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SPUR

The magazine of Equestrian and Country Life

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER 1995

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PLAYING POLO WITH
TOMMY LEE JONES

Spur Visits Santa Fe



We've been chasin' after Tommy Lee Jones for a long time. Over the past few years, though, instead of his beloved polo ponies, he's been riding the rocket to stardom, going from one movie to the next with nary a breather. We finally caught up with him on a dusty polo field in West Texas. Is he as good a polo player as he is an actor? Find out in Anne Lang's "Country Boy," page 50.

From attic to basement: That's what we've combed to bring you the best of vintage steeplechase memories in "Glory Days," page 36. The photo essay and Pohla Smith's piece on the sport's prospects in the twenty-first century, "Racing Back to the Future," page 44, come as the National Steeplechase Association celebrates its one-hundredth anniversary.

Early in the summer Laurel Scott, contributing editor, and I spent a day in the attic of the National Steeplechase Association offices in Fair Hill, Maryland. Joe Clancy, NSA's communications director, helped us gather old photos representing the best of steeplechasing in each of its eras in America.

Next I traveled to Middleburg, Virginia, where Peter Winants, director of the National Sporting Library, provided me with piles of historic photos from the library's files.

The library, which is a wonderful repository of books

and magazines chronicling the sporting life, is in a cramped basement right now but is set to move into spacious new quarters within the next few years. It's a great place to get lost in for a few hours (or a few days), poring over such delights as Teddy Roosevelt's original manuscript for an 1886 article on riding to hounds on Long Island or A. Henry Higginson's scrapbook from the Great Foxhound Match of 1905 against nemesis Harry Worcester Smith.

Horse people seem to migrate to all the lovely places in the land—Middleburg, Del Mar, Saratoga, Kentucky's Bluegrass, to name a few—so you know they must have found Santa Fe. And they have. Surrounded by the New Mexico desert, horses compete each fall in the Event at The Downs, a combined-training competition held in the infield of The Downs at Santa Fe racetrack. In "SPUR Visits Santa Fe," page 28, writer Karen Galanaugh reports that there is no dichotomy between English and Western disciplines—instead, she finds "a lot of cross-training and sharing of philosophies." Could it be she has discovered the equestrian Utopia? Oops! Maybe we'd better keep it a secret. ...

Cathy Jones

CONTRIBUTORS



Tommy Lee Jones and Anne Lang

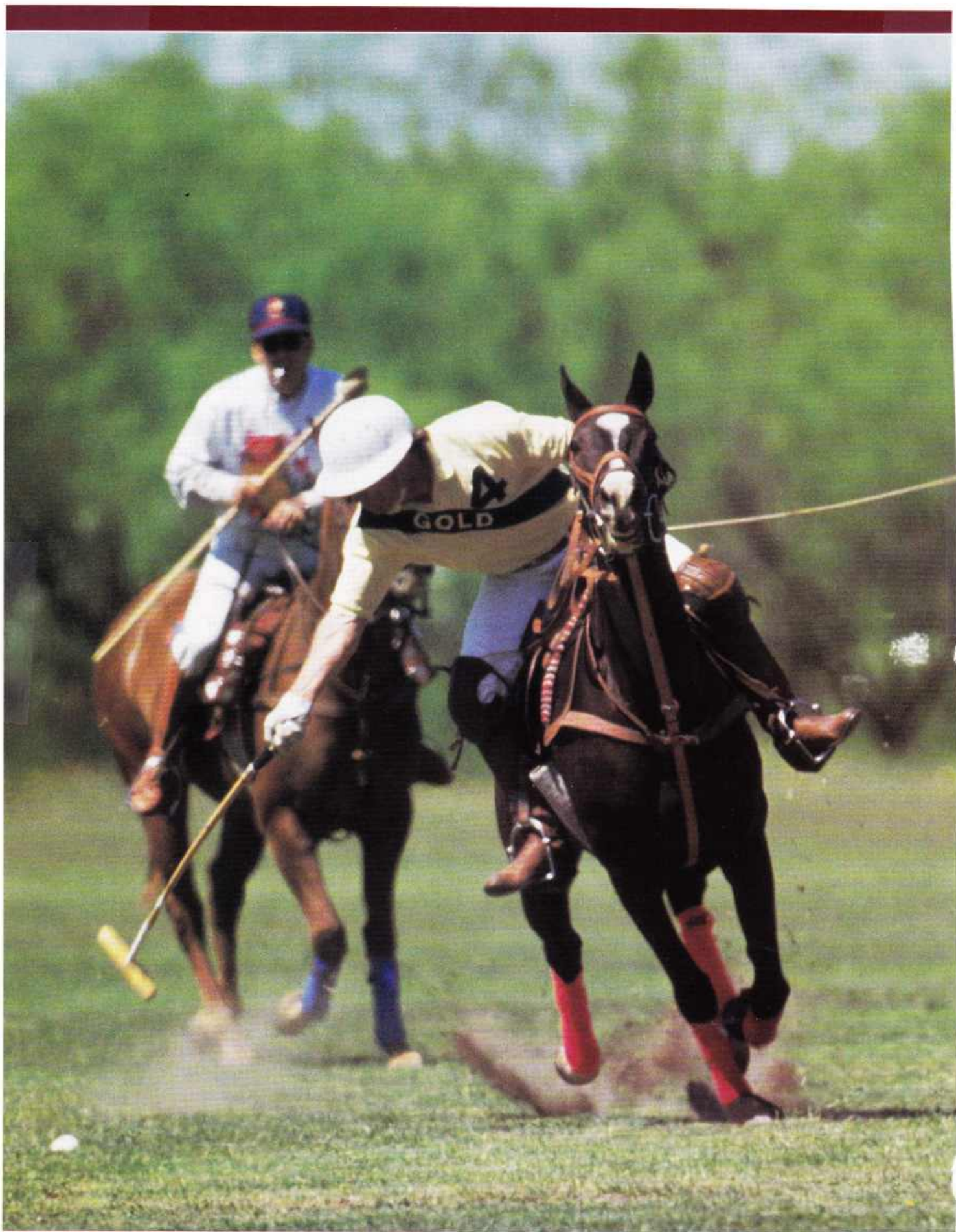
Daily Racing Form columnist and writer Anne Lang spent time with actor Tommy Lee Jones for the story "Country Boy," page 50. "Aware of Tommy Lee's reputation for being tough on journalists, I went to San Angelo with no small measure of apprehension. That he turned out to

be so accommodating was likely due to his passion for the subject matter—his horses." Lang rode as a youngster in Michigan hunt country. From 1982 to 1989, she was editor of the *Texas Thoroughbred*, steering the magazine to several American Horse Publications awards.

Peter Winants, retired editor of *The Chronicle of the Horse* and director of Middleburg, Virginia's National Sporting Library, was the ideal researcher/writer to put together SPUR's tribute to steeplechasing, "Glory Days," page 36. Winants has been a lifelong foxhunter and dabbled in ama-

teur race riding in his younger days. "My interest was motivated by my stepfather, S. Bryce Wing, who was president for years of the National Steeplechase and Hunt Association and chairman of the Maryland Hunt Cup," says Winants. "His enthusiasm was very contagious, and I've never lost it." Winants recently worked with Field Horne, curator of the National Museum of Racing, in putting together an extensive exhibit entitled "A Tradition of Jumpers: American Steeplechasing 1834 to 1995."

Riding in Rajasthan ("Royal Treatment in Rajasthan," page 56) is all in a day's work for veteran travel writer Ann Jones, but she never loses her wonder at strange places and new faces. Jones has ranged from the Amazon to Siberia on assignment for publications such as *Condé Nast Traveler*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *Diversion* and *Town & Country*. In recent years she has added riding adventures to her endeavors, satisfying a lifelong dream. Jones, who teaches journalism at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, boards her horse Sailor at the school and trades the classroom for the stable at every opportunity.



Country Boy

Oscar winner Tommy Lee Jones is happiest aboard one of his homebred ponies, tobacco 'chaw' in cheek, mixing it up on a dusty Texas polo field.

BY ANNE LANG

It's just past 11 a.m. on a blindingly sunny day in West Texas, and the grounds of Hoolihan Acres—an austere-looking polo field situated 20 miles west of equally austere San Angelo—seem all but deserted.

A brisk wind whips across the plains, sending orange-vested parking attendants scurrying after their caps and threatening to uproot a scattering of gaily striped tents that border the field. Over in the roped-off players' area, the first horse rigs have begun to arrive, bumping clumsily over the rutted grass.

Emerging from a white pickup, Tommy Lee Jones energetically sets up lawn chairs next to his 12-horse van, bantering with his trainer as a groom unloads the horses. The 48-year-old actor looks alert and well-rested, despite having played a match in a far-off Texas town just yesterday and another the day before that. Today's game, a benefit event for a local therapeutic riding program, won't start for two more hours. Jones will use the time to acclimate his young horses to their new surroundings.

"I've got six here today," he says in his distinct Texas drawl, gesturing toward the string of assorted ponies now tied to the rig, "but there's a little too much 'town' here for my country horses. They need to get a good look around." Joyful at the prospect of riding, he ducks into the van's dressing room to rummage for his boots.

Jones has driven here from his ranch in San Saba, a small rural community about 100 miles to the east. An eighth-generation Texan, he seizes every opportunity to flee Hollywood for the Spartan lifestyle of the ranch, home to all the beings closest to his heart: his wife, his two young children, his beloved horses and cattle. There, the mega-star rejuvenates his spirit by immersing himself in the daily labor of

Left: Tommy Lee Jones reaches for the ball in a West Texas charity match. Below: Jones relaxes fieldside before a chukker.



CAROL KALLSON

CAROL KALLSON



CAROL KAEHLSON

mending fences and hauling hay and other ranch chores—leaving ample time for “stick-and-ball” polo practice.

Born in San Saba, Jones developed an early rapport with horses on the Fort Worth ranch where his father worked. Later, the elder Jones took a job in the West Texas oil fields. When he accepted a transfer to Libya, his only child opted to stay behind, enrolling in a Dallas boarding school. The first-rate curriculum stimulated young Jones’ exceptional intellect, culminating in a scholarship to Harvard. There he roomed with future Vice President Al Gore, excelled in varsity

football and graduated *cum laude* with an English degree.

Although tradition-steeped Harvard was among the first American universities to offer polo, no team existed when Jones attended during the 1960s. The athletic Texan would be in his 30s when he first sampled the sport.

By then, having parlayed his fascination with language into an acting career, he was beginning to emerge as a notable talent. He’d already appeared on television, in several Broadway shows, and a number of feature films. (Jones’ career breakthrough performance occurred in the 1980s with *Coal*

Miner’s Daughter, for which he was nominated for a Golden Globe award. A subsequent string of successes eventually led to a 1993 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in *The Fugitive*—and a Golden Globe as well.)

But he’s never lost touch with his ranching roots. While living in California during the late 1970s, Jones owned a former world champion roping horse named Scotty Michael. He had competed at modest levels on the gelding, but when Scotty got old, Jones wasn’t sure if he wanted to buy a new roping prospect or try something else. Introduced to polo by some friends, he was instantly hooked, and he tried to convert Scotty Michael to the game.

“He’d last about three minutes, then he’d get mad at me and quit,” Jones recalls, chuckling. “So I finally gave in, retired him and bought 12 polo ponies.”

In the years that followed, he played sporadically, keeping his ponies at San Antonio’s Retama Polo Center until he bought the San Saba ranch in 1981. That year, he met future wife Kimberlea on a Texas movie set where she’d been cast as an extra. That Kimberlea was an avid horsewoman herself (with hunter/jumpers) enhanced their strong mutual attraction. They married in 1982 and now have a 12-year-old son, Austin. Daughter Victoria is 3.

Jones has 38 horses in San Saba, 12 of them polo-ready (“six made and six green,” he says). All of the green ones were born and raised on the 4,000-acre ranch. Jones is working toward expanding his homebred population: Six current mounts are by the ranch’s resident stallion, a descendant of renowned Thoroughbred Princequillo. (Nobody can remember the stallion’s registered name; they just call him Guapo, which means handsome in Spanish.) All the youngsters are out of proven polo mares, about a dozen of which are owned by Jones.

“I’ve got the ranch organized to where, theoretically, I can raise a string of polo horses each year,” Jones says. “Not too many people can keep six young horses healthy and alive for five years, but if I could, I could put out a string a year.”

If health is synonymous with hardiness, Jones certainly will get his wish. He's a devoted subscriber to Old West values. "We raise horses in a herd," he says. "If we're off playing polo, we've 'left the herd'—that's how we define the experience.

"I could pen these mares up when they're just about to foal and imprint the babies, but I don't. I'd rather they live in the pasture, even if it means we might not see those babies until two weeks after they're born."

As he expounds on this and other topics, Jones is sitting on the steps of his van, fumbling with a pair of kneepads. He's wearing white Wranglers, worn cowboy-style boots and his uniform shirt for the day—gold with green trim and a No. 4. He's borrowed the pads from Tommy Higgins, whom he met in 1979 when both were playing in California. Higgins has been the resident trainer at Jones' ranch for nearly two years.

"I don't know if I want to wear these damn things or not," Jones grumbles. "Shoot, I guess I'd better. I haven't put these on upside down, have I, Hig?" Patiently standing by with Jones' first warm-up horse, Higgins shakes his head. Jones snaps the final buckle and in one smooth motion he's aboard the mare. Donning sunglasses and lightly picking up the reins, Jones trots off toward the field where other players are warming up.

Across the field, clumps of spectators can be seen enjoying their tailgate picnics. Booming on the sound system is "Happy Trails To You," an ironic choice to play for incoming crowds. No matter, this is West Texas, where simple good fellowship takes precedence over protocol. Despite its elitist reputation, the game of polo is welcome here—as long as Levi's and longnecks are, too.

Jones is right at home. Cantering along the sidelines, he calls out jubilant greetings to his longtime polo buddies, all of whom respond in kind. He loosens up his horses one by one, riding with a quiet seat and sensitive hands. As he heads out for his final warm-up, someone tells him that his chief mentor, Cecil Smith, is on the



CAROL KATLSON

grounds. Jones abruptly makes a U-turn and reins to a halt by Smith's chair, leaping off his horse to shake hands with the retired polo legend.

"Cecil," Jones says loudly, pointing to the bay he's holding, "I'm gonna have to show this horse some flags today. He's new; he hasn't been to town much!"

The elderly Smith, leaning on a wooden cane, nods and smiles. As he watches Jones riding off, the man who for 25 years was rated a 10-goaler shakes his head. "I always like talking to Tommy Lee; he's a great fellow. But I haven't seen enough of him lately—he's always off making movies."

Right now, movies are the last thing on Jones' mind—which is precisely what he's telling a local television reporter who's back at the rig, asking about *Batman Forever*. Getting zero cooperation from him on that subject, and clearly out of her league on the topic of polo, she stammeringly asks Jones if he'd autograph a photo for a nursing-home resident. "Now *that* I'm happy to do!" Jones exclaims, signing "to Granny" with a flourish. Camera-man in tow, the TV reporter slinks off, her high heels sinking hopelessly in the spongy soil.

It's nearly time to start. Jones does a little limbering up of his own, legs straddled as he touches his toes. He



CAROL KATLSON

Opposite: Jones, who a friend says is "deliberate, precise and authoritative" as a player, gallops down the field. Top: On the awards platform, Jones talks with legendary 10-goaler Cecil Smith and his wife, Mary. Above: Next to his rig, Jones preps for a game.

then swings a row of mallets in turn. Strapping on his white helmet, he mounts up and lopes toward the field.

Playing on the Gold team with 2-goaler Jones are Dr. Ron Horne (also a 2-goaler), Tommy Wayman (6 goals) and Charles Smith (5 goals), son of Cecil. The Blue team consists of Jimmy Newman (2 goals), Cody

Woodfin (1 goal), Robert Evans (6 goals) and his father, Bart Evans (7 goals).

In the first chukker, Horne scores almost immediately for Gold. As the pack thunders back and forth, Jones gets in some solid hits before Bart Evans puts one in for Blue, soon followed by teammate Woodfin. Jones manages to deflect a near score by Bart Evans, just before a buzzer ends the period.

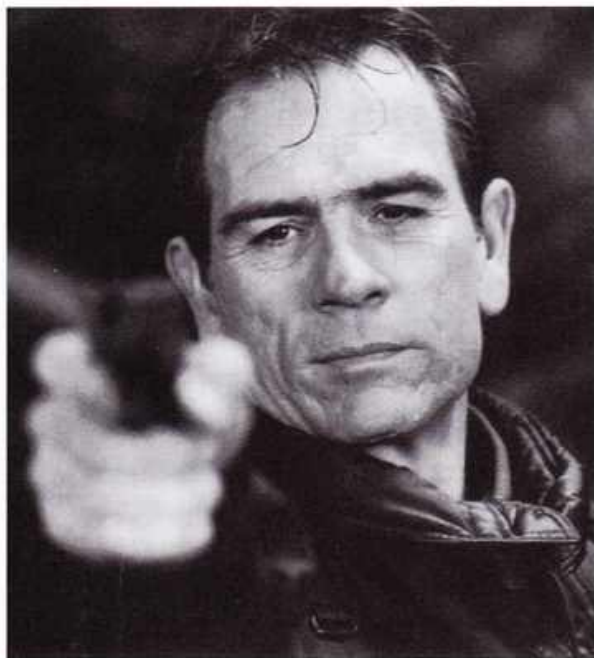
Back at the van, Jones' face is serene, his breathing barely labored. Higgins and groom Juan are like a well-oiled Indy 500 pit crew. They hand Jones his next pony; he vaults into the saddle and dashes off. Not a word is exchanged.

There's a slight delay at the start of the second chukker. A large gopher hole has been spotted at midfield, and someone has been dispatched to fetch a shovel. The affable players, including Jones, hop off their horses and try to tamp down the spot with their mallets. Play finally commences, and Jones whacks a far-flung back shot. Robert Evans scores for Blue; shortly thereafter, so does his dad.

Moments later, Jones is all alone at the front of the galloping herd. He valiantly swings and valiantly misses. Nice try, though. End of chukker.

Half time provides an unusually long respite for the players, as there's plenty of entertainment lined up for the crowd. The day has warmed to the mid-70s, and Jones is carefully scrutinizing the condition of his ponies. He describes each one as he walks the line along the van, affectionately slapping a rump or a neck as he goes.

"This one here is awfully talented and a big guy. He's named Con Quien—Spanish for 'with who.'" (Jones' mares answer to plainer monikers, such as April and Velvet Dawn.) "This one here is a good horse; nothing wrong with him except that he works off his front end a bit too much." Ever the Texan, Jones prattles away with a "chaw" of tobacco wedged in one cheek.



ARNOLD KOVELSON/WARNER BROTHERS

Above: Jones won an Oscar for his portrayal of Deputy U.S. Marshal Sam Gerard opposite Harrison Ford as *The Fugitive* in 1993. Opposite: Jones *en famille*: This shot of Jones, wife Kimberlea and children Austin and Victoria was taken in 1993.

The actor's devotion to his horses is genuine and deep-seated. Higgins reveals that when Jones is working out of town, he calls home every day to check on his animals.

"He's good with his horses, very compassionate," the trainer says, as Jones strolls over to schmooze with some benefit sponsors. "He wants to keep the pressure off them. He knows a good horse, and he's raised some good ones.

"As a player, Tommy Lee is deliberate, precise and authoritative," says Higgins. "As a man, he's super: down-home, folksy, a great guy to work with."

The folksy guy in question is presently surrounded by a small gaggle of preteen girls who've managed to charm their way past two security guards. There's a blur of shiny braces, swinging ponytails and bashful giggles.

"What's your name?" Jones asks their leader. "Amber? Well, hi, Amber, my name's Tommy Lee." As if they didn't know. He good-naturedly signs a video copy of *The Fugitive* and flashes one of his rare, dazzling grins. The delighted girls scamper off, and Jones suddenly turns to Juan, firing off a rapid barrage of Texas-twanged Spanish—

something about horses' core temperatures and such. He listens intently to the equally rapid reply. Jones obviously is bilingual—fluent to boot. It figures.

Still in a mood to wax eloquent on his equine philosophies and momentarily oblivious to the growing crush of officials, sponsors, players, trainers and others subtly vying for his attention, Jones settles back into his lawn chair and returns to the issue of pasture-raised horses.

"Does it make a better polo pony? It makes a better horse," Jones practically bellows. (Nothing understated about this man's delivery, on-screen or otherwise.) "They've gotta get out there and make a living as horses!"

He further elaborates. "San Saba has been known through the years as a place that makes good feet. The hills are made out of rocks, so the back end of the ranch is where the 2- and 3-year-olds go to college—Rock College," Jones declares, pleased with his quip. "Then there's a good polo field down at the front end of the ranch, so my horses are all-terrain vehicles." He laughs gleefully.

Jones' ponies start their active polo season in February, with games most often played in Texas and California. The season ends in July or August, and that's when what little pampering Jones grants his animals takes place.

"We have a little six-acre trap that's planted in coastal Bermuda," he says. "When they come off a campaign, they step into that luxury suite. It's big enough for all of them to walk around, stretch and eat a little grass. If there's any spoiling we do, it's in the interest of their health. They have psychological needs just like you and me, and we try to meet those needs by treating them like horses. It's the best thing you can do for them."

Other players are using this time to relax as well, including two of Jones' teammates for the day: Tommy Wayman and Charles Smith. Both go back far enough with Jones to recall when

he wasn't such a household name.

"He's still just ol' Tommy Lee," Wayman insists. "Nothing's changed with his stardom. When you go out on the field, all that stuff stays behind. But his fame has brought a lot of people to polo, including spectators who go on and learn to play. He's a pretty serious person, and he takes his polo just as seriously."

Smith agrees, adding: "Tommy Lee's a good player, always giving 100 percent. He knows how to take the man and make the play. As a friend, he's unassuming, easy to be around, real down-to-earth."

Jones feels mutual loyalty toward Wayman, Smith and a dozen or so other men he's played and partied with over the years.

"These guys are like family to me," he says with quiet emphasis, his brown eyes intense. "As players, these are the athletes, the horsemen I look up to and try to emulate."

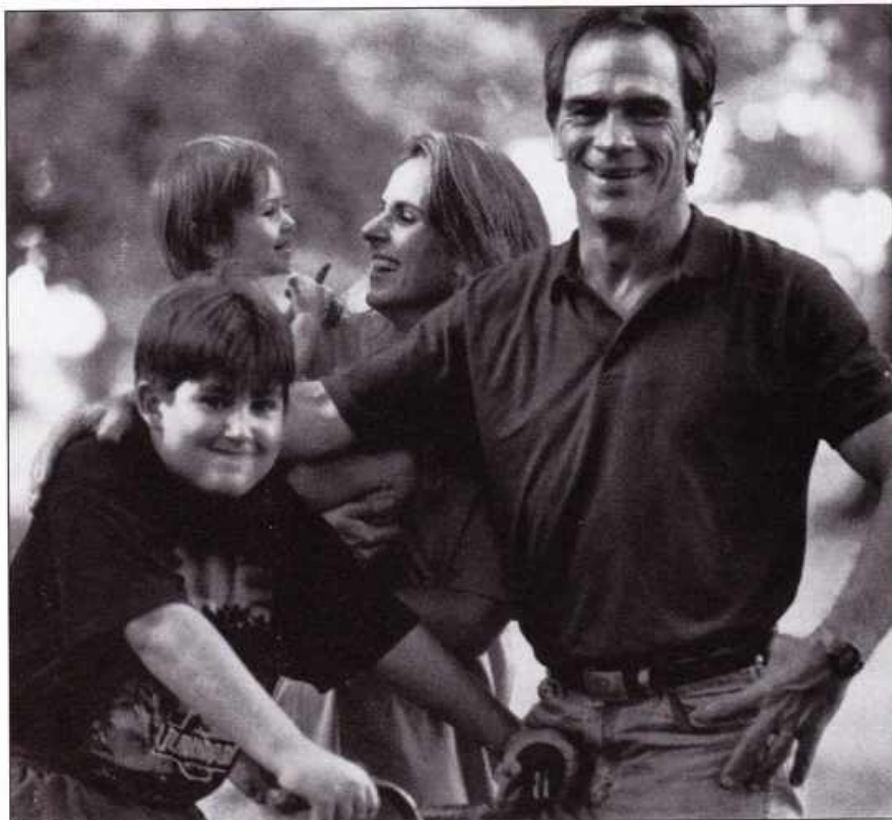
Do they ever tease him about his Hollywood connections? "All the time! All day long!" Jones chortles, his sunny side resurfacing. "I get no respect, no sir!"

Not true, says Retama Polo Center pro Jimmy Newman, who has known Jones for nearly 20 years.

"Tommy Lee is a smart player, and the exceptional thing about him is that he hits a good ball, even when he has not practiced in six months. He's just the ideal person to promote polo, from my standpoint, because he's a cowboy kind of guy—and that's all part of the Texas image. He's a rancher, he loves horses and he raises horses to play polo. I think that's as much a part of the thrill for him as winning a tournament, seeing those young horses come along."

Considering all the tough-guy roles he's played, one might think the element of danger was catalytic in drawing him to the sport. *Au contraire*.

"Horses are what attracted me to polo, certainly not danger!" he exclaims, shaking his head for emphasis. "There's no appeal to the danger, none at all!" He emits a barking laugh, then adds: "There's no arguing that some-



times polo can be dangerous. But we all do what we can to eliminate danger from the game."

Has he ever considered abandoning the sport? "Sure, I get frustrated sometimes, and I've decided to quit a bunch of times—sell all my horses, all my gear and leave the whole thing," Jones smiles. "But I've always changed my mind by dark."

It's nowhere near dark yet on the San Angelo polo field when the third chukker begins. The pace quickly heats up, and the crowd is hollering and on its feet. Jones, aboard Con Quien, smacks one right into the goal for the only score of the chukker.

Midway through the fourth and final chukker, Charles Smith scores for the Gold team, putting it only one point behind the Blues. The excitement is palpable. With just 30 seconds left on the clock, Smith chucks another one in, and the game ends in a 4-4 tie, a fitting cap to a charity event.

A flush-faced Jones returns to the players' area at a brisk trot. Exuberant, laughing and showing no signs of waning energy, he swings off his mare and grabs a large water bottle, draining it

in seconds. The small crowd that greeted his return with applause drifts toward the site of the awards ceremony. With the exception of Higgins, Juan and a journalist, Jones is alone for the first time in hours. He towels off his damp face, humming softly.

"Good game, Tommy Lee," the writer says. "Your goal really turned things around." Jones stops toweling for a moment.

"Hell, I did score a goal, didn't I?" he growls, with a sly sidelong glance. "Gee, I forgot about that." He quickly turns and with studied nonchalance snatches his sunglasses off a chair—but he's unable to hide a triumphant smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

A few minutes later he lines up with his fellow players on the platform of a flatbed truck as Cecil Smith solemnly passes out prizes. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with his equally sweaty, dust-caked and disheveled teammates, Jones beams as he clasps the trophy in his big, calloused hands. In the late-afternoon glow of West Texas sun, the silver keepsake glitters every bit as bright as Oscar gold. **S**

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PBS Series Features Jack Russell Star

Jack Russell terrier fans are advised to keep an eye on the fall-season television line-up, which includes the debut of an innovative PBS series—starring a member of the breed that's long been favored by the hunt-seat set. "Wishbone," named for its canine leading player, is designed to introduce school-age children to classic literature and encourage a love of reading books. But the show should appeal to Jack Russell lovers of all ages.

In each weekly half-hour episode, Wishbone—who lives with his wholesome human family in a fictional American town—experiences daydream fantasies that transform him into various characters from a broad selection of classic tales. Among those are Don Quixote, Oliver Twist and Rip Van Winkle, featuring authentic sets, costumes and dialects adapted from each appropriate time period. Wishbone's adventures offer an imaginative mixture of heroism, comedy and discovery, in scenes geared toward familiarizing children with the basic characters, names and plots from each literary work.



Wishbone in character

As official photographer for the show's Texas-based production company, SPUR contributor Carol Kaelson has been working with the talented terrier for the past year.

"We do a lot of shooting outdoors, where it's often over 100 degrees," Kaelson says. "We don't want Wishbone to pant on-camera, so in between takes he gets to relax in a little air-conditioned dome. In the winter, the dome is heated. But he works hard; he deserves the extra attention."

—Anne Lang

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