

THE DENVER POST

Polo "do' ponies up funds

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August 11, 1999

Polo is a sport filled with excitement and glamour, and a wonderful mix of thundering hooves, elegant women dressed in knockout evening gowns and seemingly endless supplies of fine food and sparkling champagne made the weekend-long U S West Denver Polo Classic an affair to remember.

This gala occasion, sponsored by the Denver Active 20/30 Foundation, began with last Friday night's Polo Ball at the Donald R. Seawell Grand Ballroom and concluded on Sunday when 2,000 spectators gathered at the Polo Reserve in Littleton for two championship matches preceded by lunch and an international beverage tasting.

An estimated \$200,000 was raised for Denver Kids, the I Have a Dream Foundation, Colorado Christian Home and 47 other children's charities that the 20/30 Foundation supports.

The success the Polo Classic now enjoys is made sweeter when one considers its humble start. "This thing started as a polo match followed by a barbecue where our members spent a lot of time chopping vegetables," recalled 1999 chairman Craig Mills. "We made maybe \$600."

An executive with US Bancorp Piper Jaffray, Mills joked that he hadn't intended to become the event chairman. "I thought I was signing a restaurant tab. Then I woke up the next morning and discovered I was in charge of a major event."

Bruce Kabat, owner of Bright Avenues, a technical recruiting and career coaching firm, planned the Polo Ball, a black-tie event attended by 400 players, committee members and guests.

"The ball used to be just a thank-you for our corporate sponsors," Kabat explained, "but it has turned into a fund-raiser in its own right." Live and silent auctions and a calcutta where individuals could "purchase" a polo team all contributed to the weekend's impressive bottom line.

"We have 46 members and it takes all of us - plus wives, girlfriends and families - to make this happen," noted President Scott Patrick. "But it's a fun weekend and we raise lots of money."

Early arrivals at the Polo Ball could enjoy the mountain panorama seen from Seawell Ballroom's bank of picture windows, pose for souvenir snapshots or test their luck at

casino-style games where new member Scott Smeester, owner of The Internet Design Firm, helped last year's Polo Classic chairman, David Barnes, owner of Scenographics, set players up with play money.

Later, there was a buffet supper and swing dancing.

It was girls night out for Nancy Gebhard and Beverly Martinez. Nancy's husband, Bob, is general manager of the Colorado Rockies and was traveling the minor league circuit with other club officials; Beverly is community affairs manager for Channel 2, and was introducing her boss, station manager Bill Ross, who had escorted Lisa Flack to the event.

Joan Corbett and Andreia Samarjian were tending the silent auction tables where bids could be placed for items ranging from a professionally designed Web site to a box of Arturo Fuente cigars.

Samarjian, who works at Land Title Guarantee, is a native Denverite who has volunteered at the polo event for the last three years. For eight years, she had a key role in the former Channel 6 wine auction and with Corbett, a Liberty Savings Bank staffer, supports events benefiting the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates).

Other familiar faces in the crowd: IdealDial's Robert Kiger, who, with past President Kent Stevinson and several other members, started the Polo Classic 12 years ago; former Channel 7 weatherman Ron Allen; past President David Puchi; Dottie Leonard, marketing director for Vax-D Back Surgery Alternatives; Todd Wheeler; Wendy Fourez, a broker with The Real Estate Firm in Greenwood Village; Mark Osborn, marketing director for United Artists theaters; and TV types Brian Maass and Erica Wilner.

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