

## **Polo puts giddy-up into events**

Author: Rebecca Landwehr  
July 17, 1998

Corporate event planners have discovered the advantages of a first-class divot stomp.

Looking for a new angle on traditional networking events, local businesses are taking a tip from the horsy set and centering company functions around polo matches at the Columbine Polo Club. From after-hours networking to entertaining clients and even employee picnics, polo has become more than a logo sitting on the shirt pockets of Denver business.

Denver's largest polo facility, the Columbine Polo Club at the Polo Reserve development boasts three polo fields, enough professional players for six polo teams and a full stable of polo ponies. Set among the mansions of the Polo Reserve development and overlooking the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the Columbine Polo Club affords a stunning site for distinctive corporate entertaining.

The day comes complete with an official divot stomp, the half-time stroll across the polo field that was featured in the film "Pretty Woman."

The Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau recently hosted an evening event for members of its Chairman's Club at the Columbine Polo Club. Entertaining this group, the bureau's upper tier of corporate membership, holds its own particular set of challenges, said director of membership Denise McMahan.

"For us, this event has to be more than a cocktail party," she said. "This upper echelon of members has plenty of opportunities for parties. We like to create more value for the event and the polo match generated an overwhelming response."

Events held at the Columbine Polo Club are set under a large tent overlooking the lush field where the full-length polo match is played. The match itself lasts about two hours, with the players and horses available afterwards for an up-close look at the sport.

Polo, Colorado style, is highlighted by KMGH Channel 7 weather reporter Ron Allen, himself an amateur polo player, who announces matches with an animated mix of polo conduct and comedy.

"It was my first time to see a live polo match and I left with a greater appreciation for the athletic skill of horse and rider," said Eugene Dilbeck, president of the Denver Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau. "When we find unique places like the Polo Club to hold

our events, we tend to get a better turnout. And in this case, it was all very well done and made for a very enjoyable late afternoon event."

This summer, Denver-based Land Title Guarantee Co. held its summer picnic for employees and their families at the Columbine Polo Club. One particular challenge for event planners is finding a site that will accommodate 600 people and keep the feel of an intimate party.

"It's difficult to find a place that can accommodate a large group like ours," said Stephanie Hein, a human resource representative at Land Title who organized this year's picnic. "When you get that big, it's hard to keep it a private event. We've done Elitch's and your group gets lost among the general public."

Only one event per day is scheduled at the Columbine Polo Club and Hein said one of the best elements of the Land Title event was the secluded feeling that the Polo Club provided.

"I'd say this is the greatest summer picnic we've ever had," said Hein, who organized last year's picnic at the Denver Zoo. "You can go to the zoo any day, but this is polo. It's an absolutely beautiful setting. We can drool over the gorgeous houses and we're the only ones there. It was a huge success."

Although employee picnics are becoming increasingly popular events at Columbine Polo Club, in many circles the sport is still perceived with a touch of snob appeal. Some companies that have held recent events at Columbine declined to comment for this story, concerned about investor reactions to a polo event.

Admittedly, Columbine Polo Club itself is cautious about losing any of its cache by saturating the corporate market with events, said Polo Reserve owner and developer Kip Fuller. The season lasts all summer long, but the club schedules about 12 events per season.

"We are monitoring activity here at the polo fields," said Fuller, who regularly plays in the polo matches at Columbine, as does his former wife Kim. "We are really trying to keep a balance so that the events don't become too ordinary."

Fuller compares this conservative strategy for corporate polo events to his formula for the upscale development itself.

By far, the most prestigious event on the Columbine calendar is the annual US West Denver Polo Classic, a fund-raising event for children's charities organized by the Denver Active 20/30 Foundation. Scheduled for Sunday, July 26, this summer will be the Classic's fifth year at Columbine Polo Club and the foundation is expecting quite a few straw hats among the 2,500 attendees.

"It's a real mixed bag," said Maita Lester, executive director of the Denver Active 20/30 Foundation. "We get people who truly love polo and it's one of the few places they can get a championship match and still others come to a beautiful place to have a good time and support a good cause."

© 1998 American City Business Journals Inc.