

KEEPING THE BALANCE

EDUARDO NOVILLO ASTRADA

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Eduardo Novillo Astrada leads quite the nomadic life; even more so than many of his fellow polo professionals. One week, he can be playing in The Argentine Open with La Aguada Las Monjitas at Palermo, the next he's in London, his favourite city, for a Jaeger-LeCoultre photoshoot. Other days he's in Venice for The International Film Festival with his wife, model-turned-photographer, Astrid Muñoz or collaborating with La Martina on a children's polo tournament. Then there's the rare downtime, when he can actually head home to the family base, La Aguada, to check in on the pony breeding operation and sit down for mate with his grooms.

He juggles the time spent with his three boys, Justo, Cruz and Lucio, with a professional polo career worthy of a former 10 goaler, which takes him on the usual treadmill rhythm of Europe-Argentina-America. He works with his long-term patron, the businessman Camilo Bautista, on the Las Monjitas team he has been a part of for nearly 15 years and honours his commitments as Brand Ambassador for both Jaeger-LeCoultre and La Martina, whilst also finding time for life away from the polo carousel.

In short, he's a busy man.

Therefore, I feel very fortunate that we've managed to find time to sit down and talk over espresso in Sotogrande. I'm conscious of his busy schedule, but find him to be relaxed and talkative as he tells me stories of growing up in a family of famous polo players and his interests away from the sport. He describes himself as 'constantly curious' and says that he is always interested in new projects or different experiences, whether that's joining forces with Jaeger-LeCoultre in designing a new watch or checking out a music concert. He's also quick to admit that, like most players, he's fiercely competitive and feels the losses more keenly than the wins.

"To be an athlete, you have to be focused," Eduardo tells me. "You are only at the top of your game for a short time in your life so you have to be committed. You have to pay attention to all of the details – from the strength of your horses, to ensuring you help a young player on your team. Because of that constant need for focus, I do try to take time out from polo, to do something else; so it is not all-consuming. Instead of staying at the barn for the sake of it, I like to do other things to take my mind away from the sport.

"Then I return to training refreshed and very focused on what I need to do. Two days before a game, I get nervous, even now. You learn how to control it better as you become more experienced, but I think the day you don't feel the nerves is the day that you stop caring. I always want to win. If I lose, I can't sleep the night after. When you win, it is only one tournament and then you move on. You can't relax for more than one moment as it's your job to win – and to always be ready to do so."

This resolution and drive has helped him achieve many of the polo world's greatest accolades. From winning The Gold Cup with the Schwarzenbach's Black Bears, to the ultimate triumph of winning The Argentine Triple Crown with his brothers in 2003, his role call of successes reads like a Wikipedia entry of high goal polo tournaments. Add to that, achieving a 10 goal handicap (he's currently on 9), wins of The US Open and (due to his British passport) aiding England to victory in the 2009 Westchester Cup, it's very evident that the focus has paid off.

As with many of the Argentine polo-playing families, his childhood sounds an ideal of galloping around bareback on spirited ponies with his brothers, Miguel, Javier, Ignacio and Alejandro and his sister, Veronica. He credits his grandfather and father as huge influences and shares with me his gratitude for the polo utopia they created. "It was a great environment to grow up in. They made everything possible for us to play polo. My father





was a good amateur player – one of the last to combine being a businessman with playing the high goal. He instilled in us the passion for the horses; the contact with these amazing animals is something I still love much more than the sport itself.”

His interest in polo really developed when he was 10-years-old. During a family summer holiday to Punta del Este in Uruguay, the young Eduardo witnessed a person drown which put him off swimming and the idea of a beach vacation. So each summer he would stay behind and live with the grooms on the farm, waking up early to ride all day and improve his polo. “Then my family and cousins would return and we would stick and ball for days, just stopping for siesta times and to swim. Those times with my brothers and cousins are amongst my earliest memories at La Aguada. It’s not that big, but it was the whole world to us then. We used to play hide and seek in the woods on the ponies and there was always someone breaking a leg or coming back with wounds – my parents were forever running to the hospital. Total pandemonium! It was a great childhood. And it is what we try to create for our children now.”

At 16, Eduardo reached 6 goals, but he didn’t view polo as a career. He played a great deal of rugby – nearly turning professional before the hereditary pull of polo, rekindled his interest – and studied economics at University, before going to work for his father. “I wasn’t into becoming a professional [polo player]. My brothers played full-time and were travelling, so I would stay in Argentina, work, manage the farm and then play with them when they returned. I would maybe play elsewhere for a couple of weeks – for instance I replaced Miguel when he broke his elbow in England – but I just didn’t see polo as a career for me back then.

“It wasn’t until I was about 28 that Javier convinced me to give playing professionally a try. There was an opportunity to play the 22 goal in England and so I said to my father that I wanted to go and find out how good I actually was – and that was that.”

In 2001, he flew to Europe and played the UK high goal with Javier in the Black Bears shirts of Urs Schwarzenbach’s team. By the following season, they had won The Gold Cup at Cowdray Park. It seems Javier’s encouragement was worthwhile.

I ask him whether he sees turning professional unusually late had a positive or negative effect on his career? “I missed a lot of years playing and improving, but I matured in other things and maybe as a result I see polo and the world outside of it more clearly. I cannot regret anything – all that I have done in my life has helped me to be where I am now.”

2003 was an exceptional year for the Novillo Astradas. They had played The Triple Crown series for a few seasons under the La Canada name, fielding three brothers and learning from a fourth experienced player such as Alfonso Pieres or Ernesto Trotz. They had taken beatings against mighty established teams such as Chapaleufu, but steadily progressed and improved. “I think it’s good to start like that – it makes you want it more,” comments Eduardo. “You learn so much and appreciate how much hard work it takes to win.” That dedication came to fruition when Nacho, Miguel, Javier and Eduardo fulfilled a dream in not only playing together, but winning The Triple Crown as a 34 goal team.

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“We were fortunate that our father influenced us right at the beginning and recommended that we played with an experienced player – that proved invaluable. And then that season [2003], we were going to play with Gonzalito Pieres but he decided he wanted to play with his brother – and we chose to do the same. We were lucky. We were doing things right by spending every penny we had on horses. The team played well and had fun and, as it was our first season playing together, we were relaxed as there was no great expectation. It was the first year we had decided to play as La Aguada, after the Club my grandfather founded, so to win under that name was just unbelievable and very special. My father couldn’t speak after the game – he was in tears.”

Eduardo also met Las Monjitas patron, Camilo Bautista at this early point of his professional career – a meeting, which would result in a successful partnership between pro and patron that is rarely seen in the sport. With handicap changes, new signings, polo-tics and passing fashions, it is quite unusual for professionals to last several seasons (let alone 15 years) with the same patron. Together they’ve forged a team, un-missable and unforgettable in the neon orange of the Las Monjitas colours, which has seen major success in the high goal in Sotogrande and Palm Beach.

“Camilo and I connected right from the beginning – and then of course we were very successful, which helps, but I think

the main thing is that we get on very well. We both like to plan ahead. It's not all about the success, but we have the same way of approaching things. We take a lot of care over the atmosphere that we want to create within the team. It's not all based on winning – but we both believe that a good atmosphere helps get the results.”

Their newest collaboration is the formation of the La Aguada Las Monjitas team, which Eduardo is currently captaining in The Triple Crown series. Having made the decision, as the eldest brother, to split and form a second team, this set-up is still competitive, but is also a showcase of the incredible horses, which he and Bautista have been breeding. It's also a young team of promising talent including Eduardo's brother Negro (Alejandro). “My brother is a great professional because he is a complete player in every aspect of polo,” Negro explains. “He is a ‘warrior’ on and off the field and will fight for every play until the end of the game. He plans and organises everything so well and this helps to minimise any error when he's playing. It's always fun to play with your brother and it's a privilege to play with someone of Eduardo's experience.”

Lucas James and Christian Laprida, two young players and friends of the Novillo Astrada family, complete The Triple Crown-playing line-up. 8 goaler, Lucas tells me his thoughts on his La Aguada Las Monjitas teammate. “It is a pleasure to play with Eduardo because he is one of the best players in the country,” says Lucas. “He has also had the opportunity to travel to many places around the world playing the best polo outside of Argentina. He gives you confidence and he helps you as much as he can. I learn something new from him after every match. Eduardo has given me an amazing opportunity to grow as a player and to get as much experience as possible playing the highest level of polo.”

Clare Milford-Haven, Eduardo's fellow Jaeger-LeCoultre Ambassador seconds Lucas' praise. “He is a very encouraging teammate. As a leading player, he is the consummate professional and always gives the best of his ability.” I go on to ask Clare why she also thinks Eduardo is such a great fit with the JLC brand. “I was very supportive of the decision as I felt he had all the right attributes – most importantly he has the ability to be interested in and talk about, other things than just polo! Apart from being one of the top players in the world and well-educated, charming (and good looking) he is also a lot of fun and the great thing about working with Jaeger-LeCoultre is that it is exactly that; it's not deadly serious, thank god! Astrid, his stunning wife, is also a brilliant asset and I always have a good time when they are around.”

Professional polo accolades and praise from fellow teammates aside, this hasn't been the easiest of years for Eduardo. Losing his brother, Javier to a long struggle with cancer was understandably

a bitter blow to the Astrada family. It is clear that Eduardo held his younger brother in very high esteem and talks about him with a great deal of respect. “Javo knew from the time he was seven or eight-years-old that he wanted to be a professional. When we were younger, I would go out and party, but he would go back to the farm every weekend to stick and ball. He was always supremely focused. He played with Carlos [Gracida] and Gonzalo [Pieres Snr.] at Ellerston when he was 18 so he learnt from the very best. He was a crazy guy about polo; he was determined that his ponies would have the perfect feet; that he would have the best tactics for each game; he would analyse the opposition, analyse us. He was very progressive for his time, obviously an influence from his time spent with Carlos and Gonzalo.

“At the beginning of my career, I was very relaxed, but I am finding that I am becoming more like Javier every day. He worked hard and was determined. The Astradas are not so talented with the ball, but we work hard to make the team work – that is the strongest aspect of our game. And Javo was very much responsible for that.”

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“Eduardo has obviously been through a tough time in losing his brother,” continues Clare. “I have greatly admired his strength in coming to terms with this huge tragedy and the depth of his faith and closeness to his family are values which are not so common these days.”

And now, Eduardo is looking to the future – and not just close to home with his current team, but the players of tomorrow. “Projects such as the La Aguada Youth Tournaments at Guards are important to me. I want the English and

Argentine players to know each other and to create opportunities for them both in the future. Maybe it is my way of trying to give something back to polo – and not just being out there criticising everything that people do. I think it is good to get involved.

“I have been inordinately lucky to do a job which I love, to have contact with the horses, with the wonderful people, to travel to amazing places. It's not going to last forever so I try to appreciate it.

“I think the secret in life, is to try and see everything in a positive way. Sometimes you make mistakes, but you learn. I see my life as a fantastic opportunity and I have to consider that a blessing.”

I wouldn't say my usual interviews cover topics as varied as polo and proverbs, but as Eduardo leaves to head back into his busy life, it would seem that he's found balance amidst the varied nomadic lifestyle he leads.

