



Los Machitos: Breeding Goes High Tech

BY HEATHER BUCHANAN



WHAT STARTED AS A RANDOM SWIPE RIGHT IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM HAS TURNED INTO A CAREFULLY CURATED COMBINATION OF BLOODLINES TO CREATE THE PERFECT POLO PONY.

Polo Hall of Famer Mariano Aguerre, founder of the breeding operation Los Machitos in Buenos Aires, Argentina, states, “We believe in genetics. We know that in polo you have strong lines which have competed for generations. We have a great gene pool.” While a show jumper may have only a few horses to compete individually, each polo team needs a string of ponies for each of its four players on the field. But quantity in this case does not replace quality. It is a long and expensive job to create a Best Playing Pony, and through breeding, following mostly the matrilineal line, that life is extended through generations.

Mariano Aguerre who is a nine-time winner of the Argentine Polo Open followed in the steps of his father, sharing the same passion for development of pony ponies and created Los Machitos in 1992. He met Nick Manifold at White Birch, Peter Brant’s polo organization based in Greenwich, CT and knew Manifold had a special eye for selecting horses. Manifold, born in Australia, played with White Birch and found a kindred spirit in Aguerre. Aguerre states, “It just clicked because Nick’s such a great horseman. We complement each other well. What he can’t do I’m good at and vice versa.”

Manifold adds, “We started as friends and breeding as a hobby. We were lucky enough to inherit mares from the Barrantes organization and White Birch.” So, with 20 top level donor mares and one stallion the breeding program began. Los Machitos has grown to an operation with 700 horses and 40 employees, managing 1000 acres all dedicated to horses. They also brought on partner Naco Taverna who helped control the growth of the breeding operation without losing sight of the High Handicap competition.

Breeding has gone high tech for polo ponies. “Live cover,” or let’s say sex the old-fashioned way, is almost

only reserved for the thoroughbred racing industry. Now clients can even order a polo pony à la carte, picking the stallion and the mare and creating an embryo to be placed in a surrogate mare.

Aguerre’s most beloved pony Machitos Jazz lives on in her progeny, “She produced 12 high goal polo mares and five top of the line stallions, and now her granddaughters are starting to play,” says Aguerre. Her daughter Machitos Jazzita was named Best Playing Pony of the 2016 Palm Beach season.

But it doesn’t stop there. The best polo ponies are being cloned. Hello Dolly of the polo world.

The first polo pony to be cloned in 2010 was Califa, who played in the 2009 US and Argentine Open. Aguerre says, “We had gelded Califa so we cloned him and kept the baby as a stallion.” (probably the reincarnation dream of every gelded horse.) Now his progeny are just starting to play. “You take the cells from the neck or the tail of the horse,” explains Manifold. They are then implanted in an unfertilized egg with the DNA removed, and after an electronic stimulus which causes cell division, the embryo is implanted in a surrogate mother. “It’s an expensive process and takes time – maybe two years before you get the foal,” says Manifold, “But if it’s your best ever mare it elongates her life.”

There is also the nature vs. nurture question. Aguerre weighs in,

“YOU HAVE TO HAVE THE BEST OF BOTH. WE TRY TO DO BOTH WELL WITH OUR GREAT ORGANIZATION IN ARGENTINA WHERE WE TAKE OUR TIME AND HAVE THE BEST TRAINING POSSIBLE AND USING THE BEST GENETICS.”

The business model of polo ponies also differs from racing or show jumping. Polo ponies can compete even up to age 20 and each team has a string of many ponies available for play. While an up and comer six-year-old can sell for \$40,000 you might see \$300,000 offered for a champion. However, both Manifold and Aguerre believe that most





Photo credit for the horse farm: Marcelo Bianchi.

top players wouldn't part with their super stars. Manifold says, "Ask Mariano or Adolfo Cambiaso to take their best horse, and it's like taking their legs away."

When asked if it feels like playing God, Manifold answers, "I look at it as lengthening the life of a horse and the DNA." Aguerre agrees, "Even with the clones of Jazz, it's not her."

For Los Machitos the goal of the breeding operation isn't just to produce a high goal champion. Aguerre states, "We are always looking to produce sound horses that anybody can ride and have a good mouth and with that base eventually the horse has potential."

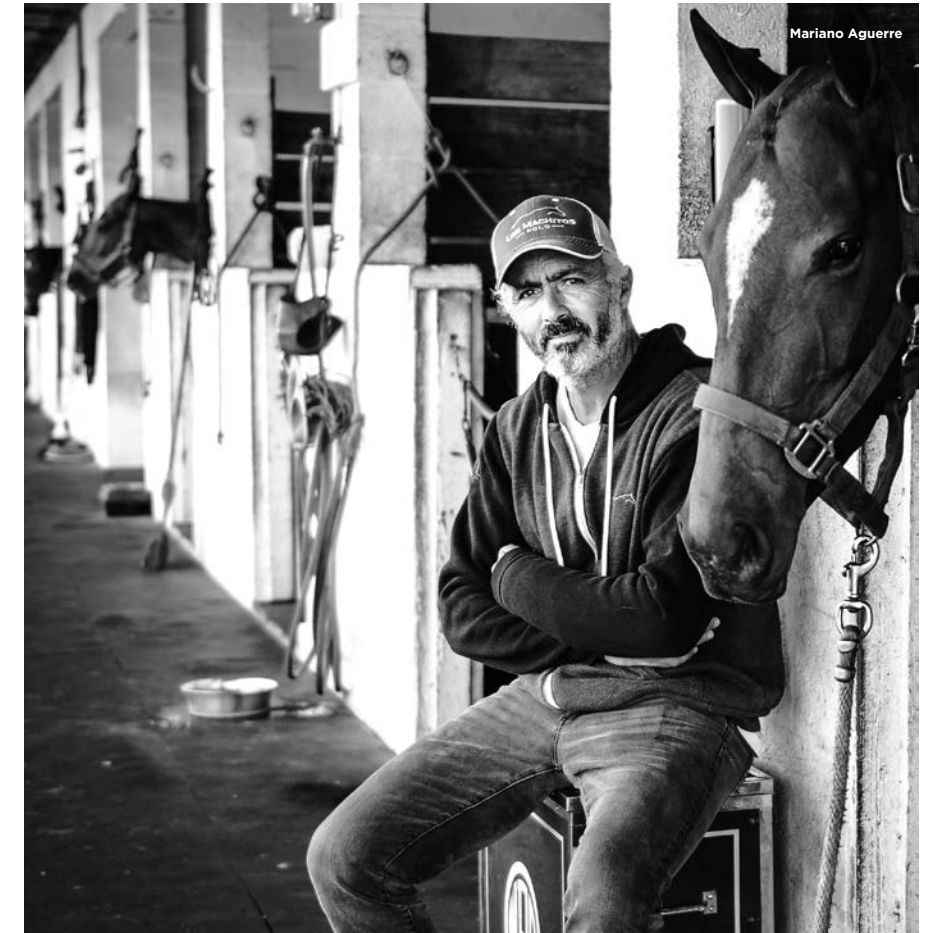
Manifold concurs, "There are horses there for everyone – for amateurs to play or horses to play in the Open. The most important is to produce a good quality horse to enjoy. We want you to have a good experience from a horse you get from us."

Aguerre sums up his vision,

“ MY HOPE IS THAT IN THE FUTURE WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT MACHITOS THEY SAY THAT WE HAVE ONE OF THE BEST BREEDS – THAT'S MY GOAL.”

Fans will have the chance to see these amazing ponies in action at the Greenwich Polo Club season which runs from June to September, 2018 and hosts the prestigious East Coast Open.

www.losmachitos.com
www.greenwichpoloclub.com



Mariano Aguerre



Nick Manifold

Photo credit: Elena Lusenti.