

POLO POWER

In one of the poorest areas of South Africa, a charity is using polo to positively transform the lives of the disadvantaged local community, reports Darlene Ricker



Nestled in the foothills of the spectacular Maluti Mountains in the Eastern Free State – one of rural South Africa's most scenic and disadvantaged areas – is Uitgedacht Farm, home to the Poloafrika Development Trust. The charitable organisation is dedicated to providing the local underprivileged youth with an entrée to polo – and a new outlook on life.

'What I love most is to see these children developing over the years and knowing that this programme has contributed so much to their lives,' says Catherine Cairns, co-founder and primary sponsor of the trust.

While building the polo resort, Cairns was inspired to benefit the surrounding community. 'I decided to give my grooms an opportunity to become true polo professionals, and then

children starting to get involved,' she explains. 'I am very proud we have a pipeline of young, talented athletes. [We realised that] if the opportunity was here, they would flourish in this country – and overseas. More importantly than that, though, the programme helps the children become well-rounded individuals. They are who they are because they've had this opportunity.'

A British businesswoman, Cairns holds an MBA from the Wharton School and is a Fellow of its Lauder Institute. She created Poloafrika with Trustee Tracey Morgan in 2005. Within a decade, the charity has evolved from a sports initiative into a thriving and diverse organisation, with ponies the common denominator.

Taking full advantage of its breathtakingly beautiful surrounds, the farm has extensive

equestrian facilities and one of the best polo fields in Africa. The field is fully boarded and irrigated; a second field is under development. There is also an enclosed arena, one of only a few in the country. The trust leases the facilities and has use of tack, polo gear and about 70 ponies.

In contrast to its own abundance, Uitgedacht Farm sits in one of South Africa's poorest areas, with very high unemployment. The job opportunities Poloafrika has provided for local adults has had a significant economic impact on the local community. More than 70 per cent of households in the seven villages within a 15km radius of the farm have a family member participating in the programme.

Poloafrika now provides jobs, training and education for underprivileged adults and

From beekeeping to literacy, children at the Poloafrika Development Trust learn more than how to play polo

children. It has also turned conventional perceptions – and the limitations they engender – on their heads. Stereotypes are smashed. For example, girls can learn welding or carpentry if they are interested. Some boys take up needlework or cooking. Many children have signed up for Poloafrika's beekeeping classes, and some plan to make it their career. (Bees are an essential contributor to the health of the countryside and the success of farms, but there are not enough beekeepers in the country.)

'Here, it doesn't matter who's a boy, who's a girl,' says Anton Chaka, Trustee of Poloafrika and elder of the community. He hopes some students will grow up to compete in high-goal polo, representing the country. 'It is my wish to one day see a black player coming through Poloafrika. We need to show the whole world that people are people; don't classify them by their colour. If they have opportunity, they will grab it.'

Poloafrika acts as a much-needed catalyst for change in many ways. In South Africa, there are few black athletes and coaches in the equestrian world. Cairns feels it's important for South Africans to see black players compete and win to address the perception that polo is a white-only sport.

The trust is affiliated with the South African Polo Association and five of the permanent staff on the farm are adult players who teach the children. Former Springbok player Gavin Chaplin, a polo coach and pony trainer of international renown, has been teaching the advanced young students for several years. The children love working with the ponies at all levels, and recently the scope of equestrian activities offered by the programme has broadened, with Adam Moses teaching dressage and jumping.

Poloafrika has also branched into other areas of social development over the years, including building a complete schoolyard complex and installing electricity to provide online learning. The 40-plus students are taught mathematics and English, subjects that present a challenge to rural underprivileged youth in South Africa.

The pupils come to the farm at weekends during the school year and five days a week over the holidays. All children receive transportation assistance and help with homework. The focus on education at the farm is to help the children



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strive and succeed in life, but they also benefit from something invaluable: happiness. It's not just the joy of swinging a mallet from atop a horse: the farm is a haven for them. In addition to playing polo or spending time bonding with and caring for the ponies, the Poloafrika children can fish, swim or just sit in a beautiful setting and read a book. poloafrika.com