

The Poloafrica development programme

Polo in South Africa has not moved with the times as most other sports have. There are hardly any black South African players, moreover the few that do play are sponsored players. There are as yet no rich black South Africans who play the game. Part of Poloafrica's mission is to change both the perception and reality of the sport in this country, in order to allow it to flourish and grow.

The home of Poloafrica is Uitgedacht Farm, a working farm set in the foothills of the spectacular Maluti Mountains in the Eastern Free State. The farm has over 45 playing ponies and a small breeding herd. The farm provides polo coaching and vacations, mostly for overseas guests. Everyone from the farm is proud of Poloafrica's growing reputation as the home of black polo in South Africa.

Poloafrica has three specific objectives. First, to uplift and encourage previously disadvantaged people of talent to do well in the sport. To play, certainly, but also to become true "polo professionals" not only by developing a wide range of horse management skills, but also through schooling the ponies and coaching other players in the sport. The latter capability requires confidence and authority, which represents a considerable social challenge for South African black players given the closed nature of the sport in the country today. Times are, however, changing. Already Poloafrica has one senior black coach, Tshidiso Meshake, who now has a proven track record in successful coaching of foreign guests, which has significantly improved his confidence. Considerable help and guidance is being given to Tshidiso and the rest of the team by Matthew Pohl, one of the leading polo professionals and coaches in this country.

Poloafrica's second objective is to make the sport more accessible to non-white players. It is important for wealthy black South Africans to see black players compete and win, in order to challenge the unspoken assumption that the sport is only a sport for white people. To achieve these first two objectives Poloafrica sponsors black development players to hone their playing skills and to compete in tournaments. Harold Awuah Darko, a leading Ghanaian polo player and supporter of Poloafrica, and Catherine Cairns, founder of Poloafrica, put together a team of three South African black players and Harold himself, who won the Africa Cup at Inanda in 2008. This team was captained by Tshidiso Meshake. This was the first time a black team has ever reached a final in a tournament in South Africa, much less won. Sbu Duma won Most Valued Player for his performance in this tournament, and went on to play with Harold in the Accra Open in Ghana, where again he won Most Valued Player and one of his ponies, Coravich, from the Poloafrica yard, won Golden Pony. This year the Poloafrica team, again captained by Tshidiso, sadly did not keep the trophy – however they achieved a measure of success through two wins out of three games played, only losing to the team which eventually won the tournament. There have however been other successes for Poloafrica this year – a Poloafrica black team won the junior division at Free State Champs and another Poloafrica black team won the B division at the Sparta tournament. Two Poloafrica black players have also won the coveted award of "Most Valuable Player" in tournaments this year. Most recently, the Free State Invitation side (again captained by Tshidiso) beat the

Highveld team in the curtain raiser at the BMW International Polo Series held at Inanda in August. This was the first time an all black side has played in the curtain raiser for the International Test Series. Three of the team members were Poloafrika players.

Poloafrika's third objective is to use polo and ponies as a lever to encourage children from underprivileged backgrounds to work hard at school. To this end, Poloafrika runs a development polo programme on the farm. Poloafrika provides practical and financial support for school attendance and gives children a chance to learn about horsemanship and play polo. Poloafrika works closely with the Valley Education Fund run by Franshoek Farm in this endeavour – the VEF takes care of the school side of things with funding from Poloafrika, and the children receive polo coaching at Uitgedacht Farm. The six children currently in the programme are permitted to receive coaching and play polo as long as, and only as long as, they do well at school and continue to demonstrate discipline and enthusiasm for the ponies and the sport. The point of this programme is not to create future polo players (although that might also happen and indeed is happening) it is instead to foster academic upliftment and a sense of responsibility. There are two boys and four girls in the programme. The boys are doing well at school and have been enjoying polo at Uitgedacht Farm in their holidays and some weekends for over two years now. These two boys both played in the team that won the junior section at Free State Champs this year, and the older boy, Thapelo Motijoa, also played in the team that won at Sparta. The girls joined the programme in the last quarter of 2008. These girls are all children who dropped out of school (some for more than two years) and who because of this programme have been registered at school again, and so started back at school in January 2009. One of these girls, Mamaseko Sithole, won "Most Improved Player" at the Franshoek tournament in the Free State this year. Three of these children were chosen to attend the Jurassic Park Junior Polo Clinic this year, sponsored by the South African Polo Association (SAPA), the Free State Polo Association (FSPA) and Poloafrika.

Poloafrika is happy to report that in the SAPA Executive Committee meeting held in October, the decision was taken to endorse and sponsor the Poloafrika development programme.

www.poloafrika.com

Location coordinates: lat -28.768, lon 28.008, or 28 46 05S, 28 00 30E

(+27) 83 434 6372

info@poloafrika.com