

Daring Doc



Madison
Richardson
thrives on
adventure

By Gwen Rizzo

Despite a busy medical practice, Richardson, left, reached a 3-goal rating. Here he is challenging Mike Conant in Santa Barbara.

To say Dr. Madison Richardson is a thrill seeker would be an understatement. From flying acrobatic airplanes and racing cars to running with the bulls in Spain, Richardson has done it all. That love of adventure eventually led him to the sport of polo, something that continues to capture his attention after some 40 years.

Richardson grew up on his family's working cattle ranch outside Houston, Texas, that once belonged to Gen. Sam Houston. It is where Richardson developed a love a horses.

"There was just something comforting about them to me when I was young," Richardson explained. "Riding wasn't a luxury sort of thing. We had all kinds of horses. My grandfather gave me the gentlest one to ride. I could crawl underneath it and it wouldn't do anything. Then when I was about 10 or 11, I'd try [to ride] the two year olds. I'd swing up on their backs with no saddle, no bridle and just [ride] them until they threw me off."

But it wasn't just horses that peeked Richardson's interest. "On our ranch, if it had fur, I rode it. I didn't care if it was a goat, sheep or calf ... I'd go in, get astride them and run around the pen until they bucked me off ..." he said. "My grandfather would look at me and say if I can get you to 16 you might have a chance."

The family eventually moved to California when he was a teen. He heard about riding and polo at Will Rogers State Park so he would go there to watch. Later, while he was attending Howard University in Washington D.C. he would go watch polo at the National Mall on Sunday afternoons.

"I looked at those guys and they were like demigods to me. ... I would say, oh my God, what do you have to do to be able to play polo like this," Richardson explained.

At the time, he was playing football, fencing and doing other sports in school but something about polo resonated with him. "I said, oh no, I am going to find a way to do this," said Richardson.

But first, he had to finish his education, following in his father's and uncles' footsteps as doctors. Richardson said he had no interest in anything else, because he had lived his life to get to that point. Totally focused, he says he studied eight hours every night and 13 hours on the weekends.

Richardson also served in the Army, taking care of soldiers during the Vietnam War. He says he enjoyed taking care of the helicopter pilots most of all because they, too, were risk-takers.

"They were the greatest, most fun and interesting soldiers. They'd leave Fort Rucker in



Richardson ran with the bulls in Pamplona, Spain in 1995.

Alabama to go to Vietnam and 50% of them knew they were going to die," he said. "They lived like that. I got to be such good friends with those kind of devil-may-care, live-now, big spirited people who were in the war and thought they were going to die. Every single day was a big deal, with camaraderie, loyalty and all the things you see in warriors."

He eventually went back to California to open a practice. He had three offices and was working really hard but he had a couple of jumping horses and made time to ride at a nearby riding club. One day, a computer salesman came into the office and learned Richardson rode.

"He asked if I ever thought about polo, and I said yeah, I did, but it hadn't worked out. He said, he had just the thing for me and was going to take



Hall-of-Famer James Rice and Richardson share a laugh. Rice worked for him for several years.

me up to the club on the top of the hill Thursday night," Richardson said.

Richardson decided to take the guy up on his offer. That is when he met Bill Carter, who was at the Will Rogers Polo Club.

Richardson remembers, "He showed me how to wrap that mallet around my hand and I said, my life is going to be like this, Oh my God."

Richardson with Nelson Mandela



Despite how busy he was with his day job, he always made time to practice polo every Tuesday and Thursday night. He admits the sacrifice and commitment necessary to play the sport are what appealed to him.

Within the first year of playing polo, Richardson made a trip to Argentina to be where the best players in the world came from. It was there that he met the 10-goal great Juan Carlos Harriot, whom he calls a superhero. He also met and played with 10-goaler Eduardo Moore.

"We'd play 12 to 18 chukkers every day. He'd tell me everything about the horses, the bits and everything I needed to know," said Richardson. "He showed me how to manage polo horses. He taught me a lot and it made it a lot easier later on."

He continued to immerse himself in the sport as much as he could. "I started watching all the games from Palm Beach, Rolex A&K and all the big teams were playing down there," Richardson said. "I'd go to bed every single night watching those games over and over. I'd say, this makes sense to me. I don't know what everybody else is doing but this is going to be my life."

Richardson lived in an historic neighborhood in central Los Angeles called Hancock Park. Back in the 80s, for Father's Day, his family had a wooden horse built next to the pool in the backyard. Despite often working late, Richardson would come home and hit about 300 balls a night.

"I'd be knocking balls around and you'd hear somebody say, 'Doc, go to bed!' They even ran an article about me and my polo pit in the local newspaper," he said. "It was a pretty serious disease!"

The more involved Richardson got in the sport, the more playing opportunities were presented. He admits he never said no to a playing opportunity, no matter where it was.

At that time, polo at the L.A. Equestrian Center got really big. "My horses were the first polo ponies in the arena before the pro league started. Joe Henderson cut his teeth there; Goodspeed, the Waltons and Memo [Gracida], everybody was in there, not to mention all the celebrities," Richardson recalls.

Eventually, Richardson would go to Texas to buy horses, both at Houston Polo Club and through the polo horse sales they used to have.

"I saw the Busch boys come up in their great big truck. It was a pretty heady time, a little different than now," Richardson said. "I got to be real good friends with Tommy [Wayman] and Joe Barry. I got to buy a lot of horses from them."

At one time Richardson had 34 horses, three that he used for fox hunting and the rest ponies. He played all year long for years. The dedication helped him reach a 3-goal handicap.

Richardson explained, "I had a string in the desert and a string to play at Santa Barbara. I'd play in Santa Barbara from April to the end of October, then I'd play indoors in November. We'd have the Sherman Cup and a few other indoor tournaments, and then the first of the year, I'd play

passions and the same kind of spirit."

He got to be good friends with Producer Michael Butler, whose family started Oak Brook Polo. Through Butler, he met Maj. Ronald Ferguson, at the time, polo manager for Prince Charles.

"Michael Butler would call me and say, 'listen, Ronnie's bringing a team to California and he'd like to play in the desert, then in Santa Barbara at the equestrian center. See what you can set up.'



at Eldorado until April 15, then I'd start the process all over again."

Polo led to some wonderful friendships for Richardson, and allowed him to travel to many interesting places around the world.

"When people talk about polo being a passport to the world, it is that and more," Richardson explained. "It is just amazing the opportunities it has afforded me, and more importantly, the opportunity to meet people that share similar

They would go to Jamaica, then come here and I would organize games for them," Richardson explained. "Then the Junior League in Scottsdale [Arizona] would host a fundraiser. It would be an American team versus a British team so I'd take my horses over there. ... Ronnie would come every other year, or sometimes every year. He and I got to be really good friends."

Through the celebrity polo matches, he also got to be good friends with actress Stephanie Powers.

*Richardson with
actors Stephanie
Powers and Sylvester
Stallone*



HRH Prince Charles and Richardson meet at England's Cowdray Park Polo Club in 1992.

"I was on my way to visit her in Kenya one year and Ronnie said, 'Listen why don't you stop through London on your way.' When I got there, I was staying at Ascot, and he would let me ride in Windsor Great Park. It was wonderful, what an incredible thrill that was," Richardson said. "One day he called and asked if I'd like to meet the prince. So, we went to Sussex and for two days, it was just five of us there, including Jorie Butler Kent, Geoffrey Kent and Cody Forsyth.

"The prince pulled up in his new Aston Martin DB9 with a secret service guy, MI5, I guess, sitting next to him. ... The prince came over and introduced himself. ... His dog was there with him and he said, 'come on, let's go for a walk.' And so we walked all around the field, just talking. He was playing with his dog and just making small talk. That went on for an hour or so, and then again the next day, the same thing. That was really fun actually.

"When I turned 50, Prince Charles wrote me a letter congratulating me, saying Happy Birthday and how he remembered seeing me."

Over the years, Richardson also got to know Vikram Singh, a friendship that has lasted 30 years. He had gone to India with a team made up of Bil Walton, Eric Friden and Big Boy Sheik.

This led to the first of many trips to India. He has been to various places in the area, seeing everything from the Taj Mahal to the Khyber Pass and Punjab. And Singh would bring an Indian team to Michael Dailey's club in Hawaii every year.

"Michael Butler said, 'I'm going to Michael Dailey's place. Vikram and the Indian team are going to be there.' So, I said why not. I went over there that September and God, did we have a great time. It was just amazing," he remembers. "Then Michael said, 'there's a festival in India in March for two weeks. You're coming.' So we went over there and played in Mumbai and with the snake charmers.

"We were on TV every day. [Singh] has a place in Punjab. His family owned a huge village and he has a 400-room house there—almost like the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur—where we stayed," he remembers. "It was amazing. They were some of the most accommodating, wonderful people in the world. There is nothing they won't do for you."

When the Indian team comes to California, like it did a couple of years ago, Richardson always hosts a big party for them at one of the big Indian restaurants.

In 1995, Richardson decided to check another box on his bucket list with a trip to run with the bulls in Spain. He tried it twice but admits he wasn't as reckless as some people.

"I got ahead of them and after getting to the next-to-the-last turn, there was a guy hanging on to a fence so I pulled up on the fence next to him and watched the bulls go by. They were about 20 yards behind me but that was pretty close," he said. "It is like polo. It never will be entirely safe, but you can make the odds a little safer ..."

He continued to play for another 10 years or so, but gave up the sport when he was 62. Today, he still rides on occasion and has five horses, which he keeps for his children and grandchildren to enjoy. He also uses them on Saturdays for a program he is involved with designed for inner-city kids called Operation Progress, run by the police department. It exposes kids to equestrian lifestyles and the discipline they get out of it that will transfer to other aspects of their lives.

As a board-certified head and neck surgeon,

Richardson has had his share of excitement in his career as well. Originally, he was going to be a heart surgeon but, after interning at Walter Reed Hospital during the Vietnam War, he changed course.

"We'd have 100 new boys coming there every day, just shot to hell. I was the only surgical intern, which means I never got home. I was in blood all day and night," he said. "I rotated through the ear, nose and throat, head and neck surgery department and the guys there were just a cut above. ... They were brilliant. I just felt at home with them. The work was so meticulous. ... It just appealed to me.

"I like difficult things reserved for people who really have to apply themselves, discipline themselves, school themselves and immerse themselves in a particular discipline. ... [like] polo."

He was a deputy sheriff for 25 years, involved with search and rescue. He also was called in to save the life of a young truck driver, Reginald Denny, badly beaten during a riot in Los Angeles, following the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of Rodney King.

Richardson was hosting polo players from India in 1992 when he got a call from a friend, asking if he seen the riots on TV. "About a half hour later, Les Geiger, who was a neurosurgeon, called me from the hospital. He said, 'Madison, I need your help. There's a truck driver here that is seriously injured.'

"I took the guests from India back to Santa Monica and got on the freeway. There were fires burning everywhere. I drove through the fires on my way to the hospital and when I got there, it was a tricky time. It was tense and there were curfews. ... We had 140 different news outlets there every day ... I knew one thing for sure ... if he had died from those injuries, which he really could have and probably should have, considering what they hit him with and the damage to his brain and face, my name was going to be associated with failure and death.

"I was well trained in cancer and reconstructive surgery, war surgery, and it all seemed to coalesce to that point and time," Richardson said.

Between work and polo, he somehow found time to stay involved in community programs as well. He held board positions with the Urban League, the LA Opera and the Medical Society, in addition to being appointed to the state medical board for many years.

His involvement in a variety of different areas,



Richardson with polo great Juan Carlos Harriot, whom Richardson calls a superhero.

offered Richardson the opportunity to meet a variety of interesting political figures, including Nelson Mandela, President Obama, Vice President Dick Cheney, Henry Kissinger, Alan Greenspan, Warren Christopher and James Baker.

"I love history and then to see people making history ... to be able to see people who are historically important is one of the greatest treasures of the world," Richardson explained.

He also met a variety of people from sports figures to musicians and actors, including Zsa Zsa Gabor, Martina Navratilova, Sly Stallone, Stevie Wonder and Lionel Richie, to name just a few. Muhammad Ali, a former neighbor, is his daughter's godfather. Still, he admits, he enjoyed meeting Juan Carlos Harriot more than most celebrities he has met.

Some of Richardson's other heroes, such as Winston Churchill and Thucydides, were not only wonderful people of their times but good authors as well.

"All of these historical people have left behind something they have written about. That is a high art form, maybe the highest because I have a respect for the written word," Richardson said.

When a particular subject peaks Richardson's interest, he says the first thing he does is get books about it. Though, he says when he started polo 40 years ago, it was frustrating that you couldn't go to the library and find a book on polo.

"I don't want to read it on the internet, I want that physical book in front of me. It's an old fashion way of learning, but it's my commitment to the written word. That is where knowledge comes from," Richardson explained.

Now 75, he continues to practice medicine but his risk-taking activities have slowed. He still keeps active, shooting sporting clays competitively, fishing and traveling. He collects wine, polo memorabilia and books and has a deep interest in history. He is also working on his memoir.

He stays involved in the sport, serving on the board of the National Museum of Polo and as a box holder at Santa Barbara Polo Club. ○