



THE KING OF SPORTS HAS A *Queen*

ACCOMPLISHED AND HIGHLY
EDUCATED YET SURPRISINGLY
SHY, MEGAN WEST FOUND
HER VOICE ON THE JOURNEY
TO BECOMING A FIRST-CLASS
AMATEUR POLO PLAYER.

Megan West and Dixie

Written by LISA STAMOS
Photography by LINDA M. BARRETT

The LeCompte/Kalaway Cup is played in three round-robin matches. Players are (from left) Claudio Gauna, Ahmed Fahey, and Megan West.



POLO IS JUST A HOBBY FOR NORMAL, WORKING FOLKS SAYS ACCOMPLISHED AMATEUR POLO PLAYER MEGAN WEST. “YES, HORSES CAN BE COSTLY,” WEST SAID. “BUT ALL YOU NEED IS TO OWN OR SHARE-BOARD A HORSE AND YOU CAN PLAY POLO WITH US. WE’LL HELP YOU FIGURE OUT THE REST.

EVERYONE THINKS POLO IS OUT OF REACH OR IS AN ELITIST AVOCATION,” WEST EXPLAINS. “HOWEVER, IF YOU ARE WILLING TO WORK FOR IT, PLAYING POLO IS ATTAINABLE. IT’S MORE WITHIN YOUR GRASP THAN YOU MIGHT THINK.” WEST EXHIBITS THE SAME COME-AS-YOU-ARE PHILOSOPHY AS THAT OF HER BARRINGTON HILLS POLO CLUB MENTOR AND FRIEND, JOHN ROSENE. THEY DE-MYSTIFY POLO AND EVEN PURPORT THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVEN’T BEEN ON A HORSE BEFORE CAN LEARN HOW TO PLAY.

WEST SAYS PEOPLE are surprised to see her shy and humble demeanor melt away on the polo field where a bold, competitive spirit takes over. The sport does attract people with a competitive nature, but for West, playing polo is where she finds personal strength. “On the field someone’s got to take charge. I’ve learned that skill in a safe environment with people who are my friends. It’s a place where I’ve learned and practiced leadership skills,” she said.

When not on the field or in a barn, West leverages her doctorate in agricultural food chemistry for Mars Wrigley where she works on long-term research projects. “It’s basically a lab-based job,” she says of pre-COVID-19 times. A chemist by training, West works on projects such as product ingredient sourcing with consideration to sustainability.

Growing up in Glencoe, Illinois, West says hers was not a “horse family”. The earliest chance to ride was at summer camp in Minocqua, Wisconsin. “My first year at Red Pine Camp, I was eight years old and just one of those kids who wanted to take riding lessons,” West said. “I love the outdoors and the appeal of horses. I just gravitated towards them.” Riding at camp was a source of fun for West and her “barn rat” friends who helped take care of the horses there.

FROM SUMMER CAMP TO POLO

For years, riding horses was limited to summers. Then, an equestrian center in Morton Grove offered a source of riding lessons through high school. Later, at a short stint at the University of California at San Diego, there was a show team that offered riding opportunities. “Show riding wasn’t for me—not my speed,” West said. After funding cuts at school, Purdue reached out to West with financial offers she could not refuse. There, she learned that polo was an option for her with “no experience required”.

The year between college and grad school had few projects for West and she was looking for work. An opportunity on the Barrington Hills Polo Club



Played before the LeCompte/Kalaway matches, a Battle of the Sexes tournament is always a crowd pleaser. From left: Megan West, Adam Kaminski, Lisa Sanfilippo, Kelcey Roberts, and Jack Maison.

website caught her attention. It was a job as a horse groom where the payment was unlimited riding. “I called the phone number and John [Rosene] picked up. He invited me to come out to his farm to see how I ride. I got the gig, and have been working there ever since,” West said. She joined The Riding Club of Barrington Hills to enable riding in the lengthy trail system and also rode at the Barrington Park District’s Riding Center as well as the Rosene farm.

HER FIRST MATCH

The first match as a Barrington Hills Polo Club member for West was in the fall of 2008 for the Les Baddeley USPA Arena Memorial. “It was a white pants match at our arena in Wauconda,” West recalls. As for injuries, she says she’s been fortunate enough to have avoided anything serious. A couple of minor concussions at the most. “We all fall at some point,” she said. “My whites last about two months. I’m always the dirtiest!”

Playing polo is something West says she can call her own. She has three horses—Dixie, Bee, and the now-retired Martini. “I am a team player who is tactical and technical,” West said. “I don’t always have those long, big hits, but I’m good out front on offense, and have the patience to get in the penalty shots. I like the whole team to play together. That’s my favorite kind of polo.”

In addition to her job as groom and playing the sport, West is active with the club. She is the official delegate to the United States Polo Association and the club’s equine welfare representative. “I also help manage and organize a lot of things—the day to day polo activities, emails, and social media,” she said.

POLO AND LIFE LESSONS

“In the last 20 years or so, the polo community, a confused lot at best, began transposing the phrase, “The King of Sports” and too often call it the “Sport of Kings” which is, of course, horse racing,” John Rosene said. The club’s former president and now chairman has been West’s mentor in polo, and life.

“John trusted me right off the bat and gave me a lot of freedom,” West said. “John is a model of what having a good attitude can do for your life. He’s a good human being and always has a smile on his face. He’s just happy to be there and he offers a great perspective on things. I’ve watched how he handles difficult people. John has done so much for the club and Barrington Hills. Karen, his wife, is a wonderful role model in how she interacts with her family. She’s taught me the importance of giving back through her work with Citizens for Conservation. Like my own parents, John and Karen demonstrate how to conduct great relationships.”

POLO TIPS AND MEMORIES

“Polo has the element of physicality and players do need strength,” West says. “Good hand-eye coordination, too. People and their horses play at different levels based on experience. But there is also a lot of finesse. You need to be patient and have softness and kindness with your horse. Polo is demanding for the horses, but if you treat your horses well, they will do amazing things for you. There is a zen and flow to the game. It’s a dance. Players are passing to each other and talking out there on the field.”

West’s philosophy is to treat her horses right. That means properly fed,



Megan West is surrounded by her fellow polo players at a practice in Barrington Hills.



LeCompte/Kalaway Landowners Cup champions in 2015. From left: Adrienne Purves, Megan West, Courtney Rohs, and Joan Brugue. Photo by Matthew Bowie.



John Rosene is the chairman of the Barrington Hills Polo Club and a long-time polo trainer and mentor to Megan West and many other polo players.

At the Top of Her Game

by John Rosene

Megan is an achiever. She graduated Summa Cum Laude, is Phi Beta Kappa, and earned a Ph.D. Has a career as a food scientist. She's one of the best amateur polo players in the area normally dominated by men, and in women's polo (a separate category) is among the best in the Midwest and has been invited to play in women's tournaments as far away as Oklahoma, Minnesota, and South Carolina. She has earned MVP awards in Aiken, South Carolina, Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, Arranmore Farm in Oswego, Illinois, and most recently, at the 2019 LeCompte/Kalaway Cup in Barrington Hills.

She's a warm, caring, and generous person. Is diligent, honest, trusting, responsible and zealous in meeting all her obligations. Loves teaching riding and polo—especially children. Practically worships her horses, which includes mine on whom she learned most of her polo skills. Megan is also an accomplished photographer.

Although she got her start playing polo at Purdue, where the coaching was not very adequate, she really developed her skills when she started working for me and playing at BHPC. In fact, after seeing how weak the Purdue program was, the entire Barrington Hills Polo Club trailered their horses down to Purdue and ran a weekend polo clinic for the Purdue Team the first winter Megan was with us, which I believe was 2009.

When I was hospitalized for brain surgery due to a polo accident in September 2009, Megan left Purdue for weeks to come take care of my barn and my horses until I was back on my feet. Megan is an ardent feminist and doesn't take a lot of crap from anybody—except me. Thank God she has a sense of humor.

exercised, and to not over-exert them. “Get your horses to be your partners,” she said. “Not all horses will become polo ponies. But for those that do, treat them with patience, so that they want to play, rather than have to play.”

West recommends that the youngest beginners in the King of Sports be at least eight years old, and strong enough to hold a mallet. She says it is optimal if children have some riding lessons and experience before learning the sport. For her approach, West says you can drill the adults, but need to make learning polo a fun game for kids.

West fondly recalls the LeCompte/Kalaway Cup in Barrington Hills, and is grateful for the LeComptes' generosity. “I love to do the Kalaway because it's a big, fun celebration for the whole community. Everyone comes out—my family, friends, and 'oh by the way we're playing polo'”, she said.

Her other favorite memory was a road trip to Aiken, South Carolina, with John Rosene. The two drove there and back, an adventure in itself. “My team made it to finals, and we didn't win. But, I won MVP and was given a special gift. It was a handcrafted knife made most likely from a John Ryan rasp—the file used by farriers for a horse's hoof.”

For West, playing the Barrington Hills style of “polo among friends” has been life changing. “I feel fortunate to do what I do,” she said. “I'm so glad to be part of it.”



John and Karen Rosene (on left) join Megan West and her parents, Sue and Les West.



The Saddle Club, started by Jill Zubak and Karen Selman in 2019, is a program that teaches children about proper horse care and basic riding skills. There, Megan West offered a polo demonstration to children held at the Barrington Hills Park District Riding Center.



Megan West and polo pony Dixie.