



*"We started out small, just two fields. But the people came," says Robin Uihlein, recalling that it wasn't easy to get them out here. "Back then University Park was a long, dusty shell road."*

# looking back

*with Robin Uihlein and Maggie Mitchell*

Robin Uihlein climbed down from atop scaffolding where he had been tinkering with a new ceiling fan, part of the recently completed Clubhouse remodel, long enough to reminisce about the past. Club manager Maggie Mitchell joined in, sharing observations of her own. The

conversation lent credence to the expression, 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'. And that's just the way they like it.

While some clubs have become mired in politics and poor manners, sportsmanship remains the hallmark of the Sarasota Polo Club. Since the club was founded in 1991, club president Robert

A field trip clearly showed that, yes, polo would lend a certain cachet to the community. Once the decision was made, officials began the hunt for someone to head it up, a hunt that quickly ended when they realized Robin was already in their sites, albeit on a ranch in Texas.

So Robin and his family came east and brought his high standards with him.

Polo wasn't entirely new to SMR. "There was one field at headquarters, a Bahia field, where a few cowboys played knock-around," Robin recalls. The guys were riding their stock saddles, didn't know anything. I looked around and scratched my head and thought 'this is going to be something big one day,' but at the time it was the craziest thing I'd ever seen."

Former executives John Clarke (SMR president), Clive Morris (vice president), and a friend of theirs, Don Rookensmith, played as well. After Robin donated mallets, saddles and a few ponies to the cowboy games, things got interesting. It was around that time when all the talk about a "real" polo club began. The rest, as they say, is history.

The Club will honor its' heritage this year with the resurrection of the SMR Cup, which teams polo players with cowboys. Only now it will be played on infamous grounds, at one of the top polo clubs in the nation. And it didn't take long, in the scheme of things, to earn such a fine reputation.



*^ Robin, Kiley, Augie and Brendra Uihlein at their home at the Sarasota Polo Club, December 1992*

"Robin" Uihlein has put his boot down, so to speak, running a first-class operation with a reputation for fairness, fast-playing fields and family fun.

Some may assume that since he was the only polo-playing member of the Uihlein family, it was his idea to bring Polo to the ranch when it first considered diversifying into real estate development. Not so. "The Board started talking about bringing polo here. I suggested that if they really wanted to see what an equestrian influence was on a development, they should visit Palm Beach," he says.



^ The official Sarasota Polo Club sign, that still stands today, goes up

"We started out small, just two fields. But the people came," says Robin, recalling that it wasn't easy to get them out here. "Back then University Park was a long, dusty shell road. We would hold events out here, like the Ringling Cup and some big charity events, and it was pretty incredible to watch Mary Fran Carroll get people to come out here. They'd scoff and say, 'Come on, there's nothing east of the interstate!' and she'd say, 'Oh yes there is; trust me! So people would come in their fancy cars and fancy clothes and drive down this dirt road, stuff would be flying everywhere. But they came.'"

It has since grown into a well-respected club, with paved roads, nine fields and a first-class residential polo community. "There are now 35 ranches, the only homes in Lakewood Ranch that are in Sarasota County," says Maggie, who has run the club since 1999. "The polo community has really embraced the club. Most of them buy tailgate spots and rent out their barns to visiting players."

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^ The Sarasota Polo Clubhouse under construction in November, 1992  
The Pavilion would start the following year, September 1993



^ Before the Clubhouse there were tents! Preparations get underway for the Ringling Cup polo match celebration, Saturday, October 31, 1992

Tailgating, in fact, has evolved into an event in its own right, with both sides of the field covered by a sea of tailgaters. It's something the community looks forward to.

But what Maggie likes most is the club's credo that everybody gets the same deal, no special favors. "We have a reputation of being fair across the board, no special treatment, and the members like that."

"Maggie has run clubs all over the country," Robin says. "She has firsthand knowledge of the intricacies and the money and the egos and all the things that breed if you don't have a tightly run organization."

The pair makes a great team. Robin has little tolerance for nonsense. Maggie knows the business better than most. "I consider this a players' club—by, for, and with the players," says Maggie.

And that's something that will never change.

Article by Candice Mutschler