

Report Hublot Polo Gold Cup, Gstaad

Where altitude meets attitude

At first glance the whole thing seemed so civilised, idyllic and – well – beautifully Swiss. But assemble four fiery Euro-Argentine quartets on a sunny Alpine meadow and sparks will fly, discovers **Yolanda Carslaw**

A bucolic Alpine valley quietly frequented by the super-rich provided the genteel setting in August for a feisty four-day battle between a highly competitive band of European patrons and mostly Argentine professionals. A couple of miles from Gstaad town centre, on a level meadow next to the airfield at the village of Saanen, the contest took place for Switzerland's elite grass high-goal title, the 18-goal Hublot Polo Gold Cup, which celebrated its 15th birthday this summer.

Expressive Italian patron Stefano Marsaglia came out on top – but only after a controversial final chukka and a taut period of extra time that left his opponents spitting in fury at what they regarded as disastrous umpiring. The previous day, HPA umpire Henry Stevens, who oversaw proceedings with Argentine JJ Boote, had told *Polo Times* there were lively characters in the fray – but he couldn't have predicted such a barrage: more on this later.

The four entries came from all sides of the Alps, stabling their horses in temporary lodgings next to the slightly smaller-than-regulation ground. Marsaglia, with longtime Azzurra pro Marcos Heguy making his Gstaad debut, brought 22 horses from West Sussex for the Bank Baring Brothers Sturdza SA team, his campaign masterminded by Azzurra manager Mariano Zimmerman.

Hublot patron Gualtiero Giori, who lives in Geneva and Italy, brought 29 horses from near Siena, where he plays at his stepfather Ricardo Tattoni's Villa a Sesta Polo Club. Giori and Tattoni won at Gstaad in 2001 and were runners-up in 2004; Giori was runner-up in 2009, as was Tattoni



The magnificent backdrop of Switzerland's Saanenland mountains

in 2006 and 2005. Giori's lynchpins for 2010 were the Menendez brothers, Gstaad veterans. The party headed to Zurich afterwards for the Swiss Open.

Star Design's Swiss patron Philipp Maeder, who plays all over Europe, brought his regular pro Federico Bachmann, plus Milo Fernandez-Araujo and Agustin Martinez, whose horses arrived from St Tropez. "This is my favourite tournament," Maeder said. "I love the beautiful setting and the ambience: it's so relaxed and friendly."

Team Gstaad Palace was meant to be led by father and son Fabian and Sascha Pictet, who won with Alejandro Agote and Hector Guerrero in 2009 and 2008 and with Guerrero and Milo Fernandez Araujo in 2006. But injury scuppered their line-up.

Agote explained: "We were due to come with the same team. But Fabian needed surgery on his elbow, so Jack Richardson [the only Brit in the competition] took his place. Then Sascha broke his knee so we had to change the team completely." The Luxembourg player Bert Poekes, who is based in Bern, came in instead. Agote brought his ponies from Deauville while Justo Saavedra and Jack brought theirs from England. Both Pictets came to watch.

Despite heroic recent works on the field, a wet July took its toll on the play area. In particular a horrendous thunderstorm on 10 July devastated a side-valley just upstream from the polo field – leaving cows swimming, cars floating and dwellings damaged – and the day before the fixture an inch and a half of rain fell.

"The ground to start with looked amazing, as they had done a lot of work levelling and re-seeding it," said Henry Stevens. "After Wednesday's rain it cut up

in the first couple of games but they did a fantastic repair job, filling holes and re-mowing."

Tournament organiser and Gstaad Polo Club president Pierre Genecand confessed: "The challenge here is to get the ground right. It's covered in snow till April, so it's not easy!"

Thursday's opening games provided a good if rather boggy warm-up, and Saturday's playoffs – both somewhat vocal – under glorious clear skies determined the order of play for Sunday's