

We make it to a row of four-foot high trees, fragile, quivering dark green poplars. Growing a "green wall" takes years. First the sand needs to be fixed with brackets to hold the roots against the constant winds that move the dunes along, crushing everything in the way. Poplar roots grow like spider webs, sprouting more baby trees. If the tree survives, it should reach a man's height in four years. The volunteers also plant the shrub, Salix. "We use local species. They tend to live better in sand than other trees," says John Kwon. With trees and shrubs comes undergrowth and slowly, perhaps signs that the land will come back. We find a tiny lizard! We stare at a fox hole, which appeared in 2009. And tiny purple flowers—*Yang Chai*—beach grass.

Can the green wall redirect the movement of sand? "I slow it down; I do not stop it totally," says the ambassador. The volunteers start tagging trees to honor donors and notables: Barak Obama, tree #522; Lula da Silva #508; Christiana Figueres (UN leader on climate change) #525. A Korean student raises her hand. "We have to make desertification a global environmental issue," she says. "It's great to be out here planting a tree—doing something," says Harvard's Janie.

We end the afternoon by the muddy Yellow River. On the road to Baotou for the overnight train to Beijing, we see truck after truck after truck, endless lines of trucks loaded with coal, grinding down the highway, trucks and more trucks; in the distance loom the three massive cylinders of a power plant; off in a field a 60 story skyscraper and giant construction crane—abandoned, we're told, because "they" ran out of money.

The train is jammed with school children and their frazzled teachers; we are spread among them, six bunk beds per compartment. Through the night, the children swing from upper to lower bunk and around to the next compartment, up and down the train.

China Ultra

In China, our host is the Metropolitan Polo Club in Tianjin. The membership hotel looms before us like Versailles, all lit up—splashing fountains in a pool out front back lit in blue and red. A string of life-size statues of polo ponies, with riders in action poses, stand guard. We are dirty, dusty and we enter a palace of marble, mirrors and gold.

The lobby opens onto a massive multi-storey birdcage of glass, with a grand piano and cozy clusters of sofas and chairs; in the center of the room on a wide circular pedestal is a statue of the archetype polo player on his galloping steed about to crack the ball. In the evening a torch singer in evening dress sings . . . *your daddy's rich, and your mama.* . . . Down a long marble corridor, another statue of a horse rears up on two legs. Each living and dining area "done" in exquisite taste with chandeliers hung from a gold bracketed ceiling, designer rugs, soft furniture all arranged according to *feng shui* standards of peace and harmony. Even in the bathrooms, there are so many mirrors, you think you've been cloned into three people when you wash your hands. If you can make the mental leap that you really *are* three people, then you can grasp the boldness of the vision behind this Emerald City of commercial and residential development in what was farmland a decade ago. As the brochure puts it: *This place is not just a building, it's not just a polo club. It's also a foundation stone for the new nobility in China.* The polo field is a velvet lawn; a princess could not find a pea under the soft manicured grass. On the far side of the lawn is a big split screen to show the score—and to follow the play up close and personal. On the other side is a series of elegant tents with tables and chairs and sofas, where food and drink are served to guests during a game.

In China, everything to do with polo is imported. The grooms are from Argentina. The director of polo operations is Australian. The horses are from New Zealand—gorgeous, long-legged, temperamental mares. There aren't many people who even ride in China. Decades of communism snuffed out support for an elite sport of the rich. To bring it back, the Metropolitan Polo Club is positioning itself as the international go-to place for polo events. Meanwhile, the club offers riding and polo lessons to children of the rich to groom future polo players and seed coming generations with the "sport of kings." The goal: to make China a leading polo country within the decade. Luis Lalor, former head of the Argentine Polo Association is here to watch the college games. So is Richard Caleel, a plastic surgeon entrepreneur who is president of the Federation of International Polo (FIP), which counts more than seventy countries as members. Roger Cheever from Harvard administration has joined our group along with Scott Amero co-chair of the Friends of Harvard Polo and Janie's father.

Our team looks the horses over: which one is crazy, hot? Which one steady? Easy? Compared to the soul mate geldings on the steppe, these lovelies are pretty and pampered. . . and they can run like hell. Marina, who's just joined her teammates, assesses the pool: Hia Watha, Metro, Pinto, Sambrita, Clarita, Kitty. "Everything here is over the top," Crocker tells the team. "The horses are faster, the field is bigger. . . . If you feel comfortable on the horse, crank it."

The week-long university tournament features Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge. A Harvard polo alum is on the Cambridge team. The Brits are slightly older, and the Cambridge team has one ranked player. (Collegiate polo—30 universities in the U.S. have polo teams—is amateur. No one of the Harvard team is ranked.) The students are a little subdued. The grand velvet field of play is jaw-dropping, as though the Harvard Krokodiloes suddenly had to sing opera at the Met. "Hit the ball, play the game, don't think about anything else," advises Crocker.

Building Bonanza

Meanwhile, we explore the sites. The Great Wall of China at Huangyaquang, started in 557 AD, looks just like the images in photographs and on scrolls: a meandering bulwark of stone, up mountains, down valleys; the line broken by watch towers and battle stations. We climb along the top of the wall in the heat; some of us get up the ridge to a forest, some of us take shade in a tower.

In Beijing, the sky is gray. We walk around Tiananmen Square, named for the Gate of Heavenly Peace, where protests were crushed in 1989; hundreds died and thousands were wounded. The air is thick and very hot. Long lines wait to visit the Mao Mausoleum, the resting place for Mao Zedong, founding father of the People's Republic of China, Chairman of the Communist Party—revolutionary, anti-imperialist, political theorist: *A revolution is not a dinner party. . . . A revolution is an insurrection. . . by which one class overthrows another.* It starts to rain gently.

We move over to the Forbidden City, the past's sanctuary of class, money and power. According to our peppy guide Stephanie, world history begins with the Ming dynasty. Reconstruction of the city started in 1406, she tells us, lasted 14 years, and took a million workers. We walk through palaces and pavilions with trademark yellow tile roofs. Rules were strict: walk on the wrong side of the walkways and off with your head. Emperors were like that. "Now belongs to the people," says Stephanie with a big smile. "Welcome to China."

No mention of poor old Genghis who conquered the place in 1215. No mention of his grandson Khubilai who established the Imperial City that is now Beijing as the capital of the Mongol Empire that ruled China for generations. In the Ming Leap Forward, the Mongols were erased: absorbed, killed, or exiled. Today, Inner Mongolia is an autonomous region of China with more than 15 million Chinese residents to three million Mongolians. "One big happy family now," says the smiling Stephanie.

The Harvard students start to tire. We hit a MacDonald's. The French Fries are limp. We go to the Summer Palace, a lovely park of temples and palaces and bridges and corridors by Kunming

Lake—"a luxurious royal garden for royal families to rest and entertain," says a brochure. We walk up Longevity Hill and look inside luxurious royal residences. Stephanie tells us that the emperor had 3,000 concubines. They had to sleep somewhere. So did the wives. Seems the men got sex and women got real estate. The rain has stopped. Grandmothers and children stroll along the lake. We end up in a tea house. Always the overcast skies, an ominous reminder of the pollution hanging over China.

The highway is a fast new road with signs in English: **Don't Try Fatigue Driving** and **Rear End Collision—Keep Space**. On the toll booth are posters, such as: **Model Youth Unit At Your Service.** There's always traffic. Officials drive black Audis, we're told. The Tianjin train station looks like a space-age saucer. The bullet train to Beijing takes about a half an hour—a distance of nearly 70 miles. (Hello: the train from Boston's North Station to Hamilton where the polo team practices at home—a distance of 24 miles—takes 45 minutes.)

Back at the Metropolitan Club, Harvard plays Oxford. The teams are mixed, boys and girls. The announcer is Australian. Third chukka: Janie scores a goal on Clarita, and a close-up of Harvard's smiling captain lights up the big board. A horse stumbles; Oxford player on the ground. *Pony having a little lie-down.* Harvard scores wins the match 7 – 3.

Crowds start coming to the games, filling the tents. Meanwhile, beautiful women in long gold evening gowns show off the development of "Fortune Heights," the real estate development connected to the club: a series of chateaux, 11 skyscrapers with "villas in the sky"—duplex and triplex condos with indoor swimming pools and tennis courts and service with the press of a telephone button. There are half a dozen haute cuisine restaurants at the club, a five storey wine cellar, four levels of underground parking, three polo fields, 207 horses, a manmade lake. Underway is construction of the third tallest building in China (the fifth tallest in the world), with workers around the clock—adding a new floor every four days—and a completion deadline of 2015. The whole enterprise is a nine to ten billion dollar investment by the Hong Kong businessman Sutong Pan of Goldin Properties Holdings Limited. "We are selling lifestyle," explains Harvey Lee, vice chairman of the Goldin Group.

An American physician in internal medicine, who is watching the game, puts it this way: Eight years ago when he started at the hospital in Tianjin, 80 percent of the patients were foreign. Today, 60 percent are Chinese. Pay is out-of-pocket. He tells me he rides his bicycle to work while patients roll up in their Lamborghinis for their well-baby checkups. "There's a lot of money here," he says.

Crocker and I go to a special lunch for the more than 70 Harvard alums in the Beijing area. Most are from the business school. Jenny Pan, entrepreneur and right hand to her father, a graduate of Northwestern University, owner of the SLOAN collection of wine in the Napa Valley, looks out on a group of mostly Asian faces, men and women who see in China the land of opportunity. *First on the menu: Mediterranean Prawns Salad and a 2009 GOLD from the SLOAN collection.*

The man sitting next to me is from LA; went to Stanford, Harvard business school and is now based in Shanghai. After some joking around, he essentially asks: why polo?

Horse Sense

I smile. After all, I have never played polo; I don't even ride. I believe the future belongs to physicists and philosophers and engineers and artists. But I get it, I tell him. First, the horse: Polo grounds the students in their hyper-competitive digital world that super-stresses the brain. They come to the stable and brush the coats, braid the tail, clean the tack. Some on the team have never ridden before; many have never swung a polo mallet. They have to turn off test mode and plumb the psyche of another creature—their partner—perhaps finding some balance in the New Virtual Era. The man nods. A techie-whiz entrepreneur, he could see that. And the fun of it.

Our last day is foggy with a yellow tinge to the sky. Harvard has beaten Yale and makes it into the finals against Cambridge. Our last day is foggy with a yellow tinge to the sky. The tents are full of guests. A television star in a red dress and high heels welcomes the crowd. The announcer is Australian: *The whole situation here in Tianjin is a paradise for polo.* Cambridge scores two quick goals. Whistle blows. *Bit of shouting and dump-out there.* Third Chukka: Cambridge leads 5 – 2. Whistle blows. A penalty in Harvard's favor, chance to score a goal. This is the moment. Psychologically a three-goal gap is winnable game; the gap can be closed. *These guys need to score this goal.* The crowd goes quiet. Wind up, swing, crack, down the field to the goal. . . and the ball bounces off the post. *That will hurt.* The moment is passed. The game goes on. Final Score: Cambridge wins 7 – 3. The only consolation is the unexpected hero for Cambridge is grad student Casra LaBelle from Dubai, who learned to play polo while on the team at Harvard.

In the evening all the teams gather at an outdoor barbecue. The night is soft. Music starts and some of us dance. Meanwhile, smoke rises in Syria, another rape in India, wild fires in Colorado, crackdown in Cairo, Protests in Brazil. . . . It's time to head home.

By Abigail Trafford, former health editor and columnist at The Washington Post and author of *My Time: Making the Most of the Bonus Decades*, was a journalism fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health.

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