

WIPN Women's International Polo Network

A brand new initiative bringing women players together from all over the world



Katie Vickery
reports

There is no doubt that ladies' polo in the UK and around the world is on the up, with the tournaments getting bigger and better sponsors, plus team entries at an all-time high. Women all around the world are enjoying the huge benefits of a more extensive ladies' polo calendar and the seasons are getting more and more competitive each year. With such a huge increase in global interest, some of the top female players and names on the circuit in the USA have come up with an initiative to help bring the many strands of womens' polo together and achieve a more dynamic and organised entity, consolidating information and contacts from around the world in one digital network. *Polo Times* chatted to some of the women behind this initiative to get a feel for their aims and methods.



Photography by David Lominska

The WIPN were influential in supporting a women's team at The Colorado Open

Meet the Team

Pamela Flanagan – President

Pamela is a polo player with a 3 goal ladies' handicap, an attorney, a member of the USPA Women's Handicap Committee, a brand ambassador for the Hawaii Polo Life and a passionate advocate for rescue horses. At WIPN, she has helped to guide the organisation's vision from its inception.

In 2015, Pamela created a social media platform called the @WomensPoloNetwork and in 2018 she joined forces with a group of women from around the world to expand that social platform into the organised, interactive website it is today: The Women's International Polo Network (www.wipnpolo.com).

Dawn Jones – Vice President

Dawn holds a 1 goal handicap in mixed polo and 6 goal ladies' handicap. She is a motion stills photographer in



the film business. She has been playing polo for 24 years and has won the US Women's Open twice, and even received the Most Valuable Player award.

Recently, her Santa Maria de Lobos team came third in the first Argentine Women's Open (2017) and she has played in the (mixed) 26 goal US Open. She is WIPN's connector and fundraiser, raising awareness about the organisation among supporters and players at all levels.

Courtney Asdourian – Secretary

Courtney is a 1 goal mixed handicap and 6 goal ladies' handicap and is the driving force behind the WIPN's global tournament calendar. She is a horse trainer and sells Thoroughbred polo ponies to the high goal. She travels for polo on an international level.



Erica Gandomcar-Sachs – Treasurer

Erica owns and operates the Denver Polo Club. She holds a 1½ mixed handicap and a 5 goal ladies' handicap.

She is The Mountain Circuit Governor for the USPA and the head of the USPA Women's Committee, as well as sitting on the USPA Women's Handicap Committee.



Cecelia Cochran – Board Member at Large

One of WIPN's visionaries, Cecelia is 5 goals in ladies' polo and 1 goal in mixed polo. She is based at New Bridge Polo Club, and plays in Wellington Florida and at the Denver Polo Club. She runs two women's leagues and is working on developing another at Denver Polo Club for 2019. Apart from polo, Cecelia is co-owner of Crossfit El Cid in West Palm Beach, Fl. She is on the USPA Women's Handicap Committee and the USPA Women's Polo Committee.



How did discussions regarding the WIPN commence?

“The WIPN started a little differently for everyone involved. The team members all had the same passion for polo and desire to help grow and organise women’s polo globally, but quickly realised these aspirations could not be attained individually. They needed to come together to make this dream a reality. Dawn Jones had been working with Courtney Asdourian to create a global calendar to organise women’s tournaments around the world and wanted to establish a proper platform for this calendar.

“Erica was deeply integrated in women’s polo as the USPA Women’s Polo Committee Chair and teamed up with Dawn to brainstorm ways to better organise women’s polo. Pamela had created a social media presence called @WomensPoloNetwork in 2015, to act as a network and to share all things women’s polo. The group came together and realised they all had the same goals in mind. Rather than recreating the wheel, the group took on the Women’s Polo Network name, logo and following, joined together, and merged their visions with hopes to grow into a bigger, better and more sophisticated platform.

“Erica introduced the group to Orange Marketing, web developers based out of Denver, Colorado and owned and operated by polo women Kim DeLashmit and Amanda Cordsen-Iseminger. Erica and Kim ensured our fundraising platform was up and running, and Dawn has been our fundraising extraordinaire. From there we linked up with Cecelia Cochran, a high rated and well-respected player, to expand our efforts and add to our reach.

“Taylor Scilufu then joined the team to run social media and ensure our message is clear and wide spread. All of us work on a volunteer basis and have agreed to lend our time and efforts simply for the desire to grow and organise women’s polo. So many others have been supportive in this project, and without our growing community, this endeavour would not be possible.”

What is the purpose of the organisation?

“The WIPN’s purpose is to enhance women’s polo around the world by building an online community that includes detailed player profiles and a comprehensive global calendar of women’s tournaments. We aim to do this by facilitating team and tournament organisation, increasing global exposure for women players, cultivating a healthy women’s polo community, and creating opportunities for sponsorship and philanthropic outreach.”

What do you hope to achieve in the short term and in the long term?

“Our current short term goal is to raise the



The WIPN team is made up of women who travel internationally for polo, both professionally and as amateurs

necessary capital to fund the project so we can get this online platform off the ground. The WIPN is a 501(c)(3) non-profit entity, which is independent of any association or Club. It can only become a reality with the financial support of the entire women’s polo community.

“Long term, we hope the WIPN can enhance women’s polo by aiding the sport to grow, connecting female players from around the world, encouraging new women to join the sport and providing sponsorship opportunities to the athletes who dedicate their lives to this sport. We want polo to provide opportunities for young women, whether that means assisting them in making it a profession, starting a new Club, feeling a part of this global community, finding and pursuing a new passion, getting a college scholarship, or having the opportunity to travel the world. We already agree that polo is an incredible sport, but even the most wonderful things have room for improvement. In short, the WIPN aims to better women’s polo globally.”

How do you hope to make WIPN global?

“Polo is already a global sport. The WIPN team is made up of polo women who play and travel frequently, and with that comes the ability to connect with women players we have met along the way. The site will launch globally in December during The Ladies’ Argentine Open. We have recently created a WIPN Ambassador model whereby more polo men and women have been invited to join our efforts by taking part

in conference calls, submitting suggestions and helping us build our network. We want everyone to be properly informed of our happenings and to have a point of contact in the event of questions or suggestions. We are a group that values inclusivity, thus all and any support is always welcomed.”

What are your thoughts on ladies’ polo around the world? How could it be improved?

“Women’s polo is growing year on year and the women within the sport are changing the way it is being played. Women are taking strides to make women’s polo more professional. The number of skilled players continues to grow, and because of this, the game is faster and more exciting to watch. Women are now playing on a level never seen before.

“Despite the progress, women’s polo in some ways lacks organisation on a global scale. For example, important tournaments have overlapping dates because there is no one place that lists the dates for women’s tournaments globally. Further, it can be a challenge to match players to teams when there is no place that lists all the players and their handicaps. Not all players are registered with all associations, and thus finding their handicap information can prove challenging.

“The WIPN will try to mitigate these issues by having a global living calendar which allows for clubs to input their tournament dates and provide contact information for interested players. It will

All handicaps are HPA women’s handicaps, unless stated otherwise

▶ *Is your women’s polo not featured? Email editorial@polotimes.co.uk with all your women’s polo news!*



The WIPN will mitigate global issues

also have player profiles that list the players' handicaps in all/any association. The WIPN will also expose players and fans to women's polo around the world. This exposure and the ability to connect through the WIPN will help clubs and women's tournaments grow."

What makes ladies polo different to mixed?

"Most women tend to play in the number one position in mixed. This doesn't really give them the chance to learn other positions. Playing women's polo makes one play all positions. There is a lot more work that we all must do to make the game flow. Of course certain people will be stronger at back or in the middle, but that's the beauty of it. We have to build trust and teamwork to be successful on the field. It makes women players more well-rounded.

"Women have to work harder as a team. Not many women can hit a big ball to their number one like the men can, so we need to rely and use one another more.

"Also, mixed polo has tournaments that have been established for many years, and with this comes natural organisation. Everyone knows The US Open is in April, The Gold Cup for The British Open in July, and The Argentine Open in December. Higher level women's tournaments however, are just beginning to become established.

"For example, in 2017 the first Ladies' Argentine Open took place and 2018 saw the first Women's East Coast Open. With women's polo growing so quickly, we need to coordinate now. The WIPN hopes to provide a platform to allow for organised growth. Mixed polo has been around much longer and thus has already learned how to manage through trial and error.

"Women's polo around the world is growing by leaps and bounds. Through the improvement of speed and ability, it has become more fun to watch. People want to

watch Lía [Salvo], Hazel [Jackson-Gaona], Nina [Clarkin] and Sarah [Wiseman], as well as the up-and-coming young players like Miliagros Sanchez, Mía Cambiaso and Hope Arellano. These women are exciting to watch and there's an enthusiasm that is building worldwide. Women's polo will improve with connection and unity and this game is evolving quickly. Having a body like the WIPN is fundamental to its growth."

Women's polo is one of the only sectors of the sport that is expanding – Why do you think that is?

"For a long time, polo was a sport that many saw as a man's sport. A few brave women, like Sunny Hale shattered that perception and inspired more women to play.

"Polo is a family sport, so once people saw women playing, and playing well, daughters and wives started to pick up a stick. The initial growth was from women already in the polo world who could quickly and easily transition from spectator to player.

"Once fellow equestrians saw that there was a place for women in the sport of polo, female riders from other disciplines began to shift to polo. Observing a few polo schools around the country opened my eyes to the quickly growing numbers of women taking to this sport.

"For example, the Denver Polo Club has a large portion of women in The Margarita League and therefore will be forming a Women's League in the 2019 season. Other polo schools have a 60 to 40 per cent ratio women to men or more even."

What could be done to promote it further?

"Word of mouth and social media seem to be the quickest reaching mediums for women in polo and WIPN. To have a venue to refer to that makes it easy to access players is

something this sport needs. There is nothing like it out there. In the past, association pages have been limited to player handicaps in that specific country, and do not allow players to create their own biographies and really market themselves. The features on tournaments and players will also help to spread the word."

How have things like The Women's Argentine Open changed things for players globally?

"Argentina acknowledging women's polo on such a high level is what really sealed it. The USA and England and other countries have supported it for a long time, by hosting The US Women's Open and the 18 goal League in the UK, but The Ladies' Argentine Open really made heads turn.

"To have gained the respect to place a women's tournament alongside the most prestigious men's tournament in the world is paramount. It gained so much attention, including being broadcast on ESPN and the top eight women in the world playing in the Final, as well as numerous well-known, talented international players participating in the tournament itself."

Which countries do you think lead the charge on women's polo?

"I think Argentina and England lead the charge of the highest-ranking players. The Argentines have adapted their game as everyday polo is played at a higher level, providing greater opportunity to improve and learn quickly.

"England produces riders. They also seem to travel to Argentina more than the Americans and are reaping the benefits. The USA has a large array of women who are riders, trainers and polo coaches. The USA unfortunately doesn't widely offer the same high goal speed to the majority of its players, but this is changing with the introduction of fast practices and more and more women's tournaments on the schedule."

What would you say to those who believe that polo should not be gendered and should remain mixed?

"Diversification in polo is fundamental. There is a place for all players whether it be mixed or womens'. Womens' polo teaches one how to play every position whereas in mixed polo, female players are usually up front in the number one position or at four marking the other number one. Having more options for players allows for greater opportunities on an amateur and professional level and it creates a challenge to better ourselves.

"Most women are not picked up to play the high goal as professionals and ladies' polo has made a place for women to actually make a living doing what they love the most. Why not have the same opportunities as the men in mixed?" ❌