

SUNDAY FEATURES

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Scott Swerdlin, left, talks to reporters in Wellington, Florida, on Monday, the day after 21 polo horses sickened just before a tournament and died on the scene or while being transported or treated at vet clinics. Swerdlin, a veterinarian at Palm Beach Equine Clinic near the polo grounds, said it appeared the animals died of heart failure caused by some kind of toxin that could have been in tainted food, vitamins, supplements or some combination of all three that caused a toxic reaction.

PHOTO: AFP

Tragedy in the stables

The cause of the shocking deaths of 21 top polo horses last week officially remains a mystery. But could the administration of tainted vitamin supplements be responsible?

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THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

They dropped like domino pieces. Twenty one of the world's most highly bred, intensively trained and lovingly groomed horses wobbled, shook and then collapsed in minutes. Nearby, hundreds of spectators were sipping from champagne flutes.

Alex Webbe, a former polo player who covers the sport for the *Palm Beach Post*, was wandering over to the main stadium at the 105th US Open in Wellington, Florida at lunchtime last Sunday. He heard over the Tannoy that there was to be a half-hour delay to the next match because of an "allergic reaction" in some horses.

"That cannot be right," he remembers thinking. Then he rushed to the trailers where the horses were being unloaded.

By the time he got there, blue plastic sheets had already been erected like beach tents around two of the horses. Other animals were being walked around, their legs visibly shaking and unsteady. One had four grooms struggling to hold it up. As he watched, horses started to fall. Dozens of vets, owners, polo players, trainers, and grooms piled in to try to help save them. They sprayed the horses with fine mist to bring down their raging fevers and applied blocks of ice. They gave the animals intravenous fluids, and drugs to reduce their heartbeats. Nothing worked.

Images flashed through Webbe's mind, first of his time in Vietnam, and then, prosaically, of the fight scenes in the film *Custer's Last Stand*. "People were crying, girls screaming. I'm standing there, and a fellow I know aged 62 has tears streaming down his face from behind his sunglasses."

In the middle of the devastation was Victor Vargas, the Venezuelan billionaire owner of Lechuza Caracas, the stricken team. He was moving from horse to horse, pumping chests to keep the hearts beating, holding their heads in his hands as they died. "You know when someone is faking it," a member of a different team who was in the thick of the dying horses said. "He wasn't. He was crying, crying. Distraught. These were his children."

As each horse was discreetly carried into trailers and driven away, the search for words to describe what had happened began. The sport of kings had been reduced to cadavers under the Florida sun.

Polo by numbers: players in each team — four; horses (that each player brings with him or her to ride) — six to eight; chukkers (periods of play) in a match — six; length of chucker — seven minutes. Polo by reputation: hobby of pampered rich kids, international jet-setters and royalty; the perfect pastime for somebody who can't think of any better way to spend time and money.

That is probably the limit of most people's knowledge of, and prejudice towards, polo.

Vargas is one of the most powerful financiers in Venezuela, with direct access to President Hugo Chavez. To make his stay in Florida more comfortable during the February to April polo season he bought a house in Palm Beach. Price: US\$70 million.

But to stop there — at polo as a rich man's toy — would be to miss the point. In the last 20 years the sport has moved from a gentle amateur pastime into a multi-million US dollar aggressive industry. You only have to drive around Wellington for an afternoon to know that. In the community alone, equestrian sports together account for US\$500 million worth of business every year. Wellington must have one of the highest densities of polo real estate in the world. But a similar pattern is repeated across the three great international venues of the sport — the US; England, where competition resumes in June and July; and Argentina, polo's heartland, where many of the finest horses and most of the top players originate. A nomadic tribe of polo professionals — patrons, players, trainers, vets, grooms and caterers — spend their lives decamping from one point of this international triangle to the next.

What grounds them is a single shared passion: the love of a good horse. There have been thousands of words written about this bond between polo players and their "magnificent" animals since last Sunday. But, from a distance, it's hard to get a true sense of what that bond means. Yes, the financial statistics are impressive: each horse can cost up to US\$206,000 and the value of the 21 victims is about US\$1.5 million. But this isn't just about money.

I can only experience that when I come eyeball to eyeball with Kochise. He is the prized stallion of Jeff Hall, one of America's top-ranked players and a member of the losing US side against England in the recent Westchester Cup. Hall keeps Kochise in a barn that resembles a five-star hotel, all stripped wood paneling and white leather furnishings. The stallion is in a pen, standing quite calm, serene almost. He is strikingly beautiful, and surprisingly compact. Every nut-brown inch of him shimmers with energy. He clearly adores his owner, whom he nuzzles with his muzzle, and the feeling is reciprocated.

Hall has about 80 horses and was present when many of them were born. He trains them until their first matches at the age of 6, and sees them through their prime years from 8 to 14. Being a softy, he says, he can never bring himself to dispense with retired animals, and they roam free on his Texas ranch. All of which goes to explain why last Sunday's tragedy was so unthinkable. "They are part of us. Whatever happened ... those animals were family."

What did happen last Sunday? That is the question, though very few will address it publicly within this most insular of communities. Webbe, an astute observer of the polo world, says the mood has palpably changed in the last few days. "We've gone from shock,

to silence, to anger. People want answers now."

So what could have happened to those hapless horses? Some possibilities can already be ruled out. The animals fell so quickly that an airborne disease is implausible. They were all confined to the Lechuza Caracas team, so a general problem with water or a contaminated main food supply is unlikely. And within the Lechuza stables, only those animals who were about to play in the US Open were hit.

That last fact is telling, as it suggests that something to do with the preparation of the animals lay behind the tragedy. To be more blunt, it raises the thought that the animals were given something before the match that made them ill. Could that something have been administered maliciously, in a conscious effort to poison them? Rumors abound. Many focus on Vargas himself, whose wealth and power in Venezuela would arguably make him a target. But the idea that in order to "get" Vargas, an enemy would coolly murder his polo horses is too preposterously Dick Francis to entertain for long.

Which leaves the possibility of some form of unintentional poisoning. John Harvey is leading a team of vets at the University of Florida that is testing some of the horses. Necropsies have been carried out on 15 animals and though they found internal bleeding, it was not at a level to cause the deaths.

The next step, Harvey says, is to test samples of blood, tissue and urine to see what substances were present, "particularly focusing on drugs that would be put in the horse to enhance performance." Then he adds: "I find it very hard to believe that someone would want to kill all those horses. But it's feasible that someone made up their own vitamin supplement and got something wrong." On Thursday night, Harvey's suspicions were given strength as it emerged that a Florida pharmacy that had been asked to make up a supplement for the Venezuelan team admitted that it made a mistake with one ingredient.

The thesis that a supplement was at the root of the mystery had already gathered force on Wednesday when the captain of the Lechuza Caracas team, Juan Martin Nero, gave an interview to the Argentine paper *La Nacion*. He began by telling the paper that "*no se hizo nada raro*" — nothing unusual was done. But then he went on to explain that all but five of the horses that were being taken to the match last Sunday were given a supplement. All those horses died; the other five lived. "We have no doubt about the origin of the problem," Nero said, adding that he suspected that

there had been a botched batch of the supplement made up at a laboratory.

Initially, the focus was on a supplement that the US Food and Drug Administration has not approved for use in the US but which is legally available in France and Venezuela. It is produced in France, and its makers claim it is a harmless supplement that contains vitamin B12, which helps horses recover their strength after a burst of intense exercise. But some vets point to one of the drug's ingredients selenium, which is poisonous at high doses.

With all eyes now on the Florida laboratory, new questions have emerged. What supplement, precisely, did the pharmacy make up? And was it legal? And was it the cause of the deaths?

Amid all these puzzles, one thing is certain. The world of polo has been cast into a crisis over drug regulation from which it will not easily emerge. However innocent last Sunday's deaths are found to have been, the fact is now glaring: that in the US, polo is the only major equestrian sport that has absolutely no rules over doping or the use of any chemical supplements. That is in contrast to the UK, which has regulations and random testing.

The US Polo Association, a venerable organization that supervises the domestic game, has kept boomerily silent on the subject. Its director, Peter Rizzo, has issued statements lamenting the tragic loss, but has otherwise nimbly avoided facing the press. He may not be able to keep out of the billowing controversy for long. Calls for action have reached the level of top players. "It's time for us to have regulations," says Hall. "I would love for there to be regulation. Most of us take the care of our animals to the highest possible standards. It's just sad that 21 horses had to die for them to do something about it."

A woman cries during a memorial service held on Thursday in remembrance of the 21 horses who died during the US Open Polo Championship.

PHOTO: AP

