



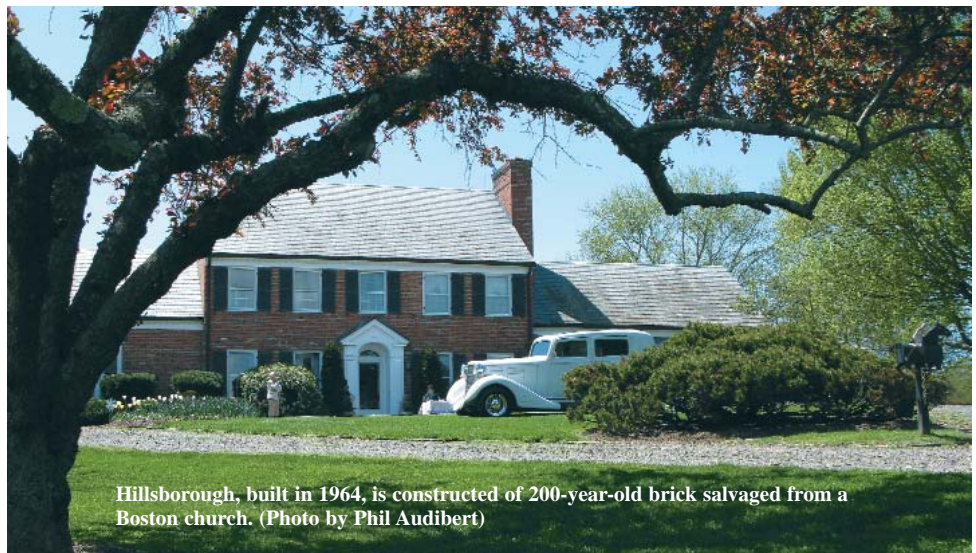
# THE TIGER AND THE FOX

## A Polo Demonstration for Historic Garden Week

by  
Phil Audibert

It is the perfect day for a house and garden tour in this otherwise cool and wet spring. The sun streams down on Warrenton Garden Club docents as they welcome Historic Garden Week tour-goers to Hillsborough Farm just outside Warrenton, Virginia. Every blade of grass is in its place. The hillside house, built in 1964 of 200-year-old bricks, shows beautifully. Horses graze contentedly in the manicured pastures. But all our hosts Debbie and Alan Nash can think about is polo.

It is their passion. “I think it’s probably the adrenaline that really hooks



Hillsborough, built in 1964, is constructed of 200-year-old brick salvaged from a Boston church. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

you, running up the field at 30 miles an hour,” explains Debbie in her clipped British accent. “Having a horse perform well underneath you while playing in a team sport with other people is a very exhilarating experience,” adds husband Alan. “It’s very strategic,” continues Debbie. “It’s a competitive team game.”

Adrenaline rush, teamwork, strategic, competitive – all good reasons. But actually, the Nashes have as many reasons for playing polo as they have ponies. As they discuss their favorite sport, Garden Club volunteer docents point out the polo theme that is everywhere in their house: on the walls, on the floors, on every surface.

In the kitchen, a framed newspaper account of one of Debbie’s matches vies for wall space with snapshots of the construction of the polo field below the house. In the great room, polo trophies, including Alan’s two Arena Polo Championships, stand guard from bookcases, floor to ceiling. In the study, a Remington of polo players locked in combat, is believed to be the only one the sculptor and illustrator ever did of the sport.

But wait – there’s more: the Nash automobile. Alan claims no kin to the car-makers, but he collects all kinds of Nash memorabilia, even has a pristine 1934 model parked out front.

And then there are the tigers. “That’s El Tigre himself,” says Debbie with a wink, pointing to Alan who bashfully admits to his polo nickname awarded to him years ago by Argentine players. Quite an honor. It has launched a tradition, namely that everyone gives him tiger-themed gifts, from throw rugs to stuffed animals.

And in fact, Garden Week visitors to the replica English pub in the basement marvel at the tiger rugs, tiger cushions, tiger-stripe polo mallets! Even the Nash polo team is named – you guessed it – Los Tigres.

The fox is another theme that is woven throughout the house. There are at least two stuffed specimens, plus a pelt or



Alan Nash, in his signature tiger-stripe helmet, moves the ball up field. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

two scattered about the house. The motif is echoed by foxhunting prints and photographs on the walls. So if Alan is the tiger, who is the fox?

Well, Debbie, of course. She certainly plays polo with vulpine cunning, seizing opportunities and capitalizing on mistakes. She ably demonstrates this during an exhibition match for the benefit of the

Warrenton Garden Club by scoring at least three goals in ten minutes. In a *Washington Post* article about the inaugural America’s Cup of Polo played against England in 2007, Debbie, who played for her native land, was said to have “pestered the Americans all day with penetrating runs down the flank.” England won that one 7-3.

In fact, Debbie has been quoted



Debbie Nash scores one of several goals during the exhibition match at Hillsborough Farm near Warrenton. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

saying that polo “is a passport to life.” Growing up in Warwickshire, England, she first sat on a horse at the age of 18 months. By the time she was eight, she had her own pony. By the time she was 21, she was doing it all: gymkhana, cross country, jumping, dressage, foxhunting, you name it. Then she went to her first polo match, and that was it; she was hooked, lined, and sinkered.

At the time, she was working her way up in the corporate world. But, given the opportunity to play polo in Zambia, she took a three-month leave of absence to do just that. Her boss was impressed. He told her that when she came back from Africa, a position awaited her in the firm’s U.S. office in Washington. She even had the cheek to ask if a polo club was located nearby before accepting the assignment.

On a cold January night at an arena polo match she realized that this player named Alan Nash was as obsessed with the

sport as she. And so the tiger and the fox teamed up.

Do they compete against each other? Alan grins and mentions the time she bloodied his eye with a mallet swing. She laughs too, points to Alan. “My husband’s the worst. He doesn’t give me an inch. I’m glad I’m on his team. He’s a tough player.” Still, when they do play against each other, “we don’t argue or fight or get mad with each other.”

What’s it like for a woman to play against mostly men? “It can be quite tough,” she responds. “It’s not a game where men treat you as a woman. You’re just another player on the field, which I don’t mind at all... I’ve had some men who don’t like the fact that a woman has just taken the ball off them. I’ve been elbowed, run into really hard.” She shrugs. No big deal.

Polo has changed over the years. The days of 14½-hand ponies, when “each

club had a bar, and the horse had to fit underneath that bar,” are gone, says Alan. “When I first started close to 30 years ago, people were playing on quarter horses. They were very easy to keep. People would just turn them out in their back yard, bring ‘em in on Sunday, go run around on them, then turn them back outside.”

Today, the ponies are really horses. In high-goal competition in Florida, some players are on mounts 16 hands or better. “Predominantly, thoroughbreds are what people are using nowadays,” continues Alan. “The Argentines have bred a lot of thoroughbred into their stock,” but he adds the Argentines are losing their traditional lock on polo-pony breeding. Alan’s own breeding program, crossing some older Argentine-bred mares with a paint stallion named Romeo Rascal, has “had some success – knock on wood.”

As in horse racing, much in this sport depends on years of training and the heart of the animal itself. “They say the horse is 90% of the game,” elaborates Debbie. “If you don’t have a good horse underneath you, then you can’t get into the plays.” Alan tells a story of a superbly trained polo pony that “in a game, he just does not have the heart to compete. He’ll do nothing more than run alongside somebody.” Polo, he continues, “takes a lot of horsemanship on the part of the rider and ability on the part of the animal.”

Horsemanship. “You’re often stopping and turning quickly, and of course you’re being ridden off and bumped into at the same time that you’re trying to hit the ball,” says Debbie. “You’re not concentrating on your riding at all. That’s really the natural part of the game. You either have it or you don’t.” Also crucial to the game is good eye-hand coordination.

The Nashes’ 114-acre Hillsborough Farm is perfect for polo. Two huge, sturdy barns house the dozens of ponies that live here year-round or seasonally. Several long trailers haul them to matches two and three times a week during the



Hillsborough Farm groom Miguel Aliaga leads three polo ponies from the stable to an exhibition match benefiting the Warrenton Garden Club. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

summer season. They've even excavated 18 feet of hillside below their house to accommodate a full-size polo field. "It's kind of a lifestyle choice," says Alan. "We're into horses, we breed horses, we train them ourselves. We foxhunt, we play polo." In the winter, when they're not fox-hunting or training ponies, the Nashes can be found playing polo from Uruguay to Dubai.

"It's our life," confirms Debbie. "It's not something you can do halfheartedly. Some people rent horses and play the weekends. But if you're into polo, you really have to go to the expense of having enough horses. And then of course you need a trailer, then you have to have a groom and then you have to employ a professional, and so it's a lot of money to really play it properly." Rounding out the Los Tigres team is a banker from Columbia and a professional player from Argentina. The groom, Miguel Aliaga has been working for Alan 15 years

now.

And so, the perfect Sunday for the Nashes would go something like this. Get up and have a cup of tea; go down to the field and play a few chukkers of polo; then, back up to the house for a cooling dip in the pool; top it all off with a traditional Argentine barbecue called an *asado*. Now that's the life for the tiger and the fox.

But right now, they need to get ready for a polo exhibition match they've promised the Warrenton Garden Club. Already spectators are gathering at the fence rail.

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Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. Phil's wife, Susie, is also a photographer. Please visit them at [AudibertPhoto.com](http://AudibertPhoto.com).

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