

PHILLIP KARBER

SHHH! P-O-L-O

Sport's name grouped with other four-letter words

All of us have an image of the sport we play and an opinion of how polo is (or should be) perceived by others. However, most of us do not spend much time thinking about where these images come from or how they change over time. Images are social constructions and as such take on a life of their own—growing, morphing, fading. For good or bad, the image of our sport is not immune to this evolution, and sometimes perceptions shift when we are not looking.

USPA members may be surprised that there is a powerful and to-date successful effort to ban the word *polo* at the collegiate level. In an era where the “F” word can be heard on the floor of the U.S. Senate, not to mention what is on the public airways, the Education Testing Service, the crowd that administers the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) and has a nationwide influence on who gets into what college, has decided that our sport is unmentionable. No, I’m not making this up! It’s buried in a recent study by a noted educator. [Diane Ravitch, the “Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn,” page 180]. The word *polo* is banned from the SATs (and other institutional tests that follow their guidelines) because the paragons of public correctness negatively view the image of our sport as elitist.

Now there may be some in our community who not only are not offended by this, but view it as positive—adding to the cachet of exclusivity. My purpose in bringing it up is not to debate the issue here, but rather highlight a more general argument. Images are not self-correcting; if not consciously maintained they evolve or even erode in unintentional directions.

The recent USPA strategic planning committee (SPC), commissioned last year by

USPA Chairman Jack Shelton and led by Chuck Weaver, identified image as one of five major strategic factors that need to be addressed. It became obvious that within American polo are a wide range of views on what the image of the sport is and what the image should be, not all of them consistent with each other. Since the USPA is and needs to be a reflection of its membership, the SPC has tasked the Marketing Committee to help survey the community, organize the findings, and report to it at the annual meeting next spring. We will be using the same SWOT methodology the SPC employed, looking at the polo image in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. You will be getting questions from us over the next six months but we also encourage your candid views sent directly to the Marketing Committee via the USPA.

But while we are studying the issue, we also wanted to start doing something about it, at least raising the image-consciousness level within the association. Thus, the Marketing Committee has initiated an annual recognition award calling attention to the person or group or club or company that, in our opinion, has had the most positive contribution to the image of the sport in America during the preceding year. The winner for 2004 (selected by a nominating committee consisting of the USPA Executive Director Peter Rizzo, the vice chairwoman of the Marketing Committee Sandy Herron, and myself) is Lezlie Hiner, the founder of the Work to Ride youth program in Philadelphia, featured in this magazine’s October issue. Her image award recognizes contribution in three areas:

- Vision—the willingness to challenge a stereotype and by dint of personal commitment make a difference in how the

sport of polo is seen nationwide.

- Creativity—showing that love of horses, experiencing the competitive challenge of tournament play, and being a positive role model as a player are attributes of polo that can be enjoyed by all Americans; and demonstrating that even in an expensive sport, where there is a will there is a way.

- Impact—demonstrating to millions of Americans, through the unprecedented quality and quantity of coverage of the Work to Ride program in *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN, that polo is a very real sport and is of broad national level interest to the sporting world.

With this image award we not only want to give Lezlie the recognition she deserves for her efforts but also appeal for your material support for the future of her program. To sustain her use of public facilities she has been told her program needs to double in size, and, as we all know, serving twice as many riders means more horses, more tack, more feed, more vet bills, etc. So, if you are impressed about Lezlie’s contribution to the positive image of polo, send her a note and put weight behind it by sending money.

I remember the first time Lezlie’s Work to Ride team competed in the interscholastics at the University of Virginia facility in Charlottesville. The kids seemed shy, perhaps in awe of the new environment, so I chatted with one of the boys and asked him what he liked about playing polo. His response, accompanied by a big smile, had the power and elegant simplicity of a million-dollar ad campaign: “It’s a good ride.” Now those are couple of four letter words we can be proud of!

Phillip Karber is chairman of the USPA Marketing Committee. ♦