

County's land crunch prompts polo players' migration to Martin *Wellington remains polo capital; officials say it's too costly, crowded*

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High prices and disappearing land are pushing out some of Palm Beach County's polo community, and the Treasure Coast appears to be rolling out the red carpet for the sport of kings.

Three large housing developments planned in rural Martin County would feature polo fields, practice facilities and some of the biggest names in professional polo, including one player called the "Michael Jordan" of the sport. The migration of the largely Wellington-based polo enthusiasts is being called Palm Beach County's loss and Martin County's gain.

"It's sort of like a Disneyland for adult polo players," said Wellington veterinarian and polo player Ted Brinkman, who plans to build the Hobe Sound Polo Club with four playing fields.

Each development will sell 20-acre lots, with residents sharing the ownership and use of the polo fields, clubhouses and practice fields. Owners plan private games and leagues among the residents, but the fields will not be open to the public and will not charge admission like the International Polo Club in Wellington.

"There will be some tournaments and club chukkers for the younger horses," said Steve Orthwein, a former U.S. Polo Association official who is developing the Port Mayaca Plantation project and its five playing fields with his son, Stevie, also a player.

Palm Beach County polo leaders predict Martin County's polo communities would become like the Gulfstream Polo Club in Lake Worth, which has homes surrounding practice fields, and tournaments take place.

"Wellington and Palm Beach County is getting built out," said Brad Scherer, a player and real estate agent who is developing Lake Point Ranches and its four fields in Port Mayaca, near Lake Okeechobee. "Polo in South Florida is traditionally pushed west and north by development."

Gulfstream was going to be sold to housing developers until they pulled out of the deal last year. Several playing fields at other existing clubs, such as the Palm Beach Polo and Country Club, have been sold for development.

Scherer, Orthwein and Brinkman said it was the impending sale in past years of Gulfstream, where they played, that caused them to look north to build their own clubs.

"Wellington started out as a horse community, but all the people there now don't see the value in horses," Brinkman said. "All of the land is going for houses."

The biggest problem is that Wellington simply does not have enough vacant land for more playing and practice fields, said Jimmy Newman, director of polo at the International Polo Club Palm Beach.

"It's expensive, it's crowded and there's a lack of available land to build anything on," Newman said.

Each field requires 12 to 20 acres, and professional polo players can use as many as 70 horses in one season, which require even more land to graze and train.

The price of land in Wellington rose from an average of about \$66,000 an acre in 2001 to \$686,000 in 2006, according to the Palm Beach County Property Appraiser's Office.

At those prices, pasture land is a "luxury nobody can afford in Wellington," Scherer said.

"Wellington is still the horse capital of South Florida, but it is a very expensive capital," Scherer said. "Why is polo coming to Martin County? It's about good land and proximity to Wellington."

In contrast, Scherer is offering 20-acre lots in Port Mayaca where polo ponies can graze and train for \$36,000 to \$60,000 an acre. Orthwein's prices at Port Mayaca Plantation start at \$55,000 an acre.

For \$1.7 million, players can get a 20-acre lot in the Hobe Sound Golf Club and part-ownership of the playing fields and clubhouse, Brinkman said.

"You're getting 10 cents on the Wellington dollar here," Scherer said as he stood Friday in the middle of one of his Port Mayaca playing fields, which was inaugurated with an exhibition game last month.

The developments will be home to some of the legends of polo, including Adolfo Cambiaso of Argentina, widely regarded as the best player in the world. He has bought a Hobe Sound Polo Club lot and plans to train ponies there, Brinkman said.

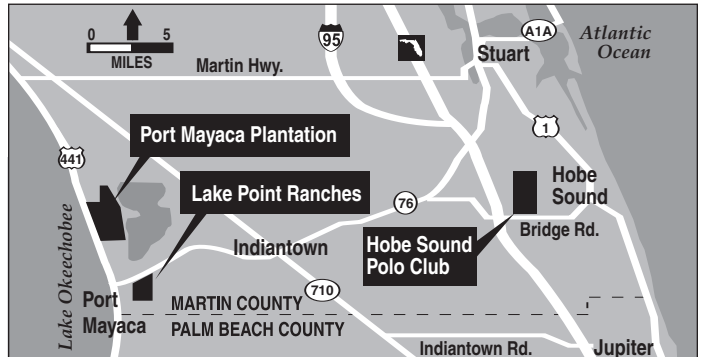
"He's Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and Babe Ruth all rolled into one," Brinkman said.

'You're getting 10 cents on the Wellington dollar here.' -- BRAD SCHERER, Polo player and real estate agent

Guillermo "Memo" Gracida, a member of the sport's hall of fame, has bought a lot in Port Mayaca Plantation and will play and practice there, Orthwein said. Gracida owns a farm in northwestern Martin County, where he built his own private polo field almost two years ago.

Polo experts do not see Martin County's communities as a challenge to Wellington as the center of the South Florida polo universe; they view them as serving as a support industry.

The players would stable their horses, practice and train in Martin County and truck them to Wellington for matches such as the U.S. Open.



Proposed polo developments

Photos courtesy of Phelps Media Group

Hobe Sound Polo Club Size: 1,800 acres Location: Bridge Road west of Hobe Sound Residential Lots: 70 Polo facilities: Four playing fields, clubhouse, track and practice field Status: Proposal to be submitted this month	Lake Point Ranches Size: 1,000 acres Location: State Road 76 in Port Mayaca Residential Lots: 44 Polo facilities: Four playing fields and a practice field Status: County commission to vote on plan May 22	Port Mayaca Plantation Size: 2,300 acres Location: U.S. 441 north of Port Mayaca Residential Lots: 108 Polo facilities: Five playing fields and a clubhouse Status: Submitted to county last year, being reviewed
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Who's who of polo in Martin County

Andres Weisz: One of the top professional players in Wellington; has competed in numerous U.S. Polo Gold Cup matches; proposing the Hobe Sound Polo Club.



Cambiaso

Adolfo Cambiaso: From Argentina; considered the best polo player in the world and has been called the 'Michael Jordan of polo'; bought lot in proposed Hobe Sound Polo Club.



Steve Orthwein

Steve and Stevie Orthwein: Father and son polo players from St. Louis; family involved in building the Gulfstream Polo Club in Lake Worth; father Steve and son Stevie are part owners of proposed Port Mayaca Plantation.



Stevie Orthwein

Guillermo 'Memo' Gracida: One of top players in the world since 1980, winning more U.S. Opens than any other player; bought property in northwestern Martin County near Okeechobee County line and built private polo field there two years ago; also bought lot in Port Mayaca Plantation.



Gracida

Brad Scherer: Son of former U.S. Polo Association executive director and Palm Beach Polo and Country Club polo director Allan Scherer; plays polo and is developing Lake Point Ranches.



Scherer

"They are looking for a farm setting where they can train and then come here for their 'high goal' polo," Newman said. "I think all of these are going to be good for polo."

Other communities, such as in Aiken, S.C., also have developments on less expensive land that center on polo. Martin County's communities offer a closer alternative, keeping the business in Florida, Wellington Equestrian Committee member Don DuFresne said.

"It's better than them moving to Aiken to play," he said. "We absolutely want them here."

Scherer said he does not expect opposition from Martin's staunch environmental activists because the horse-related uses on the properties will generate thousands of dollars in revenue but will not require water or sewer lines, schools or increased density.

All are planned on lands already disturbed: the western Martin projects on former sugar cane fields and the Hobe Sound Club on a former citrus grove.

So far, county environmentalists have not objected.

Donna Melzer, chairwoman of the Martin County Conservation Alliance, said her only major concern is whether the projects try to get water and sewer services.

The polo developers said the strict growth rules in Martin County that limit homes in rural areas to one unit per 20 acres could be good for polo because they will keep what happened in Wellington from recurring in Martin County.

"Their development codes have a unique opportunity to attract these kinds of uses," Scherer said. "We don't have to worry about a shopping center being built next to us in a couple of years."

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