

A sport for all

Catherine Cairns is the founder and owner of one of the most beautiful polo resorts in South Africa, Poloafrika, based on Uitgedacht Farm in the Free State. Catherine is the sponsor of the only black South African team in the country and her development programme also enriches the lives of children from the local community, who are given the chance to learn polo and horsemanship.



The home of Poloafrika is Uitgedacht Farm, a working farm and polo school in the foothills of the spectacular Maluti Mountains - one of the most beautiful parts of South Africa. Founder Catherine Cairns bought the farm in 2002 and has transformed it into a rural haven, a rustic but luxurious retreat for anyone interested in polo or horses. With more than 50 playing ponies and a small breeding herd, the farm provides polo coaching and riding-oriented vacations, mostly for overseas guests.

The Poloafrika development programme is an integral part of the farm. This has been running for some years now and for the last two years has been endorsed and supported by the South African Polo Association (SAPA). The programme has three objectives. The first is to provide opportunities for underprivileged adults with talent to do well in the sport and flourish as professionals, whether in pony care, farrier work, schooling ponies or coaching other players. Currently Poloafrika sponsors five adults at Uitgedacht to play polo, and two who are learning to play. Last year three players,

Tshidiso Meshake (2 goal), Zompie Tsotetsi (1 goal) and Naledi Nkopane (0 goal) attended and passed the SAPA-endorsed 'Coach the Coaches' clinic led by top HPA coach David Morley.

SKILLS FOR LIFE

The second goal of the programme is to use polo and ponies to encourage children from underprivileged backgrounds to work hard both academically and vocationally. Poloafrika provides practical and financial support for school attendance and gives children a

chance to learn about horsemanship and polo. Those accepted onto the programme receive coaching on the condition that they try hard at school and continue to demonstrate enthusiasm for the ponies and the sport. The aim is not to create future polo players (although this may happen), but to foster academic and vocational dedication and a sense of self-discipline and purpose which will benefit participants in years to come.

There are currently 12 children in the programme, six girls and six boys. During a typical day they help to check, exercise, groom and feed the ponies, do some



PREVIOUS PAGE View of Uitgedacht polo field practice over pony lines

RIGHT Tshediso and Zompie playing together

BELOW Catherine and Teams

BOTTOM Zompie and the children returning from lesson in the arena



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mucking out and cleaning, and participate in riding lessons and polo chukkas. In July this year the children's programme earned the accolade of being named one of 89 Laureus Sport for Good Foundation projects in 32 countries across the world. As a result, Laureus is now funding additional training, including academic skills and practical skills for life in a farming community. This October the children have started learning carpentry, with much enthusiasm from both boys and girls. One of the social barriers the programme hopes to help break down is the gender divide, so it has been rewarding to see girls eager to take on skills traditionally only learned by men. Similarly, some of the boys have enjoyed learning how to make coconut ice and fudge - not essential life skills, perhaps, but certainly good fun.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Poloafrica's final objective is to make polo in South Africa more accessible to non-white players. Our mission is to change both the perception and reality of the sport in this country, in order to allow it to flourish and grow. Polo in South Africa has not moved with the times as most other sports have. There are hardly any black South African players and none that are able to fund themselves. It is important for South Africans to see black players compete and win, to challenge the unspoken assumption that the sport is only a white sport. We hope that in five years time wealthy black South Africans will have embraced polo with enthusiasm, and that there will be well-respected black professionals operating on a par with their white peers. We believe that Poloafrica can be a catalyst to make this happen.

Poloafrica's programmes are subsidised by revenue from guests at Uitgedacht Farm - yet another reason to come and stay at this beautiful resort. As well as being a stunning place to hone your polo skills at any time of year, there are also regular courses led by top international coaches, such as Gavin Chaplin, who is visiting in November.

More information is available on the website, www.poloafrica.com, or by contacting Catherine Cairns on +27 84 290 0000. We hope to see you soon. ●