

... A POLO PLAYER

He's never been on a horse before, let alone played a chukka. So what happens when Ross Clarke saddles up for his first polo lesson?

The closest I've ever come to riding a horse is on a merry-go-round and, as I recall, I didn't have to hit a ball with a long stick at the same time. But I'm up for a challenge and surely learning to ride a horse and play polo can't be that difficult. In my mind, it'll end in one of two ways: hilarity or injury. As I make my way to MHF Polo School, I hope for the former and brace myself for the latter.

"We'll start by practising standing up," says Alec Banner-Eve, my instructor for the day and the founder of the school, as he hands me a short mallet. I perfect the grip and raise my arm back behind my body. "Did you ever try to swing a bucket of water around at the beach without the water coming out?" he asks. "That's the action you're after." I bring my arm down and forward, striking the grapefruit-sized ball I've

been told not to take my eyes off with the long side of the mallet. The ball comes to a stop a few metres away. So far so good.

Basic manoeuvres covered, it's time to get on the horse. Well, a wooden one for now. I try a few hits of the ball under Alec's watchful eye, and he shows me how to mount and dismount a horse safely. That accomplished, I'm introduced to Tolicita, my patient horse (or pony as they are referred to in the game). I'm a little daunted but, after a deep breath, up I go. A few instructions later on stopping and steering, I make figure of eights around the two goal posts and try to channel my inner John Wayne.

"They can run like racehorses, up to about 40mph," says Alec. With that, he takes the reins of my horse and we canter along. I am delighted that I manage to stay on. Time for a chukka (a period in a game of polo). The next 15 minutes race by and, with plenty of help from my teammate, I manage to hit the ball through the goalposts. Time's up and Toli leads her own way back to the stable. Alec gives me a pat on the back and says I did well for a complete first-timer. If only I could ride a horse with more aplomb, I'd be back for another go. Hmm... horse-riding lessons next?

For more information about lessons, go to mhfpolo.co.uk. The nearest station is Harlow. To book your train travel, visit greateranglia.co.uk



Clockwise from above Ross on a wooden training horse; with instructor Alec; taking part in a game of polo



THREE THINGS I LEARNED...

1 You always mount a horse from the left. This dates back to when people wore swords on their belts, making it impossible to mount from the right.

2 The polo mallet is always held with your right hand and the reins of the horse with the left – even if you're left-handed.

3 A polo match is made up of six rounds, known as chukkas. The term comes from the Hindi word for circle.



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