BRAINS OR POLO? EQUESTRIAN SPORT, ARMY REFORM AND THE GENTLEMANLY OFFICER TRADITION, 1900–1914

ELIZA RHEIDI

How far the British army succeeded in modernising before 1914 is still a matter of debate. Despite the reforms that followed the Boer War historians have noted that certain characteristics of the Victorian army endured well into the twentieth century. Tim Travers suggests that the Edwardian period saw the ‘convergence and frequent conflict’ of two ideals of war—the new ‘technical, functionally competent, professional ideal’ and the ‘traditional, gentlemanly, amateur ideal’—and argues that the amateur ideal persisted throughout World War I even as it proved incapable of meeting the challenges posed by technological, mass warfare.¹ For the cavalry, Brian Bond, Edward Spiers, Gerald DeGroot, and the Marquess of Anglesey have charted how the movement towards reform of cavalry doctrine in the first years of the twentieth century was rapidly thwarted by the ‘forces of reaction’.² A key aspect of this reaction was what Spiers has called the ‘gentlemanly officer tradition’. The officer corps was, almost entirely, made up of those who could claim to be ‘gentlemen’. As a group they cherished a heroic and chivalric concept of war, valued ‘character’ and morale over intellect and professional training, and attached a high importance to sporting activities.³ The Edwardian debates over the place of sport in the officer lifestyle, hitherto largely unexamined, therefore provide a revealing sidelight on the ethos of the pre-1914 army.⁴ This article explores the role of

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equestrian sport in the ‘gentlemanly officer tradition’ and describes the prolonged and ultimately futile attempts before 1914 to restrict it in the cause of a more diverse and meritocratic officer corps. In particular it focuses on polo, a game introduced to the British army only in the later nineteenth century, but which for its critics rapidly came to symbolise all that was wrong with the officer class. In the aftermath of the Boer War polo was attacked as a major contributing factor in the ‘extravagance’ that restricted commissioned ranks in the cavalry to those with substantial private incomes, and defended on the grounds that it promoted officer-like qualities and acted as a form of military training. Attempts to limit military polo by the War Office, successive committees of enquiry, and a campaign in the press met with such remarkably little success as to suggest that, in this respect at least, the gentlemanly officer tradition remained alive and strong—particularly in the cavalry—right up to the First World War.

Despite the abolition of purchase in 1871, the officer corps of the British army retained a ‘high degree of social homogeneity’ through recruitment from the public schools and the need for officers to possess private incomes. Rates of pay were so low that, except in India, it was impossible for officers to live only on their pay, especially as the army also expected them to buy their own uniforms, furniture and—in the case of cavalry officers—two chargers. Officers required an additional annual income of between £100 (minimum—for an infantry officer) and £700 (for a cavalry officer in an ‘elite’ regiment). The officer corps therefore came largely from the ranks of the landed gentry, which Razzell suggests consistently provided one-third of the officer class across the period 1830–1912. In addition there was a high rate of self-recruitment from military families, and an increasing proportion from the ‘gentlemanly’ professional classes. The aristocracy maintained a diminishing but significant presence: by 1912 only nine percent of all officers were from the aristocracy but this rose to 24 percent for officers ranked Major-General or above. Moreover, certain regiments became steadily more socially exclusive.3 The cavalry’s traditional social and military prestige as ‘the gentleman’s arm—an elite bound together by the cavalry spirit’ further contributed to the perpetuation of aristocratic values.4

This continuing connection between the army and the land meant that the ‘military life-style, ethos, norms and standards were primarily based on the principal characteristics of the landed interest’.5 Sport, and especially equestrian sport, was central to this lifestyle and one of the markers by which the socially desirable were distinguished from the undesirable. In several cases in which ‘unsuitable’ junior officers were bullied or ostracised by their peers, inability or refusal to participate in equestrian sport made up part of the evidence against them. Of an officer whose treatment by the 4th Hussars was raised in the House of Commons in 1896 it was


5 Harries-Jenkins, Army, p. 43.
said that 'on its becoming clear that Mr Hodge could not keep racehorses and hunters it was apparent that his brother officers were determined to get rid of him'; in a similar case in 1903 three subalterns of the Grenadier Guards were 'brought before the senior subaltern, who told them that, unless they rode with the Brigade drag at Windsor, they would be flogged'. If, as Spiers has commented, 'a paramount concern of the officer gentleman tradition was the maintenance of social standards—not simply the possession of a private income but a pattern of expenditure which met with the approval of brother officers and sustained the customs of the mess', equestrian sport constituted an essential component of this pattern.9

Officers not only participated in field and equestrian sports at home but reproduced them overseas. English foxhounds accompanied regiments to stations across the empire so that hunting (with some necessary modifications, such as the replacement of foxes by jackals) could proceed as normal. The Royal Calpe Hunt of Gibraltar was established in 1813 by the Duke of Wellington's Peninsular War troops. Packs were also formed at the Cape (1820) and by garrisons throughout India. The oldest was the Madras Hunt, first recorded in 1776; another famous pack, founded in 1844, was based at Ootacamund. The Peshawar Vale Hunt, established in the 1860s by the Green Howards, continued its activities almost unaffected by the vicissitudes of life on the North-West Frontier until 1947. More distinctively Indian was the sport of pig-sticking: pursuing wild pigs on horseback and killing—or at least wounding—them with a lance. Originating in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, pig-sticking became 'more highly regularised and institutionalised' in the post-Mutiny period with the development of hunt clubs, pig-sticking competitions and cups, and pig preservation policies. Dangerous and bloody, pig-sticking more than any other sport could be justified as preparation for war.10 In the later nineteenth century, however, its popularity was challenged by the emergence of a new sport: polo.

The British claimed to have invented modern polo. The game had first come to their notice in Manipur (on the India/Burma border) in the 1850s and was quickly taken up by tea planters and army officers. The first polo club was formed in 1859 by Joseph Sherer, a lieutenant in the Bengal Army, and Captain Robert Stewart, superintendent of Cachar; several others followed in the next decade. In 1869 a report in the Field encouraged officers of the 10th Hussars stationed at Aldershot to experiment with 'hockey on horseback'. The first inter-regimental match was played on Hounslow Heath against the 9th Lancers, and by 1878 an annual Inter-Regimental Tournament at Hurlingham had been established. Initially a rough and ready game played on small ponies with up to eight players a side, polo became increasingly sophisticated and tightly regulated, though still very much an aggressive contact sport. The 'slow, dribbling game' of the early days gave way to the 'galloping game' played on bigger ponies with only four players a side, and then to the 'scientific game' with a greater emphasis on combination, in which each

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9The Times, 20 June 1896, 10 Feb. 1903.
8Spiers, Late Victorian Army, pp. 338–9.
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254–9, 283–94; Maj Dalbiac, ‘Polo in the Army’, Navy and Army Illustrated, 13 Nov. 1896, 251–2
and ‘Polo in India’, Navy and Army Illustrated, 30 Apr. 1897, 300–1; T. F. Dale, Polo Past and Present
(London, 1905), pp. 369–99; Capt H. de B. de Lisle, The Rules of Polo in India, 1907 (Bombay,
1907); Anon., ‘Polo in India’, Country Life, 31 Aug. 1912, 298–300; Lt-Col Humphrey Guinness,
‘Foreword’ in Brig Jack Gannon, Before the Colours Fade: Polo, Pig, India, Pakistan and Some Memories
'break down the barriers of race, and bind together in amity the fellow-subjects of the East and West'.

Nevertheless, by the late 1880s polo’s all-pervasiveness was causing some official unease in India. There had been a spate of serious accidents, and rapid inflation in the price of polo ponies had tempted officers to balance their accounts by buying poor-quality chargers. The commander-in-chief, Sir Frederick Roberts, though an enthusiastic horseman who believed that officers should undertake 'frequent practice in feats of horsemanship', in 1890 issued a general order regarding polo, urging clubs to minimise its dangers, and instructing commanding officers to see that officers did not buy expensive ponies 'until they are provided with proper chargers' and that the price of polo ponies was kept within officers' means. The Indian Polo Association was formed to regulate the game but initially had little effect: in 1892 Roberts was forced to threaten 'decisive action' unless his comments on safety and economy were heeded. He was not alone in his concerns. From the Punjab 'A Player' urged the abolition of tournaments, the main cause of high expenses. Since 'success generally comes to the owners of the speediest ponies—i.e., to the longest purse', he said, junior officers were pressured into buying expensive ponies which were then transported long distances to tournaments 'at a cost of £200 to £300 in some cases'.

(Some years later the officers of the 4th Hussars chartered a special train to transport 30 ponies 1,400 miles from Bengalure to the Inter-Regional Tournament at Meerut.) At home the difficulty in finding sufficient officers to staff cavalry regiments raised similar alarms about expenses. One correspondent to The Times complained of 'reckless and growing extravagance amongst the younger officers', another that 'a stud of hunters and two or three polo ponies ought not to be regarded as compulsory in order to keep up a certain tone in a regiment'. In 1894 polo was banned from Sandhurst (along with keeping horses, racing and hunting) after a series of reports by the Board of Visitors condemned it as encouraging extravagance.

However, it took the disasters of the Boer War to bring the issue of officer sport to the foreground. While almost all sections of the British army proved inadequate in South Africa, the cavalry came under particular criticism for its lack of mobility, initiative, and reconnaissance skills, and its extraordinarily high levels of horse wastage. It was the belief of many officers and the War Office that the failure of the cavalry was due to the involvement of the cavalry in the Boer War, in the words of one officer, 'Black Week'.

The spectre of the charge, in which all could see the potential for the loss of the whole of the cavalry, and the potential of the same for future years, could not be dispelled. Officers were put under pressure to resign if they refused to agree to the sale of their ponies. As the subject of the sale of officers' ponies, one officer wrote: 'Get rid of our horses... one of the conditions of enlistment... minimum of...'

An officer's horse was an important element in his identity and his ability to earn a decent living. The sale of a horse was usually met with resignation but sometimes with grief, and the determination to keep the horse at all costs. Officers who refused to sell were often court-martialled. hose was a weapon.

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14 The Times, 7 Oct. 1890. For a dissenting view, see 21 Oct. 1890.

15 Churchill, Early Life, p. 221.

16 The Times, 10 Oct. 1890.

17 Polo had been played at Sandhurst since about 1874, initially on the football ground. The regulations against keeping horses, hunting, and point-to-point races had been relaxed by 1900. Times, 12 Nov. 1891, 22 Feb. 1893, 22 Nov. 1893; Maj A. F. Mockler-Ferryman, Annals of Sandhurst (London, 1900), pp. 256–7.


19 The Times, 30 Mar. 1890.

20 The Times, 30 Mar. 1893, 4 Apr. 1893.

21 Bond, The British Army in the Boer War, p. 32.
horse wastage. Roberts, who dismissed 11 out of the 17 cavalry commanders, thought that the failure of the cavalry adequately to perform its basic duties had prolonged the war. 18 The Times, heading the charge for army reform, was moved, soon after 'Black Week', to deplore

the scandal, for it is nothing less, that no man can hold the QUEEN'S commission except under perfectly intolerable social conditions unless he can command a private income of from £150 to £500. The abolition of purchase was supposed to make the nation master of its Army [but] ... expensive habits, mostly connected with amusements of one kind and another, have made the Army a close corporation just as in the old purchase days. 19

As the subsequent correspondence demonstrated, the expenditure of cavalry officers on equestrian sports, particularly polo, was the main issue at stake. A typical letter, signed 'General', complained that in a well-known cavalry regiment, 'by no means ... one of the fastest', a private income of £700 a year was thought the acceptable minimum:

An officer is considered 'a very poor fellow' and one not at all likely to do credit to the regiment if he does not race and keep hunters and polo ponies. ... Nearly the whole of this expenditure goes to promote pleasure and amusements, and acts most detrimentally upon the efficiency of officers, who have neither time nor inclination for the serious study of their profession, which has become a vital necessity nowadays. 20

Officer polo thus became the focus of concerns about two related problems: firstly, the standard of military education; secondly, the difficulty in recruiting sufficient capable officers for the cavalry because of the expenses of the expected lifestyle. In the years after 1900 the War Office and a series of government committees tackled the interconnected issues of military education, officer recruitment, cavalry extravagance, and equestrian sport. Their suggestions proved remarkably similar: their ability to force through the proposed reforms proved remarkably weak. The movement for reform took place against a wider debate about the role of the cavalry in modern warfare given recent advances in firepower. Roberts, as commander-in-chief of the British Army, urged a move away from shock tactics and the arme blanche towards a mobile force able to fight dismounted using rifles. In 1903 the lance was retired as a weapon for active service, and the rifle displaced the sword as the cavalry's principal weapon. However, Roberts faced great resistance from cavalry traditionalists led by General French and Colonel Douglas Haig, and his reforms were not destined to last long. 21 The parabola between reform and

18 Spiers, 'British Cavalry', 72-3; Anglesey, British Cavalry, chs 14-15.
19 The Times, 14 Feb. 1900.
20 The Times, 22 Feb. 1900.
21 Bond, 'Doctrine and Training'; Spiers, 'British Cavalry'.

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reaction described by the cavalry debate was echoed in miniature by the debate over polo.

Well aware of the strength of vested interests in the cavalry regiments, the War Office proceeded on the polo question with caution tempered by an increasingly widely felt need for reform. An earlier committee on cavalry organisation led by French had advocated banning neither entertainments at race meetings (‘expenses under this head, seemed, of late years, to have greatly decreased in the Cavalry’) nor inter-regimental polo tournaments. Good polo was valuable training for cavalry work: as a concession to criticism, tournaments might be supervised by a committee of Brigadiers. By late 1899 most members of the War Office Council felt that more radical change was needed. The adjutant-general, Sir Evelyn Wood, came out strongly for restricting officer sport and the associated expense. Describing tournament polo as ‘almost professional’ he recommended banning regiments from playing in tournaments outside their regimental district, forbidding regimental polo clubs, and allowing officers to play only on their own horses. Lord Wolseley, Roberts’ predecessor as commander-in-chief, agreed that ‘tournaments as now carried out do more harm than good’. Support within the Council was sufficient by January 1900 to warrant the drafting of a draconian Army Order:

Regimental polo clubs for providing ponies for polo tournaments are forbidden. Regimental teams in matches, or in polo tournaments are not to be permitted, except within the military district in which the regiment may be quartered, and Officers playing in such teams may only do so on ponies that are bona fide, and unconditionally, their own property.

In February regimental teams were forbidden to take part in tournaments outside the military district of the regiment. The other proposals included in the draft order, however, were to be discussed.22

The Secretary of State for War, Lord Lansdowne, seemed disinclined to take on the cavalry regiments. He declared himself ‘entirely in favour of putting down extravagance’ regarding polo, particularly objecting to regimental clubs funded by universal subscription among officers ‘which compel Officers who do not play to pay for those who do’. (This was a recognised grievance: in 1899 Sir George Luck, Lieutenant-General Commanding Bengal, ordered all station polo clubs to be disbanded for this reason, after officers at Naini Tal station ‘submitted a petition complaining that polo’s supremacy at the station was despotic’.23) But Lansdowne preferred to work through persuasion rather than by regulation. He was certainly not prepared to pick a fight over entertainments at race meetings, though Wood wanted to ‘absolutely forbid any Regimental lunch being taken to race meetings, except those of point to point races in which regiments may be taking part’ and prepared a draft Army Order to this effect. Was it, said Lansdowne ‘intended to forbid the regiment from going to a race meeting? If it may go, is it to take no

luncheon with his officers?’

Surely the former was the case. But Lord Wolseley, clearly, would not countenance anything but slight, as he had of his in Regiments, passed without comment, sporting expenses.6

Meantime, the officer sport in the army, by the Council, and other interest, had to be handled, coming out, and the摒 were astonishing the root cause, was seniority, of generally sporty, and the colleges and ‘keenness of men’ which they can possess, the under-employment of in a day on sports. Thomas Mansel, (generally) not the problem. A post by student, would have the assertion in the refer only to

22Proceedings of the War Office Council, 30 June 1898 to 11 July 1900, The National Archives (TNA), WO 163/4B.
23McDevitt, May the Best Man Win, pp. 44–5; The Times, 6 Nov. 1899.
luncheon with it? If it may take luncheon with it, are the Officers to be forbidden from giving a sandwich to their friends? Lansdowne’s ridicule cloaked considerable unease about the probable reaction to such reforms. It was essential, he urged, in framing rules of this kind to obtain as large a measure of support as possible from within the Cavalry itself. There was little doubt that any restrictions imposed upon the mode of life in Cavalry regiments would be difficult to enforce, and would probably encounter a good deal of hostile criticism.

Surely the Colonels of regiments could control any tendency towards extravagance? Wolseley, out of his riper military experience, assured them that they could not, or would not: ‘warnings to Colonels had frequently been given, but their effect was but slight, and of short duration, and in six months they were forgotten’. But Lansdowne succeeded in carrying his view that ‘stringent sumptuary laws’ could not be passed without first ascertaining ‘the general opinion of Cavalry Officers’, and that sporting expenses could not be considered in isolation from the other costs of military life.\(^{24}\) A committee was subsequently appointed to investigate officer expenses.

Meanwhile, however, yet another committee added its weight to the attack on officer sport. The Committee on the Education and Training of Officers, headed by the Conservative MP Aretas Akers-Douglas, reported in June 1902, having spent a year taking evidence from military men, public school headmasters, and other interested parties. They found that, although public school games had improved the physical condition of officers, their intellectual state was less satisfactory. Boys coming out of school knew ‘nothing at all properly as a rule’, and young officers were astonishingly ignorant on military matters. The committee recognised that the root cause of this problem was that promotion was too rarely by merit, too often by seniority, connections, or interest. They were concerned, however, by the fanatically sporty, rigorously anti-intellectual culture that prevailed both at the military colleges and in the army more generally: studying was positively discouraged, ‘keenness is out of fashion’, and young officers aimed only ‘to see how much polo they can play and how soon they can get out of their uniform’. They were also under-employed and consequently idle: a cavalry subaltern, it was said, had ‘nothing to do after luncheon’ and could potentially spend at least two or three hours a day on study ‘without interfering with his games’.\(^{25}\) The well-known army crammer Thomas Miller Maguire (admittedly an uncompromising opponent of ‘athleticism’ generally) saw these games, and the emphasis placed upon them, as part of the problem. A young officer, he said, had ‘every discouragement to fit himself for his post by study ... success at polo, or cricket, or tennis, or theatricals, or billiards would have paid him in his career better than learning’—not an unreasonable assertion in an age when commanding officers’ reports for the Selection Board could refer only to the applicant’s success at polo or field sports or ‘in society’.\(^{26}\)

\(^{24}\) Proceedings of the War Office Council, 30 June 1898 to 11 July 1900, TNA, WO 163/48.


\(^{26}\) Akers-Douglas, appendix 15, vol. i, p. 79; Spiers, Army and Society, p. 249.
The committee was particularly concerned by the relationship between military education, the expenses of the cavalry lifestyle, and the consequent lack of competition for commissioned posts in cavalry regiments. While a large private income remained essential it was 'hopeless to endeavour to raise the standard of education among Cavalry officers'. The Committee made several suggestions for cutting expenses, including the government provision of chargers. Much of the evidence given on this point, however, revolved around polo and hunting. Lieutenant-Colonel the Hon. R. T. Lawley, commanding the 7th Hussars, thought a private income of £600 a year necessary for an officer in his regiment: asked on what it was spent he replied, 'always on horses'. Colonel Fisher of the 10th Hussars thought polo 'a very delicate subject' and a 'difficult thing'—'a poor fellow who is a brilliant player' might easily, he acknowledged, run into debt. The Inspector General of Cavalry, Major-General Grant, hinted at the social pressures involved when he said that 'if you could arrange so that the man who can afford it plays polo and one who cannot afford it is not pressed in any way to play, I am entirely in favour of it'. Major-General H. R. Abadie, Commandant of the Cavalry Depot at Canterbury, was more direct. Polo he thought a 'good game, especially so for all mounted officers' but polo tournaments were 'a curse owing to the great expenses of ponies, their carriage to and fro as well as their wear and tear'. Regimental packs of hounds, he added, he 'would not tolerate at any price' though he was prepared to allow small regimental point-to-points and race meetings. The committee's recommendations followed Abadie closely in commending polo as a game but advocating the prohibition of tournaments, regimental coaches, and regimental packs of hounds.

Nothing had changed, however, by the time the Committee to Enquire into the Nature of the Expenses incurred by Officers (headed by Lord Stanly, the Financial Secretary to the War Office) reported a year later, in April 1903. In those areas where their concerns overlapped, the two committees' recommendations were very similar. After taking 'a large amount of evidence . . . almost exclusively of a confidential character', Stanley's committee—refusing to recommend an increase in pay and thereby cementing the need for army officers to possess a private income—concentrated on two main points. Firstly, it recommended that the state should provide some specific necessities of army life currently paid for by officers. For cavalry officers, these were to include two chargers plus saddlery and stable gear, and a second soldier servant to act as groom. (This was calculated as an initial saving of £300 plus an annual saving of £180, reducing the private income needed by a cavalry officer to £120). As it was 'considered practically essential for all Cavalry Officers to hunt as part of their military training', they were to be allowed to hunt their chargers ('a concession', said the Times, 'which will be greatly appreciated'). While encouraging hunting, however, the report—like that of the Akers-Douglas Committee—advocated that certain familiar areas of officer extravagance should be abandoned. Polo 'worse than useless as an educational factor' particularly if tournaments should be 'restricted to a pulsorty'.

Officer-hunters played out their professional lives in serious style—knightly courtesy called for the tournament, but their professional pride in their other zealots for 'time in gos' was evident. Critics of the old 'gentleman's profession' and of the pleasant society to which it led were that on account of the expense one' commented in 1895. In 1896 argued that the 'outlandish' and 'seriously flawed' was as a social anachronism.

Restrictions on hunting or participation in tournaments will be introduced.

Similarly, the military and officers, the Times reported, 'the training of the individual to devotion in the service and men under the general airmen of long.

29 Ibid., vol. i, p. 36.
should be restricted. All regimental race meetings except one point-to-point per year should be banned. No regiment should be allowed to keep a pack of hounds. Polo ‘within certain limits’ received modified approval as serving ‘a very useful educational end, in the development of qualities of horsemanship and character particularly requisite for service in the mounted arm’. But inter-regimental tournaments should be prohibited; regimental teams should not be allowed to compete outside their regimental district; and polo clubs, and subscriptions, should be restricted to playing members—‘in no case should membership be felt to be compulsory’. The Times, still flying the flag of army reform, was delighted by the report, editorialising that given ‘the ever increasing demand upon the intellectual powers of officers of all ranks resulting from the conditions of modern warfare, the very serious limitation of the field of selection by the present high standard of expenditure can be considered nothing less than a national danger’. Inter-regimental tournaments had long been ‘simply a competition in wealth between regiments’: their prohibition had ‘it is well known, been urged by Sir EVELYN WOOD and other zealous officers for years’ and The Times hoped the War Office would ‘lose no time in giving it effect’.30

Officer sport, however, could call on powerful supporters, and the debate was played out not only within the army but in the general and sporting press. The critics of 1893 were met with the arguments that since the army was not a paying profession, officers joined largely ‘with a view of obtaining a comfortable home, pleasant society, and a larger amount of sport than he would obtain in civil life’; and that on active service a sporting officer would be of more use than the ‘theoretical’ competitive examinations threatened to turn out.31 Even in 1900 it could be argued that sport and society were the main attractions of officer life and that (‘Is it seriously contended that a cavalry officer should live on his pay?’) the role of sport as a social gatekeeper should be embraced rather than deplored:

Restrict the sporting instincts of our cavalry officers, forbid them to hunt or play polo . . . and in a very short time I venture to predict a very different class of person will offer himself for cavalry commissions; whether this will be to the advantage of the service remains to be seen.32

Similarly, W. E. Cairns argued that the unreformed system had created a ‘corps of officers, the best in the world’, distinguished not so much by the ‘scientific military training of the Germans’ as by the ‘higher military qualities’ of ‘courage . . . devotion . . . forgetfulness of self’ and the ‘indescribable qualities’ required to lead men under fire. Raising pay and lowering expenses would open the profession to men of lower social status less endowed with these qualities than the traditional

30 Report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State for War to Enquire into the Nature of the Expenses incurred by Officers of the Army, and to Suggest Measures for bringing Commissions within reach of Men of Moderate Means [Cd. 1421] 1903; The Times, 9 Apr. 1903; Spies, Army and Society, p. 25. The suggestion that chargers should be provided at government expense was adopted for cavalry stationed in Britain but not extended to India.
31 The Times, 4 Apr. 1893.
officer class: and ‘Tommy Atkins’, he said, would follow a “gentleman” much more readily than they will an officer whose social position is not so well assured.\textsuperscript{33} The defenders of the gentlemanly officer tradition therefore saw equestrian sport—and its associated expenses—as usefully ensuring that the officer corps would continue to come largely from the ranks of the aristocracy and landed gentry.

This was scarcely a view to commend itself to army reformers, but officer sport could also be defended as promoting soldierly efficiency. Even the sternest critics agreed that hunting and polo could serve as a form of military training. In the days of cavalry and mounted infantry there was no doubt some truth in this—if not, perhaps, quite enough truth to justify the lavishness with which leave for hunting was granted. (In the late 1890s officers expected two days’ hunting leave a week during the season in addition to their two and a half months of annual leave; Evelyn Wood, scouge of polo tournaments, was accustomed to hunt 46 days a year.) In addition to horsemanship, hunting was said to develop an ‘eye for the country’ and the ability to cross unknown territory at speed. Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Seton Hutchinson described ‘prowess in the hunting-field’ as ‘an essential part of training’ for colonial warfare.\textsuperscript{34} Lieutenant-Colonel E. A. H. Alderson’s Pink and Scarlet or Hunting as a School for Soldiering (1900) was a prolonged attempt to prove that hunting—in Mr Jorrocks’ well-known words—really was the image of war. Hunting, Alderson argued, took up ‘the fighting education of the young Officer just where the barrack-square and the drill-field can go no further’ and in a way that nothing but active service itself could do. As supporting evidence, he pointed out that the German cavalry now hunted ‘by order’. Similarly, Baden-Powell thought pig-sticking and polo ‘an exceptionally practical school for the development of horsemanship and of handiness in the use of arms while mounted’—an education the more valuable for being undertaken voluntarily.\textsuperscript{35}

Not only physical but also moral qualities were said to be produced by polo and field sports. These included pluck, nerve, judgement and (in the case of polo) team spirit and regimental esprit de corps. Above all—as befitted officer sports—they promoted leadership ability. ‘In war we find our sportsmen natural leaders, men of decision who inspire confidence, and who in consequence will always be respected and followed’.\textsuperscript{36} In 1916, in the face of considerable scepticism, Major-General Knox declared that no man had ‘done so much as has the fox and the fox-hound to foster the cult of character, quick decision, and nerve so necessary for leadership in war’. Largely of the same qualities were required of the officer to lead men at the front lines.\textsuperscript{37} The epitome of the soldier, at Mafeking, the hero of the hour, was prepared to see ‘the old horses of a man . . . sold for horses . . . in them, but not sold for comfort by men. The man-man was glad to see the sort of thing played by men and provided for “unthinking” men was by no means and urging.

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\textsuperscript{33}W. E. Cairns, Social Life in the British Army (London, 1900), pp. xi-xvi. Cairns was subsequently secretary to the Military Education Committee.


\textsuperscript{35}Lt-Col E. A. H. Alderson, Pink and Scarlet or Hunting as a School for Soldiering (London, 1900), pp. 1–2, 209–10, 216; Lt-Gen Sir Robert Baden-Powell, Indian Memories (London, 1915); p. 31. Lionel Edwards’ watercolour illustrations for the second (1913) edition of Pink and Scarlet still hang in the Officers’ Mess at Sandhurst.

in war'. Lieutenant-Colonel E. D. Miller (late 17th Lancers) thought 'the same qualities which bring a man to the front at polo are required by anyone who aspires to lead men'. Baden-Powell agreed, specifying 'quiet, quick decision and dash'—the epitome of the 'cavalry spirit'—as the qualities in question. (After his triumphs at Mafeking, Baden-Powell himself was frequently cited as an example of how sport prepared men for war: 'I knew Baden-Powell in India as a first-class man to "pig", and a most successful shikari, and am therefore not in the least surprised that he is now making game of the Boers'). The skills acquired in breaking and schooling horses were thought to be transferable to the training of enlisted men ('Men . . . like horses . . . have tender mouths, therefore "hands", tact, temper, justice, confidence in them, boldness, judgement, and self-reliance are required to lead them successfully, just as they are to ride horses properly'); the habit of ensuring a horse's comfort before one's own could also be usefully transferred to the care of one's men. The business of organising regimental polo provided useful experience in man-management and administration. Moreover, polo (as its supporters were glad to see the German military journal Militär Wochenblatt point out) could be played by the middle-aged as well as the young, keeping older officers in condition and providing an opportunity for senior and junior officers to mingle. If it was 'unthinkable' in the early 1880s for a colonel to be in the regimental polo team it was by no means uncommon by 1914 to see 'a colonel of a regiment playing Back, and urging his officers on to victory in a hard-fought match'.

Even the question of expense was disputed. Polo, claimed its champions, was not how young officers wasted money—or if it was their parents should be thankful. In later life Churchill claimed that 'no one ever came to grief—except honourable grief—through riding horses'. Miller thought that debts allegedly incurred by officers through polo had probably been acquired in a less creditable fashion 'on amusements of a much less reputable nature'. Sport was surely preferable to the 'crapulous, unwholesome café haunting' of the continental officer. Some suggested that polo should be seen as an economic and as an agent of moral regeneration, especially in India. Baden-Powell, surely optimistically, thought that polo and pig-sticking had 'completely driven out from the British subaltern the drinking and betting habits of the former generation', and Sergeant-Major John Fraser (who certainly did not indulge in these sports himself) called them 'the salvation of many


38 Anon., ‘Polo and Cub-Hunting’, Country Life, 13 Sep. 1902, 346; Baden-Powell, Indian Memoirs, p. 104; Miller, Modern Polo, p. 350. Successful regimental teams with Commanding Officers playing included the 17th Lancers (Haig and then Portal), 16th Lancers (Gough) and the 10th Hussars (Vaughan). Unusually, in the 10th Hussars polo also provided a link between officers and men: much of the ponies' training was done by other ranks, and the NCOs had their own annual tournament. Jack Gannon, ‘Polo: the Indian Inter-Regimental Tournament Part II: 1900–1914’, Royal Armoured Corps Journal 2 (1948), 207–20, 212.
a young officer' for the same reason. Even in Britain polo was said to keep officers with their regiments and dissuade them from racing and 'more expensive and less desirable distractions in London'. Polo thus promoted thrift, self-control and 'careful living'.

Invariably the example used to support this argument was the success of the Durham Light Infantry (DLI), winners of the Indian Inter-Regimental Tournament 1896–8: a poor foot regiment beating the cavalry at its own game. This triumph was the product of a decade's-long campaign spearheaded by Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle, a mere lieutenant when, with the support of his commanding officer, he carried through his proposal to start a regimental polo club against considerable opposition. A successful amateur jockey, he devoted himself to polo after being offered the adjutancy of the regiment on condition he gave up racing. De Lisle was central to all aspects of the team's success. His tactical innovations—derived from the DLI's football team—brought in a new style of play that emphasised teamwork, accurate passing and pace. His horsemanship and eye for a horse not only meant that the regiment's polo ponies were unbeatably well-trained: the team was largely funded by the profits made from buying raw ponies, training them, and selling them on. His 'iron discipline' forced team members to devote themselves to a regime of keep-fit routines, clean living, constant individual practice and intensive team practice at speed. Justly famous, the DLI polo team was less a demonstration that regimental polo need not be expensive than it was the exception that proved the rule. When in 1898 De Lisle left the regiment the DLI left the annals of polo history forever.

The crowning argument in favour of polo was, however, as McDevitt has recently argued, that polo was a 'masculine' sport, 'the most manly of games'. Polo, said J. Moray Brown, called forth

all those manly qualities that make Britons what they are, and what, please God, they ever will be. . . . In these days of luxury any sport that tends to take away our youth from enervating influences, that trains their

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40 This did not make them universally popular: some cavalry regiments 'went out of their way to show resentment over the fact that an infantry regiment should even compete for the Regemental Cup—much less win it' (Gen Sir Hubert Gough, Soldiering On (London, 1954), p. 47).

41 See Gough, Soldiering On, pp. 44–7 for the Indian racing scene in the 1890s.


43 Polo undoubtedly benefited De Lisle's military career. Though living entirely on his pay his profits from selling trained polo ponies were sufficient to let him take a year's leave, 'pay his expenses at a crammer's and pass into the Staff College'. His polo fame surely eased his later path as commander of mounted infantry and cavalry. (Lt-Col E. D. Miller, Fifty Years of Sport (London, 1925), p. 201.)
physical powers, and makes them men, ought surely to be encouraged and fostered.

Polo was marked out as ‘manly’—both for the British and for Indian princes—by the skill and aggression it required and the dangers it involved. Dangerous it certainly was; several books on polo include useful chapters on ‘How to Fall’. Despite repeated efforts to make it safer, officers were not infrequently killed at polo. Between 1880 and 1914 The Times reported the deaths of 36 officers from polo accidents—over one a year on average—mostly in India and of all ranks up to Lieutenant-Colonel John Sladen, commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment, killed in a station game in 1910. The deaths and injuries produced by equestrian sports—not only polo but pig-sticking, hunting and racing—must have gone some way to counteracting their perceived contribution to military efficiency.

The battery of arguments produced to present polo and hunting not as frivolous, extravagant, wasteful of men and prohibitive to military talent but as manly, moral, conducive to thrift and self-control, and a useful form of military training, nonetheless had its effect. In conjunction with the overwhelming popularity of polo in the Edwardian officer corps it meant that the War Office’s attack on equestrian sport was destined to fail. Even as the Committees on Military Education and on the Expenses of Officers recommended the banning of inter-regimental polo tournaments, a campaign was beginning to revive them after the hiatus of the Boer War. In mid-1902 Winston Churchill, claiming that it was ‘wealthy civilians’ who had ‘so greatly increased the price of polo ponies’, told St John Brodrick (Lansdowne’s replacement as Secretary of State for War) that the problem could be solved by dissociating army polo from civilian polo. A British Army Polo Association should be set up and inter-regimental tournaments not banned but used as a weapon to reduce the cost of army polo. Churchill suggested regulations ‘to discourage the use of very high priced polo ponies’ and ‘to prevent altogether the sort of practice lately indulged in by some regiments of buying a great many expensive ponies shortly before a match’, and urged that ‘not less than half of the ponies should have been actually trained to polo in the regiment and not bought as made ponies’. With these rules the tournament would be won by the ‘finest masters of horsemanship’, not ‘merely the most wealthy or the most sporting’. All this seems a trifle ironic from Churchill, whose former regiment had won polo success through precisely the methods he now deplored. Yet Churchill had personal reasons to support such reforms: he had left the army because his £500 annual income was inadequate to fund ‘polo and the Hussars’. In any case he was clearly not the only person thinking along these lines.

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45 Miller, Modern Polo, p. 355; The Times, 7 Mar. 1910. This figure includes seven British officers of the Indian Army, one of the Egyptian Army, and one Royal Navy officer. It is clear from other sources that the actual death rate was rather higher.

46 Churchill to Brodrick, 7 June 1902 in Churchill, Winston S. Churchill, pp. 142–4; Churchill, Early Life, p. 213. The 4th Hussars on arrival in India had taken the unprecedented step of buying the Poona Light Horse’s entire polo stud of 25 trained ponies as a short-cut towards winning the Indian Inter-Regimental Tournament (Early Life, pp. 120–1).
That September De Lisle sent Roberts a memorandum on regimental polo, arguing that the Boer War had proved that the best polo players were the best soldiers. There was, he said, ‘a peculiar similarity between the characteristics required to “run” a Regimental Polo Team and to excel as a leader of men in the Field’. Polo trained officers for war as effectively as hunting, big-game shooting or pig-sticking, with the added advantage of promoting esprit de corps. Far from discouraging polo the military authorities should give every inducement to young officers to play a game which encouraged horsemanship, horsemastership, organisation, and ‘personal character’. Polo’s one drawback being its expense in England, he submitted a scheme to run the Inter-Regimental Tournament as cheaply as possible. Roberts, who had always felt that polo as a game was a good activity for mounted troops, was not difficult to persuade. Soon afterwards he told Brodick that, rather than banning inter-regimental tournaments as the Akers-Douglas report recommended, he intended to get new rules drawn up by a committee of experienced officers and give them one year’s trial to see if tournaments could be run without ‘undue expense’. Closely echoing De Lisle, he justified this decision in terms of military utility:

amongst the officers, who distinguished themselves in the war, several were noted as leaders of Polo in their regiments, whilst I can only remember one good Polo player amongst the many who proved failures. Polo certainly teaches officers to become good horsemen and careful horse-masters; it develops the powers of organisation, and trains men to think quickly and act on the spur of the moment—all valuable qualities in a mounted officer. 47

The rules produced by the polo committee, which included De Lisle, included a number of cost-cutting measures: a restriction on the number of ponies allowed per team; preliminary ties to be played in regimental districts; the Hurlingham Club to defray the expenses of teams competing in the semi-finals and finals from gate money (reflecting the tournament’s standing as a social function). Roberts had suggested a price limit for ponies but the Committee felt this would result only in ‘evasion and consequent unpleasantness’. If Roberts insisted (which he did not) they were prepared to set a limit of £80, the price of a good untrained pony, to foster horsemanship and make polo ‘a school for cavalry soldiers’. Formally applied to by Haig, a well-known polo player, Roberts approved the new rules in January 1903, though the adjutant-general, Sir Thomas Kelly-Kenny, was ‘afraid of trouble’ with Brodick. 48 Perhaps because of this Roberts ‘forgot’ to tell Brodick that he had agreed to let the 1903 inter-regimental tournament go ahead until March—by which time the War Office had received the Stanley report, again recom-


48 ‘Rules [for the Inter-Regimental Tournament]’; Correspondence between members of the Army Polo Committee, Dec. 1902-Jan. 1903; Proceedings of a Meeting held at the Cavalry Club on 18 Jan. 1903 to discuss questions relating to Inter-Regimental and Army Polo generally; Minutes by Roberts and Kelly-Kenny, Jan. 1903. All in NAM, ‘Polo Papers’, Roberts Papers, 7101/23-191-20.
mending a crack-down on polo. Roberts presented his decision as a deal with the cavalry commanders who, 'in return . . . promised me to do all in their power to reduce the expense of living in their regiments'. If this was a genuine deal Roberts certainly got the worst of the bargain: the cavalry commanders were prepared to reduce the minimum private income required for young officers only to £300, rather than the £120 recommended by Stanley. 59

Roberts hoped that this would still be sufficient to allow the abolition of the separate standard of examinations for cavalry candidates. 60 But his retirement in early 1904 as a result of the abolition of the post of commander-in-chief led to a 'cavalry counter-reformation' in this area as in others. 61 By 1905, following the Hutchinson report on the Deficiency of Officers in the Cavalry, the Army Council was again discussing the same old problems and meditating upon the same old solutions. Exaggerant living still needed to 'be repressed by some means'. The Chief of the General Staff, Sir Neville Lyttelton, thought that, although it was unnecessary to prohibit racing and polo 'it must be made quite clear to officers commanding that these are luxuries, and are not to be forced upon young officers of slender means'. The Army Council was increasingly concerned about the need to relax educational tests in order to ensure a sufficient supply of cavalry officers, with the result that many possessed 'a low standard of general education and intelligence'. The adjutant-general, Major-General C. W. H. Douglas, felt that strong measures were needed to reverse this situation:

The monied classes must be eliminated from the cavalry, and a poorer class of officer sent in, letting the officer commanding know that if a young officer with, say 200l. a year, cannot live in the regiment, the officer commanding will be removed . . . hunting and polo may improve the cavalry officers [but] . . . the choice between money and brains must be made, and if we elect for brains the hunting and polo must go. 62

With Roberts gone, however, traditional cavalry values were rapidly re-in-stated. Under French and Haig the rifle was de-emphasised, the lance was restored as a weapon of war, and the focus of training placed once more on the charge and the arme blanche. It is no coincidence that this period also saw the resurgence of officer sport. Faced with a choice between brains and polo—that is, between meritocracy and professionalism on the one hand, and gentlemanly values and the 'cavalry spirit' on the other—the cavalry regiments of the Edwardian army hesitantly chose polo. 63

49 Minute on Condition of Competitions for Cavalry Commissions, 30 Mar. 1903 and Memorandum on Entry of Cavalry Officers, NAM, Roberts Papers, 7101/23-124-3.
52 As DeGroot (see 'Educated Soldier') argues for Haig, a few exceptional officers of course managed to combine the two.
Continuing War Office attempts to curb officer expenditure on sport met with a mixture of evasion and defiance. Asked for their own solutions to the recruiting problem cavalry officers recommended more pay, more polo, and more leave for hunting. The 10th Hussars responded to a circular on cavalry expenses asking, *inter alia*, whether the regiment kept a pack of hounds by simply transferring the pack—on paper—to the ownership of a Captain Mitford.54 The *Cavalry Journal*, a bastion of cavalry traditionalism, bullishly promoted equestrian sport, deriding 'the recent mania to cut down expenses, regardless of whether it makes for efficiency or not'.55 In 1905 an Army Polo Committee was set up in the teeth of War Office opposition; it was immediately dissolved by the Army Council but revived in March 1906 under the new War Secretary, Richard Haldane—perhaps as a sop to officer feeling at a time when he was presenting wide-ranging reforms. By 1910 the polo lobby was sufficiently confident to suggest that some of the restrictions on the inter-regimental tournament agreed to in 1903 for 'diplomatic' reasons could now safely be abandoned.56 In India the 1899 order from the Lieutenant-General of Bengal banning regimental polo clubs proved similarly short-lived.57

While the belief that equestrian sports had military utility was held even by moderate reformers like Roberts it was further encouraged by the renewed emphasis on traditional cavalry tactics such as the charge. Haig's 1909 report on Cavalry Training placed 'great importance' on 'young officers being encouraged to hunt and play polo. . . . These pursuits have a very real value as training for war'. Polo was actively promoted at the new Cavalry School, and under Major-General John Vaughan hunting was included in the syllabus disguised as 'Memory Training'.58 By 1911 (Douglas having left to take over the Southern Command) the Army Council had softened sufficiently on officer recreation to pronounce that hunting should be accepted as having 'special military value', and that polo possessed 'distinct military advantages, and should therefore be officially encouraged'.59 At the outbreak of World War I equestrian sport was as central to army life as it had ever been, and even during the conflict it was pursued as vigorously as circumstances allowed. Packs of hounds joined several regiments at the front; polo was played behind the lines in France; the boar of the Ardennes were found suitable for pig-sticking; at a pinch partridges could be ridden down and dispatched with polo-mallets. I

The accepted sporting life was still the one drawn in the novels of the Victorian age. Sport for the drive was more auburn from the green fields of some of the better things on to the banks of the Thames. Yet the life behind the counters of the officers' clubs was more than a reflection of Victorian ideals'.60 William Macpherson, 'When the officers met', gave details of life in the officer's mess in 1872. His figure of what was considered the correct depiction of the officer's life was a blend of equestrian and professional

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54 Summary of Answers given by 23 Cavalry Officers, including 14 Commanding Officers of Regiments Stationed at Home, 1905, TNA, WO 163/10; Maj. Gen John Vaughan, *Cavalry and Sporting Memories* (Bala, 1934), p. 115.

55 Anon., 'Sporting Notes', *Cavalry Journal* 1 (1906), 380; see also in the same journal 'Cavalier', 'The Height of Polo Ponies' 1 (1906), 109–11; Col F. V. Wing, 'Foxhunting and Soldiering' 1 (1906), 495–500; 'Ubique', 'The Value of Fox-hunting' 8 (1913), 443–50.


57 *The Times*, 11 Mar. 1911.


59 Minutes of Proceedings and Précis Prepared for the Army Council in the Year 1911: Précis No. 502, 'Provision of Facilities for Officers' Recreation, other than Golf', TNA, WO 163/16. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Gen Sir William Nicholson, a man of long Indian experience, nevertheless remarked that polo had been 'anything but an unmixed advantage to the Army'.
the sport met with a mixed response; recruiting regulations were not altered to encourage soldiers to seek leave for game-shooting, inter alia, a bastion of upper-class sport, "the recent scandal of a military yet of not". Despite opposition, the March 1906 report of the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers Association still claimed that polo "was gradually acquiring a foothold in the intermediate ranks of Bengal Regiments".

Nevertheless, even by 1914 a number of reports of the renewed interest in polo were to be found in the War Office's list of sporting activities. The 1914-15 report on sport in the Indian army noted that polo, "although not yet a common pursuit as in some countries", was "popular in the cooler climate of India". Furthermore, the 1915 report on sport in the British army in Egypt stated that polo was " gaining in popularity" and that it was being taught to officers at the Sandhurst military college. The report also commented that polo was "suitable for the climate of Egypt, and for the general health and robustness of the English soldier".

In Salonika the Scottish Horse formed a scratch pack to hunt hares just behind the trenches which met every Saturday, "war permitting", and "a good deal" of polo was played, sometimes within range of the Bulgarian guns.63

The debate over officer sport took place at a time when sport was increasingly accepted as having both a "civilizing" and a military value to the ordinary soldier. Sport for other ranks was part of a modernizing impulse in the late Victorian army, the drive to make the rank and file fitter, healthier, soberer, more intelligent, and more able to act on their own initiative. Equestrian sport, which took officers away from their men and acted to restrict the social composition of the officer corps, was perceived to have the opposite tendency. There was certainly some truth in the accusations that polo had been unfairly singled out as a scapegoat for all the problems of officer recruitment and education. Polo and hunting were not the only things on which officers wasted time and money. In the absence of any political will to raise officer pay it was inevitable that the commissioned ranks would continue to be drawn mainly from the narrow band of those with substantial private incomes.64

Yet the polo debate provides ample evidence to support Travers' assertion that the belief in the 'art of war' as it had been seen in the previous century, was "waxing and waning". At the same time, as circumstantial evidence indicates, polo was still a popular and suitable form of recreation for officers, even in 1914, when it was the "national game" of the British army.


64 Officer pay was finally raised in 1914, but only marginally: 'one receives the impression' said the Times' military correspondent, 'that one is reading some change in the rates of pay authorized by some rather shabby company to an inferior class of tram-conductors' (The Times, 1 Jan. 1914).

65 Travers, 'Hidden Army', p. 538.


67 Bond, ' Doctrine and Training', p. 120.

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