

Lights
Camera
Action!

Writer/Director
David Marlett on the set
of the short film version
of 'Of Kings & Cowboys'

Polo comes to the Silver Screen!

Charley Larcombe reports
Photography courtesy of
David Lominska & Jesse Benson



Actor Kris Black (in the short film version) discusses with a co-star

Press your polo whites, polish your boots, but leave your bad language at home - you could be caught on camera because polo is coming to a cinema near you. Just think, this year you were picking up an Audi award and a La Martina saddle; but next year it may well be an Oscar and a couple of groupies... (Actually you probably have those already).

How? What? Where? We hear you cry. *Of Kings & Cowboys* is the brainchild of Texan polo player and film writer/director, David Marlett. He lives between Dallas and the heady showbiz world of LA, but spent his childhood in Texas, exercising high-end racehorses and stick and balling polo ponies. A screenwriter, stage director and 'recovering attorney' with a polo habit, he has been on a journey to get our exciting sport into the cinema and in front of Joe Public.

The plot is based on a romance between a rough and tough polo playing Texan guy and a beautiful Argentine heiress - it's a little Jilly Cooper with a healthy dollop of realism and some international jet-set locations. The story follows Cutter McCullum from rodeo rookie to proficient polo player, taking on the entire high goal from Palm Beach to Dubai and even to good old Blighty as well. Of course, in the traditions of romantic cinema, he is distracted along the way by an extraordinary Argie beauty, Catarina Naveira; so be prepared for lots of 'Will they? Won't they?' drama. You'll definitely recognise some of the characters from the clubhouse bar and your Pony Club days. What fun!

At present, the project is in 'pre-production', whereby initial investment has been raised, a promotional short film has been shot, casting and location scouting are underway, and the hunt for full production financing, has begun. The promo-short film version was filmed at Pat Nesbit's ranch in Santa Barbara, with local players vying to be in the frame, no doubt. Filming is due to start on the real deal, the feature film itself, in the spring. But first, a distributor and production financing need to be obtained to get the polo-playing celluloid from concept to reality. A major factor with a film that focuses on what is not a mainstream sport will be getting the financial endorsement. But according to the producers, that is coming along well. And, however, the gross profits of previous equine movies show that they do make money. Results from the IMDB (Internet Movie Database) show that great movies like *The Horse Whisperer* grossed \$129 million, whilst movies like the classic *Black Beauty*, although the proceeds are not officially recorded, could also be recognised for their undoubted moneymaking ability.

This summer, David was over in the UK, promoting the project and shaking hands with the great and the good of the British polo fraternity. Nicholas Colquhoun-Denvers (of Ham Polo Club) met him and was impressed with his production package; Claire Tomlinson may be involved in teaching the actors how to play. Peter Grace of Ascot Park, and a prestigious name in the polo field, is in discussions to be a part of the film production process. 'We had a long meeting with David about the film. I think he will create a passionate tribute to the sport of polo, and at the same time, in the wider format of a cinema love story, will show the greater public, how the game should be played. Hopefully this will achieve, in a film, what the world has struggled to create in the past - a much larger international interest - for the long term benefit of the sport.'

Leaving the plot aside, one area that the film makers are keen to address is the difficulty of capturing the pace and skill of high-speed polo action sequences, without resorting to excessive computer wizardry and CGI (computer generated imagery). We all know how difficult polo is to film, (as we have heard from Jan Erik in our *Caught on Candid Camera* article - see page xx) due to the speed of the game and the difficulty in tracking play. Previous equine movies have started to address this: *Seabiscuit* (2003) for example, used new technology to film the racing sequences - but the cameras only had to follow a track, not eight polo players zooming around in different directions, with a ball being whacked up and down the field. The production team behind *Of Kings & Cowboys* are designing a polo ground which will incorporate an innovative camera system set on cross wires. It is hoped that as with American NFL games (where similar systems are used) the fast-paced action will be captured. There are also plans afoot for mounting high-tech cameras on the breastplates of the ponies, so the cinema-goer can literally be there, right in the action. Pretty exciting stuff, if they can pull it off.

Backing up the creative process are producers Jim Green and Mark Bacino, who are both no strangers to independent film making. They've been managing budgets over \$120 million and are used to dealing with big productions. Jerry Lambert is the budgeting manager for the team: in the film industry for over 25 years and having worked on films like *True Romance* (you know the one, where Christian Slater looks moodily at the camera...), his extensive experience in film finance, along with Marlett's attorney background must be a huge relief to investors - knowing there are people on board who know how to work the greenbacks.

As for casting, there are major actors in mind but not confirmed - think beautiful and talented, red carpet names. Apparently Tommy Lee Jones has been ear-marked for a supporting role; not only a great actor but also a polo aficionado to boot - how can he not want to be involved?

We catch up with David on a transatlantic call to see how the movie business is taking to his concept: "Well, we are getting there! On the whole it has been exceptionally flattering to see how well the script had been received and the response so far has been very positive. When I think of what we've taken on, you know, the fact that it's the first of its kind, I think what a mammoth task. But then, I'm confident we're on to a winning, exciting project with some exceptionally talented people in terms of production and some fabulous consultants to ensure the film retains its authenticity. We've got guys like Peter Grace from England and big names like Eduardo Heguy from Argentina and Dale Smicklas from the US on board and enthusiastic to help in any way they can; so that is very confidence inspiring. One thing we're conscious of is not being pigeon-holed as just a sports movie because it's much more than that. At its core *Of Kings & Cowboys* is a romance, big, sweeping, international story. But it has to be true to the sport for sure - as well as entertaining for the 98% of whom will never have seen a polo game. We want to have depth but make it big and glossy with every frame, beautiful and raw.

"The movie *Any Given Sunday* (1999) is an inspiration and I just love the extra texture that director Oliver Stone incorporates into what is so much more than a sports film. I also want to capture the sweeping scenic shots of movies like *The Horse Whisperer* (1998) and the work of Terrence Malick. With *Of Kings & Cowboys* I hope we will show the juxtaposition between the grit of the Texan ranch-hands and the Argentine gauchos and the sophistication and perceived high glamour of the international polo circuit. But principally this is a love story, as well as the story of people's relationships with horses.

The promotional short-film is now in the can and being edited. It certainly captures the essence of what the feature film will be, so investors, distributors and major actors alike can go 'Wow! I get it now!' We are in talks for the short film to be shown at the Argentine Open, and we're thinking about sending it out into the polo community, into the clubs and so on – but obviously I want to keep a certain amount of it under wraps and I'm not sure if I want to see it plastered over *YouTube*. If I'm honest, I'm a snob when it comes to high definition quality and I don't want this initial short film compromised!

"In the long term, I think the feature film could have serious impact on polo, in terms of raising its profile and getting people interested in giving polo a try. One thing I've felt on my travels, talking polo and the movie, is that the promotion of polo is severely lacking – we know how extraordinary this sport is and it should get the credit it deserves.

"I don't want the film to be a 'fluff piece' and sugar-coat any of the grittiness that's involved with polo, and because of this I hope it will spark a lot of interest worldwide. I think the polo world will need to be prepared for what could be a big uptake in interested parties; a large section of the audience will barely know the arse end of a pony, but you're hitting a massive demographic of people who are hopefully going to be encouraged to take a closer look. I sincerely hope that will be a fantastic spin-off of this movie – any promotion of the sport is a good thing.

"I'm so pumped and passionate about this movie and can't wait for our additional production partners, meaning major investors and distributors, to come on board in the next few months."

With the shooting due to start in the spring, things are really moving forward at the rate of a thousand frames per second, so look out for a glossy blockbuster in 2010 that we hope will leave you swapping your asado for popcorn, your mate for cola and your saddle for a seat at the cinema!

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Marlett directing polo action on the set of the short film production