



# family

By Jeffrey Moser

## Colts Neck's First Family of Polo Makes the Most of Our Equestrian Heritage

# Affair

*The Gerberdings are Colts Neck's first family of polo. Both Christoph and his wife Dorothee were among the small group of residents who founded Colts Neck Polo over 10 years ago, and both have worked hard to maintain and improve the group's activities. And while Dorothee still works diligently behind the scenes to assure its events are a success, it is Christoph and his son Maximilian who take center stage as two key members of the Colts Neck Polo team. The father/son duo proudly carry on the family tradition so prevalent in polo.*

*The Gerberding family's home lies on 11 well-manicured acres near Bucks Mill Park. Neat parcels are separated by split rail fences, and all I can see are green pastures and wooded areas; make no mistake, I'm in horse country. For nine months a year the farm is dedicated to training and raising prized polo horses. The family has lived here for nearly 10 years. The Gerberdings were looking for a place near New York City to raise horses, and when a colleague told Christoph about Colts Neck the family visited and fell in love. The home is ideally situated for polo enthusiasts, the farm abuts the polo fields, making for an easy entrance on match day. We gather in the great room, and settle around the hearth. We're surrounded by family portraits that reveal a close knit family with a love for horses.*

*Christoph Gerberding=CG Maximilian Gerberding=MG Dorothee Gerberding=DG.*

LICN: Christoph, when did you first get involved in polo?

CG: I came from Germany in 1984 and first lived in California. I started playing polo there about 18 years ago, in Los Angeles. I grew up riding horses. In LA we played indoors in an arena, three versus three, against the walls. It was a good way to start getting familiar with the sport. There wasn't too much indoor polo on the east coast when we moved here.

LICN: Describe how polo began to take shape in Colts Neck.

CG: I was one of the founders of Colts Neck Polo, together with my wife Dorothee, Art Goodwin, Lillian Burry, Vincent Cerullo, and his wife. This was in 1994. The idea was to do something for the town. Colts Neck is a very horse-oriented community, so polo was something that [we thought] would be very nice for the town.

DG: It was Vincent Cerullo, his wife, and the Gerberdings lining the field, hanging the nametags, cooking. We were totally stressed out! We managed to have 25-30 members that first year, and for the last eight years we have been sold out and this year we're considering expanding.

CG: What we do with this organization is hold fundraisers. We have one for SPUR – which is Special People United to Ride program for handicapped children, the American Heart Association, Monmouth Conservation, Meridian, and so on.

LICN: How did Maximilian start playing?

CG: Max was born in 1991. He started to ride with me when he was very little.

DG: He was with you on the horse when he was a baby. And every summer, he was with our polo pro just sitting in front of him on the horse for an hour or two a day. He got used to sitting on a horse, and I think it was when he was two he started to hold the mallet. And when he was four, he would sit on the horse and was hitting the ball. We wanted it to be very natural for him.

LICN: What kind of training is involved?

CG: I would say a minimum of three years to work on your riding skills. Then you have to work with the mallet when you're on the horse, practice the strokes, and really train your eye for eye/ball coordination. It takes time, and it looks easier than it is – when you first start out I'd say you miss every second ball – it can get a little frustrating. A good way to learn is to use a bigger, plastic ball; it helps train your eyes. You should try to go out every day in the summer and exercise the horses, practice maneuvering. It's like golf; the more you practice, the better you get. The idea is to be comfortable on the horse at high speeds.

LICN: Max, what did you like about polo when you first started playing?

MG: I just liked it.

LICN: Do you think you would want to be a professional player?

MG: Yeah, that wouldn't be bad (laughs).

DG: Polo can bring you around the world. Argentina, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Russia.



**Son, Put Your Helmet On! Christoph and Maximilian make their way onto the Bucks Mill Park playing field, summer 2003.**

CG: To become a polo professional you have to have a goal rating of 5 or above. The way a player is rated: -2 the worst and 10 is the best. It's like a handicap. There are very few 10-goal players, mainly out of Argentina. But there are also some big American players such as Tim Gannon, owner of Outback Steakhouse. He has the Outback Polo Team. And John Goodman, an industrialist. In the US, they play in Florida. They sponsor some of the big teams [in the states]. Professionals can be very successful. They make good money selling and training horses.

DG: They all live on training and selling horses.

LICN: So Max trains with the horses all summer long. What's a day in the life of a polo player?

MG: It's lots of hard work (smiles). Wake up at 5 am, start at 6. We bring the horses in, feed them. Then you start to ride the horses, all six of them, for about 30 minutes each - trotting in a circle. It gets kind of boring. This goes on till about 10. Then all the horses get washed, you clean the tack, and then we eat. From about 12 to 3pm we don't do anything, it's too hot. At 4pm we start to play. After the games, we wash all the horses, feed them, and let them out.

LICN: What was it like to be on the field the first time in a game?

MG: Nervous. Everyone is staring at you. When you're about to hit the ball you always miss.

LICN: What would you tell kids your age about polo?

MG: That it's a fun sport and they should do it.

LICN: Would you tell them that it's hard work?

MG: Yeah, I would tell them that. I enjoy working the horses but it gets kind of boring as the summer goes on.

LICN: Have you inspired other kids around here to pick up the mallet?

MG: Our neighbors. One of their fathers started to play, and the two [boys] are getting into it, and getting better. There are a lot of kids my age who play in Florida. That's all they do. They play every day.

DG: There is another boy that is [Max's] age – his father is the patron of the Shannon Hill polo team. His son is a year older than Maximilian, and he is very good. (Max snickers). You two are very good, both of you. It's always a good game when he's coming, because then Maximilian has someone equal to play

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE GERBERDINGS

## - Colts Neck - Polo Matches

Colts Neck Polo kicks-off its 11th season on May 22. The polo field is off Rt. 537 on Bucks Mill Road; once entering the park, follow signs for parking. The 2005 admission fees are: general admission is \$10 per person (children 15 and under are free); reserved sideline parking for a single match is \$50; reserved season tailgate space is \$250. For more information on annual membership, please e-mail Colts Neck Polo at [cnpolo@aol.com](mailto:cnpolo@aol.com), or call (732) 946-8442. Additional information is also available by calling (732) 946-4243.

For general admission, please bring your own chairs and any refreshments. Dress is casual although, some guests and members dress more formal. Please note that for all events, there will be no rain dates and games may be canceled due to weather conditions. If the weather is questionable, call the hotline for cancellation information (732) 946-8442.

### 2005 Schedule

May 22	3PM
June 5	3PM
June 12	3PM
June 19	3PM
June 26	3PM
August 28	3PM
September 4	2PM
September 11	2PM
September 18	2PM
September 25	2PM
October 2	2PM
October 9	2PM

against. Otherwise he plays with and against adults. [In Florida] he was called out by Memo Gracida, a 10-goaler for over 20 years, from Mexico. He is one of the world's best players. He was impressed with Maximilian: [Gracida] told him that not only does it take a lot of practice, but also a lot of strength. I saw a huge jump in [Max's] playing over the summer in the way he was able to hit the ball and in how much faster he was on the horse.

LICN: Do you have a personal handicap goal for yourself?

MG: 7-goal. 10-goal I won't make, I know that. Maybe 8-goal.

CG: Right now he's a 0 handicap. He's a student, but he's coming pretty close to a 0.

DG: It really takes a lot of practice, year-round. When it came time for Max to go to boarding school, we first looked into schools that had polo. But the only ones that had polo were military schools. But we decided against sending him to a military school. It was a real hard decision for us because we really wanted him to be exposed to polo year-round. So now it's limited to the summer months, and we will see if we can organize something in Boston (near Max's school) where they have a polo club if he could practice on certain weekends. We'll look again when he goes to high school.

CG: And several colleges have teams, Yale and Cornell.

DG: We wanted Max to have a well-rounded education.

LICN: With all of this talk of handicaps and players, can you explain the rules, regulations, and lingo of polo?

CG: Sure. The field is 300 yards long and 150 yards wide. Teams have four players on each side. [Between the teams] there's an imaginary line that separates the players; the objective is to attempt to make contact with your opponent and move him off this line. The basic rule is, once the ball is hit, you cannot cross over the line. Crossing this line is a foul. And the fouls depend on how close they occur to the goal; the closer to the

goal, the penalty is more severe. The penalties range from penalty one, which is an automatic goal, to penalty six, which depends on how far the foul occurs from the goal.

LICN: Give us an example of a penalty.

CG: You cannot reach over your opponent's horse and hook a shot.

LICN: And the periods are called chuckers, right?

CG: Periods are called chuckers, each seven minutes long. A polo match is six chuckers long. After three chuckers, there is a twenty-minute break. The break between each chucker is about five minutes to allow for the riders to change horses. Each rider will usually bring six horses for a match. An average game, with penalties and breaks, is about an hour-and-a-half. If the horse are in very good condition, you can play them twice – in the first chucker and in the sixth chucker.

LICN: How does the defense work?

The teams line up a certain way, and the players are assigned a number according to their positions on the field. The number one player goes up field and waits for a pass to score a goal. Number two goes against number three on the opposing team – he is usually the best player on the team – and number four plays defense. You should always stay with one man from the opposing team. You stay with your opponent and try to keep him in a line so that you can continue to send the

ball towards the goal. Once the goal is scored, you switch sides, so no team has the advantage with the sun.

LICN: What is the difference between low goal and high goal polo?

CG: There is low goal, medium goal, and high goal. The way this is determined is they add up the team's handicaps. Up to 8 goals is considered low goal, 8 to about 16 goals is medium goal, and high goal is 20 up to 40. In New Jersey and parts of New York, the leagues are primarily 8 to 12 goals, and in Florida and California, it [ranges] from 6 to 26 goals.

- LICN -  
**Stat Box**

**Food**  
MG: Pizza  
CG: Wiener schnitzel

**Restaurant**  
Gerberding's: Huddy's - it's so convenient and it's good!

**Movie**  
MG: I like Adam Sandler movies. Anything that is funny, or action movies. CG: Legends Of The Fall

**Hobbies**  
CG: Ski. I also like to work on the farm here. It takes my mind off things.  
MG: Snowboarding. I like going to the beach and to the movies. In school my favorite classes were photography or video production.

(Top) The Gerberdings' gather round the fire, January 2005. (Left to Right): Carolina, Victoria, Dorothee, Maximilian, and Christoph. (Middle) Back in the Saddle Again: A 2 1/2 year-old Max gets a riding lesson from his dad at Brookview. (Bottom) Where's My Horse? Max is 3 and ready to ride with the big boys, even though the mallets are bigger than him. At Brookview Polo Club, Freehold.



DG: Most of the time we play low goal polo here.

CG: And in June, July, and August we travel to New York and Pennsylvania to visit other clubs to play against them. Weather is an issue here – especially playing in July and August – the heat and humidity are too much for the horses. May and June, September and October are the best conditions for playing here.

LICN: What equipment is needed?

CG: You have to wear a helmet, that's the only piece of equipment that you have to wear. We wear knee guards, high boots, and gloves. Some people wear goggles or a face mask. You also have to use your right hand for the mallet.

LICN: What are some of the plans for the future of Colts Neck polo?

CG: We want to attract more people to the games. We want to make more improvements to the field. Last year we put up little fences, and this year we hope to put up sideboards. Instead of using a chalk line, the ball bounces off the wall and doesn't go out. It makes it a much faster game.

LICN: And the Township has been welcoming?

CG: What's very nice is the township and Lillian Burry has been very supportive particularly to the Public Works. The key to a good field is that it needs to be cut very short, and they do a great job. They cut it once a week, and then they cut it the day of the game.

DG: It's really unusual to find a location like this, just one hour outside of Manhattan. Colts Neck Polo, The Trail Riders Club, these are additions to a town that make it sound more exciting. We're an equestrian town.

LICN: What would you tell people about polo that they may not know?

CG: One thing about polo, there's a misconception. It's really not snobby at all. It's a family atmosphere. Everyone is welcome. Families can come and picnic. From the beginning, we really encouraged people from town to come.



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE GERBERDINGS; FAMILY PHOTO: KATHLEEN HENNESSEY