

# IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE FIELD?

*From Polo To Puccini, Matt Richardson Is A Man Of Passions*

**D**R. MADISON RICHARDSON—MATT, AS he is known throughout the polo community—has a reputation for hospitality, particularly to visiting players. So the banquet he was hosting on April 29 last year for some visiting Indian polo friends was pretty much a routine operation.

But Richardson also happens to be at the top of a very specialized branch of medicine, otolaryngology, or head and neck surgery. His forte is reconstructive surgery, especially on cancer patients. So it wasn't much of a surprise when, halfway through dinner, the doctor's beeper sounded. Happens all the time. A local neurosurgeon whom Richardson had operated on just months before needed help with a particularly dicey case.

What an understatement. The patient waiting at the hospital was a truck driver who, according to OR personnel, had gotten "beat up." Richardson didn't find out until the next day that the man's name was Reginald Denny—the white truck driver whose shortcut through a black neighborhood at the height of the Los Angeles riots ended with his head getting bashed in, immortalized on a video that appeared *ad nauseam* on national TV.

Richardson had seen on the news what was happening to the city in the wake of the first verdict in the Rodney King beatings, had seen the dull red glow of flame and smoke fill the sky as he travelled the freeway from the Los Angeles Equestrian Center to Daniel Freeman Memorial Hospital. When he arrived he found that Denny didn't have much of a face left to reconstruct, which tried Richardson's skills to the utmost. As the news media descended in the days before Denny had sufficiently recovered to speak to them, Richardson found himself not only the attending physician, but Denny's representative to the press. He wound up giving updates and interviews as the cameras lingered over the fact that in the biggest, ugliest story of racial violence in decades, the man who pulled Denny through to a chance for a normal life was...black.

"I kind of got drawn into it," Richardson recalls. "I think I gave

nine national interviews. As soon as Reggie could speak, I stepped back." Inevitably, this kind of publicity on such a matchhead topic brought its share of hate mail and threatening phone calls from fellow blacks; Richardson says he was more frightened on behalf of the human condition than he was for himself. Perhaps it would have speeded the city's healing to know that the black surgeon and the white victim developed a rapport that transcended the medical relationship—they still keep in touch.

Nor is this friendship unusual. People from all strata of life, and polo players from around the world, are loath to lose touch with Matt Richardson once they get to know him. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that, for all his gregariousness and generosity, the person Richardson finds most important to stay in touch with is himself.

"I once designed a coat of arms for myself, with a Latin motto and everything," he says. The motto, translated, reads, "Man, know thyself." And polo is one of the many avenues he's explored on this quest for self-discovery. "It's impossible to be something you're not on a polo field," Richardson says. "Something about the game rubs you just raw. You think you know someone, and then they strap on a polo helmet, and you see where they *really* live. It's a wonderful way to know a human being—and, of course, yourself. You can take it to the point where you look right inside your soul."

Among the things inside Richardson's soul is the notion that "Combat—healthy, vigorous competition—has a romantic appeal. It must be something primal." Whatever it is, Richardson's intensity on the field sometimes rattles his opponents, but he's not a man to do anything halfway—thus his schedule is full and his days crowded with challenge. "The only time I get to talk with him at all is on his car phone," laughs longtime friend Suzanne Peika, for many years publicist at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. She recounts an evening at LAEC when Richardson played in the curtain-raiser match, announced the main event, stitched up an injured player and then hosted the visiting Indian team at a dinner afterward. It sounds like a Walter Mitty fanta-

BY SAMANTHA HAMILTON



SYLVIA MAUTNER

## It's impossible to be something you're not on a polo field.



Top, trainer James Rice holds Richardson's Best-Playing Pony, Darius, as Zsa Zsa Gabor and actor Alex Cord look on; below, Richardson indulging one of his more ardent passions.

sy, but the incidents hardly stand out in Richardson's memory—there's so much else in there.

His eventful life started half a century ago in Prairie View, Texas. His father was also an M.D., and, says Richardson, "He left a ghost for me to chase in life." The senior Dr. Richardson died when his son was only six, but medicine and the church were both pillars of the family, and Vivian Richardson saw to it that her boy got the education that was his birthright. (Richardson notes with pride that his relatives grace hospital rosters across the country. Once he walked into an operating room and noticed that the anesthesiologist's nametag read the same as his; after a quick exchange of vitals, the man turned out to be a Richardson cousin from San Francisco.)

His love for horses dates back to those Texas ranch days: "We always had horses when I was young, so I've

been riding ever since I can remember. We usually had several unbroken horses and colts—we'd try to break them, and they'd try to break us. Riding bareback when you're young is the greatest way to develop balance—you just grab a handful of mane and go off. It never occurred to me that falling off was dangerous; in riding, as in most of life, fear keeps you from attaining and accomplishing the things you want. At 12, I could do a running mount from the back of a horse, just like all my cowboy heroes."

The family moved to L.A., where Richardson spent his high school years, whenever possible catching polo matches at the old Will Rogers Field. He swapped coasts to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he was captain of the football team while double-majoring in zoology and philosophy before going on to Howard's medical school.

He joined the Army in the late '60s because volunteering rather than waiting to be drafted gave him a better choice of internship; he was in fact scheduled to run an updated MASH unit in Vietnam when American participation in that conflict ended. Richardson rather misses having the chance to see overseas action—perhaps it was the same desire to be in the thick of things that spawned his stifled impulse, on a balmy April night 20 years later, to pull off the freeway and see the L.A. riots up close.

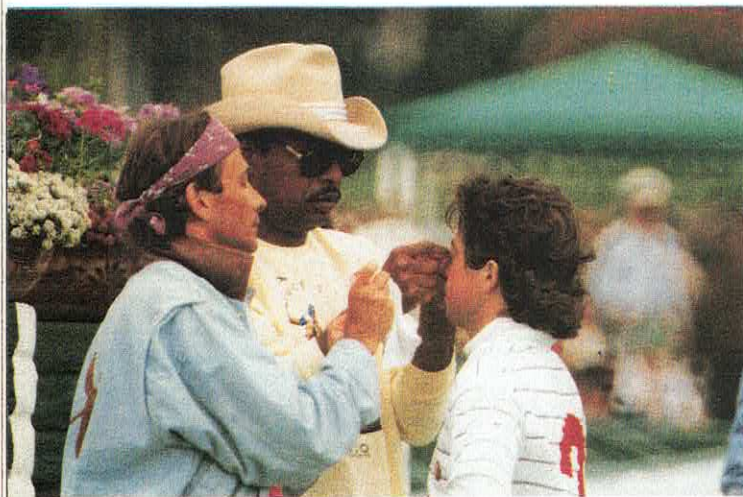
A 10-year career in the Army was largely spent cleaning up men of his own age who had lost limbs—often more than one—and coping with the fact that many of these multiple amputees had lost the will to live. It was likely this experience that annealed Richardson's commitment to medicine and sparked his drive to understand the philosophical as well as the biological side of man.

He now sees his medical practice as an ongoing lesson: "It's very rewarding. Each deformity is a challenge to your creative intuition. I literally have to create reconstructive techniques for each case. It really is an art; you use judgment and skills you can't quantify."

Those unquantifiables include the idea behind another of Richardson's favorite mottos: "*Mens sano in corpore sana*"—a sound mind in a sound body—words he sincerely lives by. Richardson's day starts with a yogic salute to the sun to the soaring voice of Maria Callas. He has a passion for opera, Puccini in particular, and knows it well enough that he once stood up at a dinner in India and favored the guests with an aria.

Richardson's average day goes on to include either a trip to the gym or a game of golf, riding if at all possible, hospital rounds and office hours, more opera and another yoga session. Then, of course, there is correspondence with the many boards and committees he serves on, which range from the local (he has been honored several times for his participation in inner-city youth programs) to the national (the NAACP, among other groups) and the cul-

# Polo is a grown-up version of a childhood pleasure.



Top, Richardson tends to an injured player in Santa Barbara; below, he talks to the "Today" show's Katie Couric about Reginald Denny's condition in the wake of the L.A. riots.

tural (the Joffrey Ballet).

He also sets aside time to be with his three daughters (he's separated from his wife) who, though young adults, love to spend time with their father. Kelly, 20, is a filmmaker, while Kimberly, 18, is a Howard freshman and Karen, 16, attends high school—and all three ride as part of their sound-minds-in-sound-bodies schooling.

Richardson also manages to indulge a voracious reading habit. Philosophy is a long-term addiction: Immanuel Kant and Ayn Rand are favorites, and he is currently devouring the ideas of Buddha, mythologist Joseph Campbell and pop physicist Stephen Hawking.

"People have different access to what they perceive is the truth," he remarks. "My goal is to integrate the intellectual and the primal level. Someone once said that the definition of a genius was someone who could hold dia-

metrically opposed ideas in his head at the same time."

Richardson seems to have room for all kinds of things both in his head and in his work space. "I'm a collector," he says simply. Many of his favorite acquisitions have to do with polo art and history: his office, where he spends the longest single block of time each day, houses a nearly life-size portrait by Salvador Arellano of his favorite pony and a huge bronze based on a rare Remington polo illustration (which he also owns). But that's not all: he collects other works of art, too, and likes the word "eclectic" to describe the assortment. It's an accurate choice: in addition to polo, Richardson favors items having to do with military history and his fascination with calligraphy, such as ancient writing instruments and unusual paper.

Another large collection, if he cared to catalogue them, would be his plane tickets. Richardson loves to travel, usually with some sport in mind: big-game tracking in Africa with the likes of Stefanie Powers, pheasant hunting in Scotland and polo in the United States, India and England. He's had tea with Prince Charles and counts Major Ronald Ferguson a friend.

At home, his Monday evenings are reserved for fencing "unless someone's literally dying." Saturdays he rides with a local hunt ("This isn't something I thought I'd ever want to do," he confided to Peika when he was approached for membership, "but now that I'm 50, I find that I want to experience *everything!*"). Sundays, of course, are for polo.

He began playing about 10 years ago. "It's a grown-up version of a childhood pleasure," Richardson says. "I was lucky that my life allowed me to recapture it. When I needed to relax, the thing that brought the biggest smile to my face was horses." His initial return to the saddle was to show hunters, but his joy in more primal conflict quickly drew him to polo. He now belongs to practically every club within driving distance—anywhere there's enough green space to get up to a gallop and hit a ball, he'll come up with dues. He's a founding member of the Rancho Santa Fe club, and has served on the boards of LAEC and Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club—the latter is where he spends a lot of his time now, although he also checks in at Eldorado and Empire in the Southern California desert.

Now that other priorities have made him cut back his practice schedule (once four days a week at LAEC), Richardson is "glad they've lowered me to 1 goal [from a career high of 3]. Now I mostly play in the desert, where competition doesn't matter so much. A lot of the time, we literally don't keep score. There's definitely a place for high-goal, but not when you're just relaxing. After all, this is supposed to be a diversion."

"He's the kind of player every club wants to have," says Peika. "He pitches in on committees, he lends horses, he announces games and he can stitch up the casualties." In

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## FIVE'S A CHARM

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for which she was named the Best Playing Pony.

"It was amazing what [the grooms] could do with that kind of a schedule," Busch said after the victory. "We were clearly the underdogs on Friday [against Cellular One] and we were clearly the underdogs today."

The underdogs played like over-achievers in the final. Budweiser used a sound defensive strategy to contain White Birch's high-scoring midfield of Heguy and Aguerre, who had combined for 17 of their team's 23 goals in the first two rounds. The task of holding the duo in check was left to Zubia.

The 34-year-old Argentine did what he needed to, stacking up the White Birch midfield with help from Azzaro and Smicklas to prevent breakaway scoring opportunities. White Birch was held scoreless in four of the six chukkers and Heguy and Aguerre could manage just one goal apiece. Zubia was named the World Cup's Most Valuable Player for his effort, despite not scoring a single goal in the final.

"Finals are going to be close, so we knew we had to stop their young guys," Zubia said. "To do that, you have to stop them just before they

have the ball. Once they have the ball, it's too late."

Aguerre concurred that defense decided the match: "Martin and Azzaro played good and they were trying to break us in the middle. I thought Smicklas was outstanding at Back today. He always brought us back to the play. Every time the ball got to him we had to start all over again. You do that once or twice and then all of a sudden you're tired. But I knew we were going to have to play out of our minds to beat them today."

The game was a defensive gem, but not necessarily a match for scoring enthusiasts. The 11 points both teams put on the board tied a 1985 World Cup record for the fewest goals in a final.

With Zubia and Smicklas concerned about covering Heguy and Aguerre, Budweiser's offense was left to Gobin and Azzaro. Gobin tallied the only goal of the opening chukker on a 10-yard neckshot and Azzaro led all scorers with five goals, his first coming on a 40-yard penalty shot in the second chukker.

White Birch replied with three unanswered goals to take a 3-2 lead after two periods, but that was Budweiser's lone defensive lapse of the game. Up 4-3 at halftime, Budweiser held the lead until goals by Kneece and Brant in the fifth chukker knotted the contest at 5 head-

### FOR THE RECORD

#### \$100,000 World Cup

**Final:** Budweiser 6, White Birch 5. MVP: Martin Zubia. Best Pony: Tamarita, owned and ridden by Mike Azzaro.

**Budweiser:** John Gobin (4), Mike Azzaro (9), Martin Zubia (9), Dale Smicklas (8). **White Birch:** Tiger Kneece (5), Bautista Heguy (10), Mariano Aguerre (9), Peter Brant (6). **Cellular One:** Lucas Criado (6), Adolfo Cambiaso Jr. (10), Ernesto Trotz (10), Adam Lindemann (4). **Les Diables Bleus:** Ignacio Heguy (7), Marcos Heguy (10), Memo Gracida (10), Guy Wildenstein (3). **Michelob/C.S. Brooks:** Adam Snow (8), Owen Rinehart (10), Alfonso Pieres (10), Brook Johnson (2). **Rolex A&K:** Hector Galindo (8), Gabriel Donoso (9), Carlos Gracida (10), Geoffrey Kent (3).

#### USPA Rolex Gold Cup

**Final:** Cellular One 14, Michelob 4. MVP: Ernesto Trotz.

**Cellular One:** Matthew Gonzalez (2), Adolfo Cambiaso Jr. (10), Ernesto Trotz (10), Adam Lindemann (4). **Michelob:** Deborah Couples (1), Hector Galindo (8), Mike Azzaro (9), Dale Smicklas (8). **Michelob Dry:** Max Gottschalk (A), Martin Zubia (9), Owen Rinehart (10), Tom Biddle (7). **Pegasus:** Julian

Hipwood (7), Santiago Araya (9), Benjamin Araya (9), Martin Gruss (1). **Rolex A&K:** Geoffrey Kent (3), Gabriel Donoso (9), Carlos Gracida (10), John Gobin (4). **Reylon:** Andres Diniz (5), Esteban Pano (9), Cristian Laprida (10), Mickey Tarnopol (2). **Les Diables Bleus:** Dale Schwetz (3), Marcos Heguy (10), Memo Gracida (10), Guy Wildenstein (3). **C.S. Brooks:** Andrew Snow (6), Adam Snow (8), Alfonso Pieres (10), Brook Johnson (2). **White Birch:** Greg Daniels (1), Bautista Heguy (10), Mariano Aguerre (9), Peter Brant/Todd Offen (6).

#### \$100,000 International Gold Cup

**Final:** Reylon 7, JM Lexus 6. MVP: Ted Moore. Best Pony: Tucson, ridden by Juan Bollini, owned by John T. Oxley.

**Reylon:** Andres Diniz (5), Esteban Pano (9), Cristian Laprida (10), Mickey Tarnopol (2). **JM Lexus:** Ted Moore (5), Red Armour (6), Juan Bollini (8), Cali Garcia (7). **The Gatsby:** Vernon Studdard (1), Paul Rizzo (5), Omar Sosa (7), Joe Henderson (7). **BellSouth Mobility:** Marcos Bignoli (6), Juan Badiola (7), Joey Casey (6), Jack Oxley (2). **Southern Eagle:** Steve Wilson (2), Rob Walton (8), Martin Zubia (9), Peter Busch (3). **Hartmoor:** Gene Fortugno (6), Wicky el-Effendi (8), Juni Crotto (9), Wink Hartman (2).



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