

NACHO FIGUERAS

A BLESSED LIFE

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Nacho Figueras has a rare few days at home. He plans to spend it surrounded by his family, riding some of his home-bred ponies and looking over the building works of his new barn, which is more an architectural piece of art than a polo pony stable. His wife, photographer and former model, Delfina will be in the rose garden, his eldest son Hilario will be working on his polo swing and the Rolling Stones will be playing on the iPod, serenading the busy goings on at Casa Figueras. Doesn't it sound like the perfect ideal? Well for Nacho, this sanctuary (as he calls his home) isn't something that he gets to enjoy often enough, so he is savouring every moment.

If there was one polo player who could truly merit the word 'globe-trotting', it would be Nacho. When he's not playing the 20 goal in the Hamptons or in the UK for The St Regis Test Match (the game is happening as we go to press), he's shooting a new campaign for designer, Ralph Lauren with famed photographer Bruce Webber. As a brand connoisseur for the St Regis chain of hotels, he's flying to host an event at the Cognac Room in New York or supporting the hotel in Singapore and for his work with Prince Harry's charity Sentebale, he's out with the at-risk and orphaned children of Lesotho in Africa or raising money in a charity match in far flung corners of the globe. In short, his passport is used more often than the M4 motorway.

Travel is a way of life for any professional, but 6 goaler Nacho's commitments to his polo career and his endorsement roles, as well as his family, means he is on the road for many months of the year. He doesn't begrudge this aspect of his life though – far from it. He considers himself so fortunate to be able to travel the world doing what he loves: "I love to travel. I love to go to Lesotho, to travel to Rio to play a polo match for Sentebale, which raises a \$1million for them – I am very blessed that this is my life, my job. The most special time to me, is the time I spend with my family – I have four kids and an amazing wife – but I am in this fortunate position and think that it is very important to give back in anyway I can and to do everything to the best of my ability." If he wasn't so earnest, yet charming, you'd think he'd be too good to be true wouldn't you?



He first began to play polo aged nine, growing up on a farm in Vienticinco de Mayo, Argentina next door to his great friend, Lucas Monteverde and his family. Although he didn't fall in love with the sport instantly – "Lucas had been riding pretty much since he was born and I found it tough having such a good friend so much better than me!" – it wasn't until he was 14 and began to ride and play better, that he realised polo was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. "I love the game, the horses, the people; it took me a few years before I learnt to love it, but I couldn't imagine my life another way."

He credits his father as being very supportive, not letting him give up despite the family not coming from the usual Argentine polo background with access to numerous ponies and high goal family members. He had to work hard at school, but as a natural athlete, he proved to be quite the talented player, constantly striving to improve and riding as often as he could.

At 17, he got the opportunity to play in Paris and so began his long career of notching up air miles. For his first opportunity as a professional, he played with Hélié de Poutralès and lived in a cramped apartment in the Château du Marais. Nowadays, I imagine Nacho may jet into the fashion capital for a shoot for Ralph Lauren, but then, he was getting up at first light to be his own groom before playing matches. "It was a low-budget gig but it was great; I couldn't believe I was a professional player and also making a little bit of money, which was a whole other level of satisfaction!"

His early career was based mainly in Paris, Madrid and Sotogrande with a particular highlight playing for his country in The FIP World Cup alongside his friend Monteverde. "Having grown up with Lucas and been playing together for so long, it was incredible to both be picked to play for a country where there are so many players." Sadly the team was beaten by Brazil, but the experience was another rung on the ladder for the young Figueras.

In the late '90s he flew to the States to play in the less well-known locations of Georgia and Tennessee ("getting a real taste of American culture") before being picked up to play in the Hamptons, the coastal playground of chic Manhattan-ites where sun-filled weekends are a welcome respite from the madness of *Sex and the City* living. Slots in teams such as Peter Brant's White Birch gave him success and got him noticed – and not simply for his polo tactics on the pitch.

His introduction to working with Ralph Lauren – the global campaigns which grace the pages of *Vogue* and *GQ* and dominate billboards – came about through a relaxed dinner party where he was introduced to photographer Bruce Webber. Just as Ralph Lauren is an artist using cloth and design as his paint and canvas, Webber uses light – and beautiful models – to create photographs of great art. He and Lauren thought including a bona fide polo player such as Nacho within the ad campaigns would add integrity and be a great foil to their model of the

time, actress Penelope Cruz. 14 years later, the three still work on the campaigns, but what was it like for a polo player more used to dirty white jeans and t-shirts and only stopping for photographs when it was for a prize-winning presentation shot?

"To be honest, from the very beginning, the whole set up just clicked and has worked so well ever since. I was very lucky being able to work with one of the best photographers in the world and he said to me, 'Don't even think about it [posing for the camera], just be yourself. We want to see Nacho Figueras, the polo player, we don't want to see anyone else.' It was fun. I was this young guy who was having a good time whilst making a little bit of money that allowed me to buy better horses. Not for a second did I regret it. I was learning about a whole other world that didn't exist for me back then.

"I learnt a lot from Ralph, the man himself. I have a lot of respect for him as a person, as an entrepreneur, father and a husband. It has been an honour for me that he has thought that I am someone who can represent his brands for such a long time."

Figueras doesn't consider himself a model – "there are many guys who look like me out there" [Editor's note: *Where are they hiding please?!*] – but has always seen his collaboration with Ralph Lauren as a way to bridge the gap between his polo and his vision of introducing the sport to a greater audience.

Increasing public awareness of the sport has definitely been a high priority for him, but whilst he may be well-known for being a major draw at events such as The Veuve Clicquot Manhattan Classic played on Governors Island in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, his professional polo career has never taken a back seat. He has successfully combined an efficacious secondary career, which has worked alongside his athletic one; throughout it all, he has remained true to his roots in the game.

"My polo career has been mainly based in the US because of the opportunity to have a double season here; summers in the Hamptons and winters in Florida. I really embraced the country and I thought this was where I wanted to keep my organisation."

Nacho competed in the US high goal throughout the early 2000s with Neil Hirsch's Black Watch team playing, but also managing the set up and organising the team. Based in Palm Beach, a mere block from the high goal headquarters of the International Polo Club, the Black Watch team were one of the most formidable on the circuit – and the best dressed, with Ralph Lauren being the official kit suppliers. For three seasons, Facu and Gonzalito Pieres made up the team before the MacDonoughs came on board for a winter. The team worked well, reaching the Finals of The CV Whitney and The Gold Cup and the Semis of the coveted US Open, but as Nacho admits; "we got close a few times, but we couldn't seal the deal."

Patron, Neil Hirsch looks back fondly on those years in the high goal, with great memories of his long-standing pro; " Nacho is the consummate

gentleman and is an incredible spokesman for the game of polo. A first class guy, he has done a lot for exposure of the sport."

Figueras has three ways of looking at the game he loves so much; "First, as a sport; the love I have for the horses and the fun I have playing with my son. Secondly, I wish to promote the sport and help to put it in front of as many people as I can. And thirdly, and this is a very important one to me, is using polo as a platform to help people in need, and that's where my role as Sentebale Ambassador comes in. It's something that I am very proud of – to be able to use polo – which is sometimes seen as something that is slightly superficial – as a way to help those children in Lesotho or wherever they may be."

Having played with Prince Harry several times, Nacho was approached by the Prince and his Sentebale charity to take on a more senior role, than simply participating in charity matches. The charity, celebrating its tenth birthday, is committed to helping children in a land-locked area of Africa where the HIV virus has ravaged through the country meaning one in three children is an orphan. "My role is to raise awareness, money and to talk about the plight of Lesotho – who can argue with the wonderful things that Sentebale are doing? Attending high profile events, doing interviews, it's all an opportunity to talk about the important things, which Prince Harry and Prince Seeiso [the co-founder] are doing. It's a little grain of sand in terms of helping those children, but it may change their lives."

His life away from his philanthropic associations and mission to promote polo – 8,000 tickets for the next Veuve Clicquot Polo Classic sold out in seven minutes recently so it seems the polo publicity machine is working – is all about home. Images of Delfina and he rubbing shoulders with the A List may feature prominently on the pages of global papers, but his home life is much more simple. It's about time with Delfina and their four children, Hilario, Aurora, Artemio and Alba. Although as I've said, there's not much room in the calendar for downtime.

"I don't really need to take a break, because I love what I do. The whole family enjoys riding and being at the farm, so that's where we go. I have a huge polo pony breeding operation and riding and polo still feature so much in my downtime.

"My son, Hilario is 14 and loves to play, but he's too young to think about becoming a professional. Polo is a great way of life and if he embraces that, then I think he will enjoy it, but the most important thing to me is that he is happy.

"There is nothing more wonderful in life, than to do something that you love."

Well said.

