

Work in progress

By Iain Heaton, Members representative

At the start of 2015 the UKPA Executive agreed that in order to continue to push the sport of polocrosse forwards and grow it there was a need to try something new. The UKPA has always benefited from having committed volunteers who are willing to put in a large number of hours for free to help the sport. However, what has become obvious in the last few years is that to really move the sport forward there is a need for more work to be done (which means more time is needed) and also that actually finding volunteers with sufficient time has become harder, as everyone seems to lead increasingly busy lives. These two factors together mean that the UKPA Executive felt there was a need to try a new approach. In this piece I hope to explain some of the background to that new approach and also where we are now in terms of developing the sport.

Before I do that though, I would like to explain one thing. People think growing a sport is all about exciting things. Flashy videos, TV coverage, big name sponsors, massive events, celebrity players. It isn't. Those things all come when you have grown the sport and you have tens of thousands of players and hundreds of thousands of people wanting to watch your sport. Actually growing a sport is boring. It involves hour after hour of administration and infrastructure building. This can be anything from replying to emails from riding schools who want to have a go at the sport to re writing the umpire training course to ensure that the UKPA has sufficient, suitably qualified umpires to umpire at tournaments (because as the tournaments get bigger the more umpires you need). Growth involves late nights writing and reviewing long, dull documents. It involves organising coaching accreditation sessions and then turning up on cold winter days to run them. It involves designing and getting printed hundreds of flyers to promote events. There is the occasional small bit of glamour, a magazine article, a radio interview, even perhaps a small slot on local TV news. However, these are rare, most of it is hour after hour of invisible work which eventually all combines to give you a foundation on which your sport will grow and thrive. Unless you have this foundation, this infrastructure, you cannot grow your sport. There is no point getting ten thousand people excited about the idea of playing if you have nowhere where they can go and try the sport, no coaches to coach them and no rules for them to follow.

So a quick bit of history....from 2012 onwards, the UKPA was very lucky to benefit from a lot of work from Barry Amor, acting as a volunteer CEO. Having stopped running his own riding school he threw himself into improving various documents and procedures within the UKPA (such as completely re writing the UKPA rulebook and large sections of the handbook) and starting to improve and keep up to date communication tools such as the website and Facebook, in conjunction with Anna Kimber Tarbuck, who also put in a lot of volunteer hours as UKPA secretary. Barry also took on the lion share of the work for organising events such as the National Championships. In doing all these tasks and more he went far beyond what would be expected from most volunteers in that role and took on areas which were not originally within the CEO's remit. At the same time, Ursula and Laura Scott similarly did a lot of work in improving the UKPA's UKCC coach accreditation system and ensuring that UKPA members could sign up, train and qualify as UKCC coaches. All this hard work resulted in the UKPA taking some important steps forwards. The organisation was starting to run more professionally, various procedures were becoming clearer, communication was improving and, after many years of struggling to do so, there were a number of UKCC polocrosse coaches being accredited, which was considered vital for the growth of the sport.

However, at the end of 2014 there was still a lot of work to do and the UKPA Executive decided that in order to ensure all this work would continue they needed to actually start to paying for some administrative support to support all the volunteer officers of the UKPA. So at the start of 2015 they engaged Barry Amor to be a paid administrator to the UKPA, a role he would fulfil alongside his volunteer CEO role. This appointment was discussed at length, as obviously it was a big step to take, but it was decided that there was undoubtedly a need for this support if the association was to keep moving forwards and that Barry was felt to be the best person to provide that support, given his knowledge of the sport and his range of skills.

It was agreed that this appointment would be a trial for 2015 only and the UKPA Executive should review the appointment throughout the year to see how effective it had been. In order to allow this review to happen a development plan was written, which laid out what was felt, at that time, to be the key areas of development and specific actions that needed to be taken to achieve them. It was never felt that all these actions would all be achieved within one year, nor were they all jobs for Barry to do by himself, there was obviously going to need to be input from a large number of other people. Ultimately the elected officers of the UKPA remain responsible for their individual areas but Barry would be doing a lot of actual detailed work for them, from writing umpire and

coach manuals to contacting hundreds of riding schools and livery yards to organising lunch at Nationals for prospective and current sponsors.

So after nearly eight months where are we with this plan? Well, you can see for yourselves what has been achieved and not achieved, as we have included the entire plan at the back of this programme, and I do encourage you to read it through in detail to fully understand what we set out to do and what we have achieved at this point.

Having gone through and reviewed the plan in detail, there are obviously a few areas where our original planned action was either not correct or we just haven't been able to find the time to do it at this stage, that was always to be expected. However, overall it has been a positive eight months with the UKPA continuing to function well. Areas such as record keeping are constantly improving, with detailed records now being kept of areas such as dangerous vice reports from tournaments. We are also developing new tools and resources, the Umpires manual and Coaches manual being two of these. We have now got specific Field Marshall training on the website and are looking at developing areas such as goal judge training.

Communication has improved, the official Facebook page now has even more content going through it, thanks to a combination of Barry and Jake Hall (in his new role as UKPA secretary). News is now regularly updated on the website and there is regular email communication direct to members, something which we said a couple of years ago was vital to the development of the sport.

External visibility of the sport has reached new heights this year with a high number of articles appearing in local and national equestrian publications, both in print and online. We have worked hard for a number of years to try and obtain more press coverage for our sport and this year it seems to have all finally come together. A number of these pieces have been obtained due to having Barry in his new post. He has been able to take the time to talk to the media, establish what they need and put them in touch with members and clubs who can help them write articles about. No piece of press coverage ever just happens, for every piece you see in a magazine or online there will have been someone in the UKPA who has written or edited that article on behalf of that publication.

We are also trying UK polocrosse clothing at the National Championships for the first time this year and also looking at taking parts of the Coaches manual and making it into a short coaching book to sell. We feel that developing some form of merchandise to sell could bring in a small amount of extra revenue and also help develop and increase awareness of the sport.

Barry has redone and improved the umpire training course and exam for this season. He has taken on actually running all the umpire training courses this year, as with the World Cup on a number of executive umpires have been very busy. There have been training courses at every tournament and the new umpires' manual is available to support and help umpires even after they pass the exam. Likewise the grading process has improved, thanks to the hard work of Kate and Wayne Henning, and there is an improved structure around the grading of players now.

Obviously there is still a lot of work to do. We need to find a way to support, mentor and improve umpires after they have passed their exam. We need to continue to develop new coaches and over the winter get our coaches out and coaching with new potential players, be they in riding schools, pony clubs, riding clubs or livery yards. We need to stay on top of administration and ensure that we have the policies and procedures in place to deal with anything that might go wrong. Overall, we have to be professional, we have to be organised, we have to be focused and we have to continue to do all the small things that ultimately will lead to our sport becoming big.