

Tournament Roundup

The Avis International Ladies Polo

England vs South Africa – 19th September at Inanda

On the 19th September 2004, Inanda Club, Johannesburg saw England once again take on a combined African team. Virgin Atlantic sponsored England and the team was captained by Nina Vestey (3 goals) and the rest of the team consisted of Emma Tomlinson (2 goals), Lucy Taylor (1 goal) and Sophie West (0 goals). The Avis African side consisted of Sherri-Lyn Hensman (2 goals Zimbabwe), Lucinda Voorspuy (1 goal Kenya), Sally Jellis (1 goal Zambia) and was captained by Sarah van Wyk (nee Erskine – 1 goal) of South Africa. Last years inaugural game saw a tusk goal-for-goal game end in a draw. This year England played of a total handicap of 6 and Africa 5. There was serious concern from the Africa supporters and the players themselves that the game would be a runaway. I personally knew that there was no way that the Africa side would allow a runaway and that they would dig as deep as the Kimberley Diamond mine shaft if they had to. The other major concern was the fact that we had the intrepid Nina Vestey. Pro female UK player and the semi-pro, Emma Tomlinson. Their reputations are well established in polo worldwide. African lady polo players have not yet reached the point where we are playing in much more than social tournaments and occasionally in provincial level tournaments in the C divisions if we are lucky. With this in mind the final score of 9-11 to the UK was by no means a defeat and watch out next year is all I can say!!

Mention must be made of Sarah Van Wyk; her performance was nothing short of brilliant! We hope that the South African Polo Association and polo community in general will make every opportunity available to her to play in more serious and competitive polo this coming year. With just a little more effort and support she really could be an outstanding player once again proving the theory of genetic inheritance. It was an absolute privilege to watch Nina Vestey play and ride. She was also fantastically composed on television and in front of the crowd. All eight players performed brilliantly and impressed the 2000 plus crowd who had gathered together for the event.

As with last year, a 2 day run up tournament was held prior to the tournament, which is specifically designed to promote and develop women in the sport of polo. Apart from the international players, a number of players made a huge effort to be there from all over South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia. A large number of players in the run up tournament had had increases over the last season. This is very encouraging and bodes well for the sport. We once again decided to have one 2 or 3 goal male player on each of the 8 teams making the tournament a 2 goal tournament. The winners of the run-up tournament were the Nightingales- Walter Grindrod (2), Nina Vestey (3), Candice Miles (-1) and Bunty Sykes (-2) who is all of twelve years old. Candice Miles put on an extraordinary performance the entire weekend and also walked away with the most valuable player award. She really is a player whose progress should be to watch in the future.

Thanks to the agreed continued support of our title sponsor, Avis and Virgin Atlantic, the event will now certainly become an annual British versus Africa challenge. Our decision to make it an annual challenge between our two continents is due to the fact that we as players have decided to build it into a major fundraising event under the auspices of the United Against Hunger. The aim is to get each player personally involved in raising funds for the charity there by taking some form of personal responsibility. No entry fee is charged instead all players raise chukka for chukka sponsorship. We will also aim to find a patron for the event from both England and Africa.

After the international, the English team were hosted by Ant and Tessa Baber at Ant's Nest, a private game lodge in the Waterberg region of northern South Africa. Ant's Nest specializes in horseback safaris and the girls saw game ranging from giraffe, kudu and eland to rhino at close quarters. A number of snakes were spotted to which caused more concern than being very close to a rhino and calf! The horses were unbelievably calm. The lodge itself was beautiful and the service was out of this world.

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