

matt jones

Interview – The Polo Manager, Ed Kennedy

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The horseman cometh

*Ed Kennedy has doubled for Gabriel Byrne and Michael Caine and once managed polo ponies for Prince Charles. **Matt Jones** discovers what the Irish horseman is doing in Dubai.*

He rode to war with King Arthur and in more recent times prepared the Prince of Wales's horses for battle on the polo field. Ed Kennedy has some tales to tell.

From the Knights of the Round Table to the seven members of the Heguy family who dominate the "Sport of Kings", Kennedy's life in the saddle has been full of high adventure. In his time he has been a racehorse jockey, a cowboy, a soldier on both sides of the American Civil War and a civil servant for the government of Brunei.

If all this makes the 45-year-old father of two sound like a time-travelling warrior from the *Highlander* series, he's not. Actually, he's the Polo and Equestrian Manager at Emaar Properties' Arabian Ranches development. But in combining a life-long love of horses and the management of "The Man United of polo teams" with film work, the boundaries between fact and fiction in his career are sometimes blurred.

His big break was riding a horse across a cloud. It was 1980 and film director John Boorman was casting experienced riders for parts in his Arthurian epic *Excalibur*.

"It was just by accident," says Kennedy. "They were making the movie in Wicklow in Ireland. They hadn't made a horse movie in Ireland for quite a few years and there was no pool of film horses, so they auditioned and I went along with a friend."

Although he was only 20 at the time, having grown up in Castleknock, on the outskirts of Dublin, Kennedy was already an experienced horseman. "At the time it was a very horsey area, with the Phoenix Park racecourse and polo club, and hunting and jumping in the area around," he says. "I rode racehorses, I hunted, I jumped, but the thing I really liked was polo, more than anything."

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For the *Excalibur* audition, Kennedy and his friend took along their polo ponies, straight from the field. “It was a wet and windy day one March and they were terrible – covered in mud, dirty and hairy,” he recalls. “There were maybe 200 people with horses at the audition that day, but when the director handed everybody a sword or a lance and shield, some of the horses just ran away, or their riders couldn’t steer them properly. Then it came to us. Because we had polo ponies that were used to doing battle every day, it was nothing. It was easy. So we were bashing each other and having a great time.

“At first they thought the horses were too small, because polo ponies are smaller than jumping horses – they’re thoroughbreds. But the horse master of the movie said, ‘Don’t worry about that. John Wayne rode cattle ponies and they looked perfectly fine on film.’ So they hired my pal to supply the horses and me to work with him.”

When production on *Excalibur* got under way, Kennedy’s horsemanship attracted the director’s attention. “The Equity-registered riders were very poor,” says Kennedy. “Some of them could ride OK, but they weren’t really horsemen as such, and really to do the battle scenes you need to be quite solid. Because polo riding is so specific, completely different to any other type, the horses are trained like cattle horses to turn or stop very quickly with one hand. I grew up doing that, whereas the other guys weren’t used to it, so they didn’t get the best out of a horse or make the horses work the way the director wanted. And the actors, they were having a lot of trouble, too. So I did perfect rehearsals for the horses and at the end of the day Boorman says to me, ‘Can you grow a beard?’ I didn’t know if I could grow a beard, but I said, ‘Yeah’ and, hey, I grew a beard in two weeks. It looked really authentic, and I ended up doing virtually all the stunts in that film. I doubled for most of the actors, so I’d be hidden, but there are a few places where you can see me on screen.”

In one key scene at the beginning of the movie, Kennedy doubled for *The Usual Suspects* star Gabriel Byrne on a magical night ride across a cloud. Other stars in the film included this year’s Oscar-hopeful Liam Neeson and *Prime Suspect* actress Helen Mirren.

TV work followed. “I did a TV thing for America, which was called *The Manions of America*, about an Irish family that emigrated to the States during the Civil War,” says Kennedy. “It was one of Pierce Brosnan’s first jobs, the one that launched him into *Remington Steele*. David Soul was on that, too.

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“We were cowboys, we were Confederate soldiers, we were Union soldiers, we were hauling covered wagons over the ‘Rockies’ with kegs of gunpowder in the wagons, blowing them up. Actually, the whole thing was filmed in the mountains of Ireland, but it looked pretty authentic. All you need are bubbling mountain streams and pine trees.

“After that we did several things for German TV and Swiss TV. I have no idea where they went or what they look like. The last film I did I doubled for Michael Caine. It wasn’t a horse film, but at the time I had fair hair and we were around the same height. It was *Educating Rita*, with Julie Walters – a lot of fun. The funny thing was that Michael Caine couldn’t drive a car, so I had to drive a little Triumph Herald around Dublin, pretend to be drunk and fall off a stage. All that sort of stuff.”

But ultimately, the erratic, up and down nature of the work ruled out the film business as a long-term career option for Kennedy. “I still played and had connections with horses and polo, so when I finished I went back to polo again,” he says.

For a time he worked as a professional artist in England, specialising in oil paintings and pencil drawings with an equestrian theme. “There are limited edition prints of my polo pictures all over the world now,” he says. “I go to Argentina or South Africa and people say, ‘Oh, I’ve got one of your pictures on my wall!’ In fact, when I was in France for the Polo World Cup last year, I went to somebody’s house to change and saw one of my pictures on the wall of an upstairs bedroom. It was a complete fluke, you know. It was nice. I was kind of flattered.”

Living in south-east England, the epicentre of world polo, Kennedy was quickly lured from full time painting to manage one of the country’s top polo teams, the Maple Leafs, for the Canadian patron Galen Weston. Working at Belvedere Farm in Ascot with the Mexican polo legend Meno Garcia – a 10 goal player, polo’s highest handicap – the new job was Kennedy’s launch pad into the higher end of the polo world. Playing the game was all in a day’s work. “Training polo ponies means you have to play them,” says Kennedy, who holds a three handicap. “The Maple Leafs had 90 horses and all those horses had to be played every day or at least on a cycle of every two to three days, even when they weren’t in a tournament, to maintain their fitness and lightness.”

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It was at Belvedere that Kennedy got to know Prince Charles and the princes William and Harry. “He’s quite a strong player, quite a good player; he plays for charity,” says Kennedy of Charles. “Because he never pays for his polo – he doesn’t buy horses, he doesn’t spend money on it – wealthy patrons give him the horses, look after them for him, and he plays charity matches scheduled across the summer season. The guy I was working for did that.”

So how’s Kennedy’s relationship with Charles? “When you meet him on the side of the field, it’s always very casual, very relaxed. He’s quite an amusing character actually, good to talk to. He’s very professional at his job of Prince of Wales, but he’s a very cool guy. The two boys are very cool, too. Harry is wild and a good polo player for that. He’s aggressive and enjoys it. William is much more self conscious, kind of like his mother, but still he’s quite a good player as well. They’re not great horsemen, but they’re quite good polo players.”

Twelve years after Kennedy arrived at Belvedere, Weston retired, selling his polo fields, stables and housing to the Brunei royal family. “Prince Jeffrey bought the property, all the horses, all the saddles and me,” he laughs. Renamed Ahmibah Farm, the property was expanded to include more polo fields, more stables and 300 horses. “That particular property had probably two of the best fields in England, if not the world, and a collection of some of the best horses in the world,” says Kennedy.

“Prince Jeffrey also had the top players from Argentina working for him,” he adds. “He had all seven of the Heguy brothers, who are one of the major forces in the world of polo. They’re all 10 goal players. There are only 12 or 13 10 goal players in the world at any one time, and this family had seven of them. So I had those guys working with me. I was preparing their horses, organising the tournaments, organising the teams and transport, everything: the training, the grooms, the staff. Imagine if you were interested in soccer and you found yourself working for Man United. That was what it was like for me.”

When the Brunei government stepped in to assume ownership of the farm, Kennedy, to all intents and purposes, became a civil servant for the south-east Asian nation. For the last four years, immediately prior to his move to Dubai, he managed the farm as a very exclusive club.

Today, based at Emaar’s Arabian Ranches development in Dubai, Kennedy not only runs the polo operation, but jumping and dressage, as well.

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“I had almost no links with the Middle East, except that I was aware of the Dubai polo team playing at the top level in the UK,” he says. “I know the manager very well because we were opposites on different teams, and he introduced me to this organisation, which was looking for somebody with international experience to come here.”

The organisation is Emaar, the Dubai property developer behind the luxury ranch and golf-themed desert community that’s rising from the dunes on the outskirts of the city. With an Equestrian Centre – which includes two world-class polo fields, a luxury clubhouse, spa, gym and equestrian shop – due to open in February 2005, Arabian Ranches will be the new home of polo in Dubai.

“In the sense that this is a property development, with the quantity of houses that we have here, there’s almost nothing like this in the polo world,” says Kennedy. “There isn’t really a comparison. There are places that have a few houses to subsidise the club, but not on this scale. Arabian Ranches is quite unique. As for the clubhouse, there are very few of this standard. Even the top clubs in England only have a wooden or prefabricated hut on the side of the field.”

According to Kennedy, the success of the Dubai polo team in the UK has led people there to see Dubai as a very select polo destination. In reality, it isn’t. At least, not yet. Kennedy’s job is to make it one, firstly by making the sport more accessible to potential players and spectators living here; secondly, by encouraging visits and exhibition matches by overseas teams.

“The riding school is very important to get people in, get them on a horse, get them developing an interest,” he says. “We’re providing a polo school just to get people to understand what they can do and how we can help them do it if they want to get to a higher level.

“Having 20 horses is non-stop organisation, commitment and expense, which is why at Arabian Ranches, we’ll provide the horses straight away to get people going, get them encouraged. We’ll do all the organisation. We’ll take care of the farrier, grooms, training, everything, so that people just come and pay.

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“Most of the polo clubs in the world provide the club, the facilities, maybe the stables, the polo fields, the clubhouse and a tournament and prize, but they don’t actually supply the professionals with the horses. The individual does that. The individual organises his own horses, his own managers, his own professionals to come and play against other teams because he wants to win the prize. In Dubai, that’s further down the road, but it’s somewhere to aim. We would still keep a base of horses here to encourage people overseas to come and play.”

The prospect of playing in Dubai already has Kennedy’s contacts in the polo world chomping at the bit. “What the Dubai team has done is put Dubai on the lips of everybody in the polo world,” he says. “They’re all on the e-mail and phoning, saying they want to play here, which is great, because it’s one of the legs this polo club will stand on. In England in winter you can’t play polo, so what those guys do is fly to somewhere like Argentina for a polo vacation. From the UK that’s about a 14 to 15 hour flight, and then there’s another four or five hour flight to the *pampas*. The wives don’t usually like that. They get a bit fed up with swatting flies after 10 days.

“Dubai, however, is only seven hours by plane, you’ve got guaranteed sunshine, which you don’t have in Argentina, you can stick your family in the Jumeirah Beach Hotel and everybody’s happy. The husband goes to play polo in the afternoon and he’s back for dinner. It’s a pretty good deal and something to build on.”

For the uninitiated, polo is played over eight acres, the size of four football pitches – the biggest playing surface of any ball game. A polo team consists of four players who will have anything from a minus two goal handicap to 10 at the very top. When a club organises a tournament, it will set a limit for each team based on the sum of the four players’ handicaps. In a 20 goal tournament, for example, there may be two 10 goal players and two zeros, which is common in the UK. In a 22 goal tournament, there may be two 10 goal players, a two goal and a zero. The patron, the owner of the team, is usually the zero.

“The sport is intoxicating, like motor racing,” says Kennedy. “Running down the ground at 35 miles an hour trying to hit a ball that could go 150 yards... The horses are fantastic because you can run flat out, stop them with one hand and turn and go back in the other direction. You can bump into people and push them out of the way... The majority of polo matches are watched from the bonnet of a car sitting on the side of a field, which has its own character and flavour.”

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So can residents in Arabian Ranches expect to see the top Argentine players and princes Charles, William and Harry going into battle on their neighbourhood polo ground? “That’s possible,” says Kennedy. “We’re aiming for that.”

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