

Prelude

This story is a slightly fictionalized account of a spring season at an equestrian facility in Southern California in 2005. The names refer to real people, and all the adventures, and mis-adventures, actually happened, as accurately as I could understand them and get them down on paper.

It reflects my many years working and competing in sports, from my childhood pony Trixie, to baseball, basketball, golf, tennis, and finally polo.

There are three main threads in the story. First, how polo is played.

Second, how groups of people come together in a common project, such as a team, or, in this instance, at a facility, with several different goals and hopes, somehow working together to get something out of a group effort.

And third, how this collective effort can be seen against the larger backdrop of the area, its history, and what many different people, in different epochs, have done to make it the place that it is. Hence the title Conquistador, which refers to the original Spaniards, leaving Mexico City in the early 16th century, heading out into the southwestern desert in search of gold.

Our hero, a real hero, incidentally, led a group of polo enthusiasts not through the desert, but out onto the polo field, in search of something dearer than gold, a skill at polo, and more, success at making polo be for them what they hoped it to be. So, dear reader, pull on your boots, slip on your helmet, reach for your favorite mallet, and spend 200 pages reliving an exciting season on and off the field, with every hope that at the end of the book, you'll think of yourself as a knowledgeable and skillful player, and, if not quite that, you'll know where to get it. You'll be, in short, a Conquistador. Read on.

CONQUISTADOR IA

"It was one tough gig," is all I ever heard him say about his time in 'Nam. He was already Back by '65, had been there in the advisor days, which didn't mean they weren't trying to shoot your sorry ass off. At least that's the way he put it. He had come back, didn't mention the Marines much, and settled into the family business. Rather, the other family business. The family in the valley had all worked on the railroad, the Southern Pacific, or S @ P, as in Shut up and Push. It was brother Dave who'd gone into horses, first as a barn grunt, then a groom, and by 17 an actual trainer, one of the youngest in the valley, some said the best. Salvo, or Sal, had been the next to take it up, and it was an unstated dispute which of them was the most gifted. Nobody else cared, and the horses seemed to like them equally well.

It seems like a million years ago, but it was only 40. A lot of it was easy then. Easy to get married, easy to have kids, easy to play 3 games a day on weekends, 24 chukkers in two days, things he couldn't even think of doing now. It hurt him just to sit in the sun on a bright morning in the door of

his barn with a cup of coffee. Although it wasn't really his barn. It was Polo Puro's, and he just rented it for the season and rode a few horses over the summer at Guido's good pleasure, which usually meant no fee until the hunter-jumpers were back in the fall. Then the meter would start running again. And Guido would feel entitled to verbally box his ears a couple of times, usually some small thing, just to let him know that he hadn't paid for those insufferable summer months. And usually it wouldn't be him but his wife Cally who would do the ears boxing. The real boss.

Every year he would say "That's it. I don't have to take this." But he did have to take it, especially since he was no longer welcome at the club, over some dispute about tie-rails. Maybe it was just a pretext, but still he didn't know where else he'd go. His own place had gone in the divorce. Besides, even there, in his glory days, he'd had no field, so it was always load, haul, unload, tack, untack, load, haul, on game days, whereas here he could ride them right out onto the field and play. And there were some decent players around, good pick-up games, and still a few real clients and a few horse sales and rentals. He was making ends meet, only just. It took some remembering to go back to when he'd actually made nice money at this.

And there'd been a lot of injuries, far worse than 'Nam, where he'd come through with one long scar on his forehead from a bullet that got there a little too quick. Just lucky. He was running out of a clearing to some cover in the woods and missed his date with destiny when the bullet that left a scar on his forehead got there just before he did. No, these work-related injuries, at least so far, had not been do or die. They were far worse. A left arm he could no longer raise past shoulder height, a bruise on the left side that never did go away, so that now, carrying the absolute maximum of 240 pounds, there was enough surface showing on the outside of his leg that it really did look like Argentina. And last season, while he and Johnny the farrier were arguing about something, one of his green mares had pawed him with her off-fore so hard that his whole head looked purple-to-black for a couple of months, and the sight in his left eye never did come back. This wouldn't usually keep him from playing, they permitted one-eyed players. Lots of guys had lost an eye, either hit by a ball or by a mallet. More than one had lost one of his just from thumping the ground too hard. So he could still play. But what was the point? If he ever told anyone it would change things. Only now he was so out of the main action that no one was watching his play close enough to notice. But it worried him.

On this bright spring morning, with the season winding down and enough money in the bank to make it through until fall, especially counting on a few sales through the summer, which usually happened, he'd be O.K. He was O.K. The summer sales were always flukes, but no harm in counting on one or two. He liked to say he was traveling light. He had a nice rental down in the Mafia condos, Las Casuelas still turned out a mean posole, and the smallest casino in the Valley was just around the corner, in case he was feeling a little flush and wanted to bet a few hands of black jack. He liked it when he bet, because it meant there was a little optimism creeping back into the equation, always a good sign. "Attitude is 90% of it."

As he turned his good eye to the two pens of horses right in front (his whole life at the moment), he could write one up right now as his summer project. He had a summer of riding to do, hoped they wouldn't kill him, and would be satisfied if he could "get into em" by fall, meaning a pretty good handle, stops and starts, rollbacks, and stick and balling with a little speed. Traffic, defense, the overall scrum, would come in the fall with the other riders. Best case, several nearly made horses in the fall. He could always pick up more in Arizona, or in Mexico, if he could somehow get back in the good

graces of the Acklands, richies with ranches on both sides of the border, a convenient way to bring horses in from Mexico.

The other pen, these here on the right, was the chance to have a nice summer. The gray mare was a cert. He'd sell her right away. Favorito, you son-of-a-bitch. Why are the best ones the iffiest? His stifle was better, but he still had never delivered. He just promised. Marked down for quick sale. He was such a looker someone would buy him out of vanity and inherit the hope chest. Studley, he probably wouldn't sell. He'd even pass on the good life just to keep him, but he had to be kept in a stall, and was so fresh when he got out that he could no longer say, as he used to, "I put women and kids on this horse. Get him out there and ride him."

And that brings us to Muley. Helluva horse. The only thing muley about him was his stubbornness and slightly oversize ears. If he could only see again, and really play, he'd love to put him in there. If he had the line, he was like a freight train, or, better, a fine tackle. Just snug that shoulder in there, a little bit in front, and your shoving match is won. Swing away and don't miss because he sure will give you a legitimate shot at it. He normally wouldn't sell this horse, and he still might not. But he could use the money, and

wasn't certain to need him for play in the fall, at least unless the whole program changed drastically.

With things taking on this rosy hue, he noticed out of the corner of his good eye the dusty gray of the one car he didn't want to see. He knew it was coming, after yesterday's square off. Only, not so soon. Here came Marisa, as in Marisa-You're-such-A-Piece-A. And indeed she was. Just about the best looking woman in, or rather around, polo today. And that was saying something. Between the old money babes of all ages, the sun-tanned jocks and grooms and escape artists, there was certainly no shortage of pulchritude. In fact, it was one of the reasons he'd stayed in the game. Friday nights in the cantina, if you weren't there to get laid you'd simply missed the purpose of the evening. Still, Marisa-Piece-A was among the best, small, even petite, but with everything just about where it ought to be, set off with a long, graceful neck and head-set which gave a touch of regal. Still, he didn't want to see her. This was a showdown he couldn't figure out, and yet couldn't resolve.

The problem was Jack, the young gun. Marisa was his Mom, Dad was nowhere to be seen, had disappeared long ago, and had had the

thoughtlessness not to leave a nice big trust fund to pay for his son's polo. In short, they couldn't afford it. They had one old mare that they hoped to breed out of, and he'd even donated Studley's stud fee.

But they lived at Polo Puro, and Jack had unofficially played out of his barn since long before it had been his. He'd cadged horses from anyone who had them. And when he took the barn over, guess who showed up first thing? Our good friend Jack. And, sure enough, he helped, mostly he rode sets, but mainly just horses he was interested in. The stall cleaning and tack maintenance didn't go as well, and there was always an edge on, like he was doing you a favor, just being in your barn. No mistake about it, he was a gifted young player. But he wasn't getting paid to play, not yet, and not one word had passed his lips about "someday," which would at least help. So he hadn't exactly fired him yesterday. He just pointed out that he had no income outside of these horses, and if he couldn't get hired and pay out of his earnings, he'd at least have to take on something like a debt until he did. His own son Kim had started out that way, had gotten out on his own, and made good on his debt. It was like a student loan. Anything else was just so much hand job. And as things had been going, he had a sneaking suspicion this was what they had in mind, exactly zero. "We knew

him when and thank you very much." The only question in his mind as the Ford SUV pulled up, bringing a cloud of dusts with it, was could he keep from getting so distracted by Marisa-Piece-A and not make some dumb agreement that he'd hate, and not even be able to live up to.

"What's the good word?" Solid opener.

"Did you fire Jack yesterday?"

"How could I fire him. I never hired him."

"Well, he's been riding for you, riding your horses, now you tell him you're not going to mount him any more."

"I merely explained to him, as I've tried to explain to you, that these horses earn me my living. I can't have someone riding them and not paying me."

"Who else is riding them?"

"That's not the point."

"Look, we're both trying to do the same thing. I'll take care of everything else, and you take care of the polo."

So he just looked at her for a second, then shifted his gaze out to the one pen of salable horses. He thought, "I could just sell'em right out from under them." He also thought, everything is just where it ought to be with Marisa-Piece-A except between the ears. This is one silly bitch. Still, he didn't have a real answer himself. He didn't want to ride the greenies himself, and Jack had been doing some of that, although he would, if it came right down to it. What to say?

"What about Monty?"

"What about him?"

"He's got some nice made horses in the next barn that nobody's riding very much. Maybe that would be a start. Then you all won't incur some debt to me that'll threaten our friendship, Jack can keep playing, and we'll have time to look around for another solution. Monty likes Jack, is always joking

about Jack the Field Manager, or Jack the Commissioner. He likes the way he's conscientious about getting chukkers together.

"No fees. I can't afford any rentals. He has to just let him ride them."

"Knowing Monty, he'll want them to wear some special leg wraps or something, just so everyone knows they're his horses. You know, vanity.

"You know I don't want a brawl. But we just have to keep Jack playing. And, we can't afford it until he starts making some money, at least at 1-goal level."

He was starting to think she wasn't so screwy after all. This was about the first time she'd made any sense on the whole question of polo finances.

And it was an unusual situation. The kid was certainly an out-of-the-ordinary talent. Usually, it was just pay or don't play. But this kid had something to offer to the game. Although they still intended to take plenty from it also. They obviously had visions of making money, marrying rich, all kinds of silly notions. "So how shall we leave it?"

"He can keep riding out of here, temporarily. And I'll call Monty and see what he says."

"Just about this time Johnny the horseshoer pulled up, bringing another cloud of dust and providing everyone with a graceful exit, something of a specialty with him.

"Just remember, I'm not in the business of giving away free Ferraris. Nobody's giving me one. In fact, I'd look good in one. Red, maybe. For this thing to work, it's got to work. You have to be realistic, and Jack 's got to be realistic. The world doesn't owe him a string of horses just because he can play."

Somewhere in this last declamation Marisa-Piece-A had gotten in her car and left, taking her considerable charm with her.

He thought, "Too bad we have to be hooking up through this imponderable problem, the oldest in the world, wanting something and not being able to have it. She's a damned good-looking woman."

"Did you and your mistress get it straightened out."

"She's not my mistress. And we surely didn't get it straightened out.

They're going to keep wanting to play, I'm going to keep needing to get paid, and the world is going to keep on being a gnarly son-of-a-bitch. I told her I'd call Monty."

"That'll be interesting. He's as tight as Ned's hat band."

"True. A long-term free loan just doesn't sound like him. But, he likes Jack, and, he's making so much money on his big law case he may not be so tight. Plus his horses need riding."

"How about Studley?"

"I think they're pretty firm. Check his right rear." It sounded like asking for air in a tire.

This was not why he was in it, to do business, to be diplomatic, making deals. But it was necessary.

On the phone, "Say, Monty, Sal, what goes?"

"I just had a talk with Marisa. She can't pay for horses for Jack, said some silly shit about you take care of the polo, I'll take care of the rest. Can you believe it? Like, what am I getting out of this? Anyway, I told her I'd call you and see if he could ride your horses."

"So what's the rate?"

"You're not listening. The rate is zero. Nada. They want you to give them a shiny new Ferrari. At least until next season."

"No kidding. It's breathtaking, in a way. What the hay. But they've got to wear my wraps."

"I thought so. At least you'll get an ad for your horses out of it. I'll tell Jack to call you and get the drill on your horses?"

"Yeah, that's fine. What else is going on?"

"Doin' O.K. The season's really over. Sell a few, ride a few. My overhead's way down. But it's O.K. on Jack . He won't ride your horses too hard. And we'll push the ball a little further down the field."

And so the solution was found, at least for a while. Jack had horses to ride, Marisa could keep her son in polo, Sal wasn't getting ripped off, and Monty, who was too busy being rich to ride his own horses, was more of a patron, and also getting his horses the work they needed. It wasn't long term. But it was something.

The coffee hour was over. There were horses to ride. I'd like to start with that gray mare, but she needs the least work of all. Let's show some discipline and get out there on one of the greenies. It's time to build some confidence, he thought, and that's by ridin' a lot. Taking a halter from the gate, he stepped into the left pen. As stiff and sore as he was, it didn't matter which horse he rode. He'd get'er done.

CONQUISTADOR 2

As Marisa-Piece-A drove back around to her place, she had the temporary satisfaction of keeping her talented son in the game. But it wasn't pretty. His dad had played, but had managed to lose his money on the day they met. something about a stop-loss order. "I was fishing for the bottom on UVN, knew it wasn't at 24, but thought we were close. Mr. Dufus Broker suggested a stop-loss order and it never occurred to me that the stock would fall out of bed on weak earnings, and I'd get sold out at 16. Now no shares. He didn't even have the presence of mind to buy me back in.

So a little more than 60% of his capital was out the window with what could have been a real nice play, ride it back to 31, instead of figure out how to tighten down and live off what was left. The glamorous couple had stayed together all of 4 years, had two kids, starting with the talented Jack, then terminally cute Brooke that no one knew what to do with. She spent her days inventing tomboy games for herself, dancing around in the driveway, while Mom and son focused on the big problem, and Dad held onto a spot

as Recreation Director somewhere on the coast, sending money when he could. It helped keep them going, but made no pretense at helping with the polo. That was serious money, which was a long time ago now.

Rather than go directly home, she hung a right and drove down the palm-lined drive to the other barns, sometimes called the Ritz, also, because there the hunter-jumpers held forth, barn Q. It was virtually empty now. But her new foal by Studley was out back and she could check on her. Sure, it was just one foal, and was 5 or 6 years from being a real horse, if everything went well. But Studley was outstanding, and the little chestnut filly impressed everyone with her size and strength. They were thinking Girl-Secretariat.

As she stopped by the pens, something didn't look right. There was a commotion down at the end and she went to investigate. Ramon and Esteban, usually a couple of pretty good grooms when they weren't drunk, which was virtually every day about 20 minutes after the evening feed, had a horse in the last pen, pretty well out of sight unless you were looking, and were whacking it with manure rakes. This could only be one thing, she thought. Gratuitous violence on some horse who'd flunked out of polo and

was on its way to the knackers. Without even looking at the horse, she grabbed a halter from a nearby pen and went straight in. She froze Ramon with a look, and he sheepishly said, "It don't matter, He'll be gone in an hour." "Like hell he will," she answered. The old horse was so frightened it took a minute to get to him in a corner and get a halter on him. She didn't know him, or anything about him. It just hit her on a soft spot, with all the hassle they were going through to get horses, here was one that was being thrown away. "Hees half-lblind. No sirve." Probably true, she thought. But there was no going back now. Even if he was useless, as he no doubt was, she'd committed to saving him.

She led him down to an empty pen and just stood there talking to him, trying to calm him down. He was trembling, exhausted, and she could see that he was blind in his right eye. He nearly flattened her when she stepped around to his right and he whirled to keep her in sight with his left eye. She filled up the water tub, left a flake of hay in the corner, and closed the gate. Who knows how this would turn out, but it temporarily got her mind off the larger problem, and redirected her underused motherly instincts to a more immediate pay-off. At least she'd kept the old guy from being put down today. If he had to be sold for meat, she'd give Ramon the

money, or at least some of it. Today seemed to be about halves. Half-blind, half the money, half satisfactory solution to the horse problem.

Meanwhile, back on the other side of Polo Puro, Johnny the horseshoer was going about getting Studley out of his stall to look at his back right. It was a little loose, but it wouldn't take much, one, maybe two nails. And Sally was bringing in his first greenie of the day to tack up.

"This one from Arizona? From the mystery source?"

"Yessir. They sprout by magic. Some say they burst out of a cactus."

'Bullshit. More likely ole' Ray Graves at Paradise Valley.'

"Don't go telling my secrets. Besides, it's not where they come from. It's what you can get out of them."

This one in particular was a very nice mare, solid bay, not a spot of white on her, which he liked. A bit short-coupled, also good, and seemed to have a nice disposition. But beauty is as beauty does. we'll just have to

see. Nowadays, just getting a saddle on was almost more work than the riding. With a heave he got his stock saddle on her. Long experience had taught him to be careful now, reaching under for the cinch. If they were going to cow-kick you, it was generally now. So far, so good. Most of these track horses had good ground manners, but you could never be too sure. And he sure wasn't going to ride any more greenies in an English saddle. That showing-off stuff was strictly for the younger guys. He walked his left hand up her shoulder, he could no longer just lift it, and set the girth. The V.A. was supposed to help with a torn rotator cuff from a fall last Christmas. Some present. But they told him to exercise it and it might come around. No way he could afford to just fix it. So for now he was stuck with walking his left arm up with his hand.

She tacked up real nice and seemed quite sensible when he stepped off the mounting block onto her. "En los manos de Dios," he muttered under his breath. His personal incantation every time he mounted a horse, just to remember that he was on an animal that survives by fleeing. There was something about getting on a horse, any horse, that still thrilled him. Without any of the mystagoguery of some of the new wave horse books, it

was a mystical moment."We'll just walk around, take the pressure off," he thought, " get to know this girl."

There was also the thrill of what might be. Day in and day out, you were a good bet to get a nice horse. It was a lot of what he was good at. Picking them. Going on looks, their demeanor, and that little extra. An intuition. This one might be special. Most were good, a few better than good, faster, lighter, easier. Even seeming to learn the game the way a human does. And a few flunked. Couldn't take the bumps, didn't like the start and stop. They usually went to charreadas, roping or cutting horses, or simply on out to ranch work. There was no pressure walking across pastures to pick up cows.

By now they were out to the front of the barn, starting to walk around the track outside the field. The one thing he'd learned long ago was to do lots of walking. If a horse had a problem, it was usually that it was too hot and couldn't relax. It would go directly from a walk into a canter. Even a gallop. That was trouble. Hell, they could all run. The young guys never seemed to notice this. You're trying to get that granny gear, walk, walk, walk, then ease them up into a slow trot. If they go too fast, pulling, surging, then you

pull them back down and walk them. As she was walking around, he could see she was paying him no attention whatsoever. He was just "sneaking a ride." That was O.K. They'd get together later. For now, he was just letting her feel comfortable with him on her back, which was already a miracle. He was exactly where a predator would want to be, on her back. It would take some slow work before she could know that all he wanted to do is cluck her for a slow trot, and not sink teeth into her neck or claws into her sides. This man-horse connection was an old one. He had no patience with the fads, the bells and whistles of riding, because they always seemed to short cut just what he was doing now, riding along at a walk, paying close attention to her, even if she was ignoring him, wishing to escape. It was real work, whether it looked it or not.

And here was his West. We were down to 80 acres, instead of eighty sections, and he didn't own those. He only rented the use of them. Those acres were worth about a thousand times what they had been bought for 50 years ago. The owners had already turned down a huge offer for them, several million. No doubt they thought to get more as PGA West crept further east. A far cry from the old cattle barons, buying land far better than this for 50 cents an acre, and having to touch bankers for that. This land,

pure desert, hadn't brought \$10 per acre in the '20's and '30's, but that was before irrigation, golf, and development. No doubt the big yellow machines would show up here too, flatten the meager improvements in a day or two, and set about fashioning a Disneyland of sculpted fairways, kept green with water from Idaho. And he'd have to look for his West further east, if he was still in it. But in the meantime, this would still be his range to ride, his adventure, as it had always been.

2 laps, 3 laps, still watching her, left hand firmly on his safety strap, a few gentle stops and easy departs. "Just get this girl to like me, to like working. We'll build that bond. And it won't be Hollywood. I'll make her love me," he thought, which translated as "I'm beginning to love her." You couldn't be in this without loving them. Not some soupy thing, not giving them nicknames. And you could keep that hard exterior. It was, after all, a world of tough men. But his one special gift was the soft feeling he had for them. He was alone, with just about nothing to rely on, but for them it was so much worse. They had nothing. It was in this heart going out to them, in his determination to help them, to give them a life, especially since they'd failed on the track, that brought them back to him, that made them Sally horses. It had once been almost a trademark. Maybe he could make it one again.

Five laps, one hour, once around the dance floor, more or less. One ride. I don't know if she's that much of a sweetie, but she may be. And it certainly doesn't hurt to think so.

School is O.K., especially when you have to go in only every two weeks for one hour to turn in work, check out books, and get new assignments. Jack was sprawled on the couch in the living room, finishing a chapter on Earth Science. He'd done B work all year, and expected the last month to be easy, constellations through the year, the phases of the moon, the seasons. On his last visit to high school, Mr. Pyrtle had made a drawing on the board which showed a band of stars, the sun in the center, with the Earth going around just inside the band and the moon near it, an arrow indicating its orbit. Not a planetarium. That would have to wait for college. But helpful. The book suggested trying to see the passage of the sun and moon and stars as a function of the earth's rotation. No way he could do that. Pyrtle even said he didn't. It was real astronomers who could feel the stability of the sun and the movement of the earth, and not vice versa. All that getting up at sunset to look out at the stars from a moving platform could change

your perspective. They were the only ones who really lived in a Copernican world. For everyone else, those first steps of science might as well not have happened. Everyone still lived on a flat, motionless earth, with the sun moving across the sky everyday.

For Jack it was different still. His sun, moon and earth was the polo field, the game, maybe especially the ball, which he was unusually adept at sending on high, arcing flights. Good hitters in baseball, good golfers, are rare. But rarer than hens teeth are those who can send a polo ball high into the air, struck from a horse at a flying gallop. Probably the most difficult thing in sports, and also, ironically, the oldest. Polo was an old game, and the special skill to play it well was still the same. In that sense, it had hardly changed at all. For Jack it hadn't come suddenly. It never did. No matter how well you rode, no matter how soon you started in, it took some time to get it all together. Really sending it especially depended on bringing the mallet into the ball just when the horse throws its weight forward onto its far front leg, the last to strike the earth in that stride. All that weight coming down timed just with the stroke on the ball concentrated an awesome force and produced an amazing effect, the ball flying high and far through the air. It was a mystery if you couldn't do it, and a precious possession if you

could. Jack knew when he first started getting the ball up off the ground with long, clean hits, and he had been doing this for several years, since the age of 12-13, that he would be rich. In fact, he was already rich. In the hierarchical world of the kids who played, he was placed far above where his money, or family position, or looks or charisma would have permitted, all because he was at least as good at striking a polo ball as the rest. He also rode well, and was beginning the little showman tricks that good players have to have, back shots with air, picking the ball up off the ground, even carrying it, bouncing it off the mallet for a few strides in the air. What's valuable is what no one else has.

If he had not had this skill, this gift, he would probably still have hung in there and tried to be part of the game. Plenty did. But because he did have this gift, he knew that he would play. This certainty was the sun of his personal orbit. His Mom would have hung in there just out of vanity, determined to be part of something that lifted her and her children out of the well-heeled mediocrity of just about everyone they knew. But this made things different, and made the effort to stay in the game less vain, less affected, and gave it the tone of a determined, creative effort. They were working on a masterpiece, like the stonecutter who proceeds slowly,

carefully, and with unstoppable determination to deliver a beautiful gem from its hiding place within the stone. And Polo Puro, its field, that barn which had been Christian's, and Merdad's, and which was now Sally's, contained the tools with which to cut this rough stone. They were going to hang, they were an army on campaign, not to be stopped, or so they thought.

Into this equation of determination fit this afternoon's effort in Earth Science. It was a part, though a small part, of the program. It was correspondence high school which enabled Jack to be out on the field when other kids were milling around aimlessly in the halls of high school. He could have made much more of his freedom. In fact, he could have played, or at least ridden, all day. If he did, there would never have been a showdown with Sally because his value would have been indisputable. As it was, he could very nearly have gone to high school and played as much as he did anyway. But, without flaunting it, it was special to lay out, to play polo. He had something to hold onto.

Sally's gift was different. He'd never been an awesome ball striker. But he was an awesome hustler, and sometimes, driving out of a scrum with the

ball in front, keeping it out there with deft touches as he drove toward goal, either all alone or in determined, defensive traffic, his connection with his horse, which made his will his horse's will, had been awesome, centaurian. He had been a 100%er, a real player. Nobody who'd ever been on the field with him, with or against, had doubted that, even the gold-platers, the high-dollar Argentines and Mexicans who fronted top teams.

So we were all on the same page. We'd all seen great polo, knew what it took, and here on the cusp, as one polo sun rested on the Western mountains, another was rising in the East. It would bear no hurrying, like the stonecutter who knows not to try for too much, too quickly. With the contention, the negotiations, the near-brawls and almost falling-outs, there was something happening, and everyone was a part of it. We had a determined woman, a gifted son, a hardened old pro looking at it all with his one good eye, and on the far side of the field, a sleeper, an unknown quantity, the one horse who could make it all come true. The best, dandiest, slickest horse is so much peanut-butter compared to the one who can. He may not be needed for the actual campaign. But for that one defining moment, which fixes in everyone's mind the undeniable fact, he is irreplaceable. He's still dripping with sweat, his knees still trembling, for

he's been to the very edge of the cliff, and in his equine brain, he knows it. But he's their boy, the one the whole project depends on, and with good luck they'll figure this out.

Jack tossed his Earth science book on the coffee table and pulled on his low-cut tennis shoes. Time to walk over to the barn. He always took the shortcut, down a little alley between two paddocks, through a hole in the outside hedge, duck under the rail inside the track, across the field, and he was there. Sal had just put away the bay mare. And liked her. That gave him a pleasing demeanor as Jack walked up the aisle of the barn.

"Didn't get that tack done yesterday." The best defense is a good offense. Even though he felt good after his first ride, and he was working, he was in no mood to lighten up. Sure, the kid was good, but nobody ever went anywhere with gifts. If he could only do one thing for him, it would be to get him over this attitude, to turn him into a professional. It took an old hand to see that he'd really done nothing to be able to hit a ball so well. It just happened. He just could, like the thousands who couldn't. In fact, if you assume, as everyone in polo assumed, that every single human being on earth would play polo if they could, for them it was just like the millions, the

billions, who couldn't. Like the pretty girl. It's easy, and if she can't be made to earn something, apart from her beauty, she will never accomplish anything.

"I had to get back early. Homework."

"Don't give me that. You just don't like to do tack."

"True, I don't. And why should I have to?"

"You just don't get it." He was rising to the challenge, putting some pressure on. "If you don't work at this, it won't be yours. This polo that you're playing now, I don't know whose it is, but it's not yours. And you know why?

Because you haven't bought it. You haven't paid anything for it. I want you to own it. There are going to be tough times. Times you can't imagine. And unless it's yours, bought and paid for, it will all go away. You haven't been around this game for 40 years, like I have. Haven't seen so many gifted people get out of it, from injuries, or money, or women, or whatever. And in every single case, they got out of it not because they wished to. of course they wanted to stay in. But it wasn't theirs. You understand me? (He liked to

turn the heat up, to demand a response, which would never come, at least explicitly.)

Jack wordlessly went into the tack room, got out an English saddle, the young, fearless star's prerogative, set it on a saddle rack outside, and headed toward the green horse pen.

Sal had been at the barn exactly three hours, for a cup of lukewarm coffee, for an unwished for confab with a confused, ambitious, determined woman, a mounted survey of the vanishing west, and a squareoff with the young gun. He was up, ready for one more ride before lunch. "If you don't take the chestnut, then I will," he taunted. They had agreed the weedy chestnut would be the toughest nut to crack. He was crowing now, like an old rooster. "I can ride anything in the pen." It was great sport. He'd even spring for lunch. It was the old scene, but it was also the new scene. Something was happening. He wasn't sure what. His left shoulder was even working, sort of, and things didn't look so bad out of his one eye.

Jack walked back with a smirk on his face, leading the weedy chestnut. So that makes it easier. "Guess it's the dun horse for me. And don't forget the

tack you didn't do yesterday. Just because we put off doomsday doesn't mean you don't have any more work to do. And call Morley this evening. He said something about giving you a nice, shiny red Ferrari." Leaving Doug tacking up the chestnut, he walked out to the green horse pen. Before going in, he stood there for a moment, arms on the top rail, enjoying the moment. They'd all dodged a bullet, just like he had in Nam. He knew they couldn't pay him, but neither could he support them, and they all wanted to keep it going. And they would. Taking a halter off the fence, he stepped into the pen and walked toward the dun horse. "Come here, you good-looker. Submit to the touch of a master."

