

# WINNER



# TAKES ALL

BY MICHELE MEYER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DIEGO CAPPELLA

Even while practicing alone, Hilario Ulloa performs the same fearless, focused moves that make him the Michael Jordan of the equine set. He's ranked among the world's top 10 polo players, and his confidence in the saddle hints at a history steeped in horses. With his mallet behind his back, he leans far off his steed—at 40 miles per hour, no less. Somehow, he knows where the ball is and slams it home.

"I was practically born on horseback," says Ulloa, offering a nonplussed explanation for his super-human skills. For those who know him best, it's his drive to win that most sets the 34-year-old apart from his competitors.

"Hilario's very intense," says fellow Argentine 10-goaler Guillermo "Sapo" Caset, who's played with—and against—Ulloa since age 12. "He has to win, even if it's PlayStation or ping-pong. He's really, really competitive."

That tenacious pursuit earned Ulloa a 10-goal rank, the highest possible, in the U.S., his native Argentina, and England at age 30. He was only 24 when he became a 9-goaler. He's played in Wellington for the past nine years, racking up triumphs such as the 2018 U.S. Polo Open Championship.

Polo player Hilario Ulloa's competitive nature and equestrian prowess impress on the field and in the stable

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**ULLOA'S CAREER BOASTS AN ARRAY OF HIGHLIGHTS, INCLUDING WINNING THE 2018 U.S. OPEN POLO CHAMPIONSHIP IN WELLINGTON AS PART OF THE DAILY RACING FORM TEAM.**

“To play against Hilario is really tough because he never quits,” Caset says. “He comes back stronger and stronger.” Indeed, when the head of his stick broke off during semifinal play of the 2011 British Open, Ulloa reversed the mallet and scored a goal with its handle.

Determination isn't the only quality that makes Ulloa a champ and coveted teammate. Many praise his generosity, dry wit, love of horses, and ability to push others to reach their full potential. “Hilario is a great guy,” says Jared Zenni, who played on Daily Racing Form with Ulloa when they won the U.S. Open. “He's humble and down-to-earth.”

“If you pick the right team, work hard during the season, and have good horses, you can't guarantee a win, but you can guarantee a good season,” adds Ulloa. Because polo is a high-stakes sport with only four athletes per team, synergy is key.

As it happens, Ulloa has some experience being part of a foursome; he's one of four children of lauded horse breeder and tamer Carlos “Polito” Ulloa. By age 5, he was playing polo against brother, Salvador, then 7. All three of Polito's sons—including Carlos “Toly” Ulloa—are polo pros, and his daughter, Esmeralda, is married to one.

At 16, Ulloa's mother, Monica, sent him to Saint-Tropez, Belgium, and Switzerland to sub for an injured pro. “I realized then this could be my career and a great life,” says Ulloa. Now he competes almost year-round, traveling extensively to play in such areas as the Hamptons, Santa Barbara, and Aspen. It's no hardship,

he notes. “You're in the most beautiful places when the weather is beautiful.”

But Ulloa's appreciation for fine weather belies his doggedness on the field. In 2014, Canada's top polo player, Fred Mannix Jr., is said to have called his one-time teammate as “relentless as a pit bull.” Earlier this year, officials red-flagged Ulloa during the C.V. Whitney Cup Final and pulled him from the first game of the USPA Gold Cup in Wellington, a move that was later reversed. “It crushed him for a few days,” says Matt Coppola, who played with Ulloa on Las Monjitas. “That's a sensitive subject.” It remains so, one Ulloa declines to address.

The rare times Ulloa loses, such as a Las Monjitas loss to Pilot in the U.S. Polo Open Championship last April, he tries to take it with a grain of salt. “Just as in childhood, I remember to cry,” he deadpans. Win or lose, he studies video of every minute of play. “I've had a lot of setbacks. Each time you lose you learn from that and get stronger. You work harder to improve.”

“The guy is probably the hardest working player and best horseman in polo right now,” says Coppola, a Wellington native. “He's in the gym six days a week. He rides and studies film of players every day. The way he works is why he's so good. The guy's a fanatic about horses and polo.”

His teammates even rely on him to choose which mares to ride and when during competition. “Hilario's the ultimate horse whisperer,” notes Coppola. But off the field, Ulloa

is unassuming. “That humility is among the reasons he's at the top,” Zenni adds.

Though fiercely focused, Ulloa lives up to his first name—Hilario translates to “hilarious” in Spanish. “He's always smiling and cracking jokes,” Zenni says. “He knows how to lighten the mood in practice and between chukkers [the seven-minute periods, between which riders change horses to avoid exhausting them]. He's fun to be around.”

Naturally, Ulloa met his wife, Maria Clara “Clarita” Ferraiuelo, at a polo match in Buenos Aires. At the time, Ferraiuelo was engaged to someone else—but she wasn't three years later in 2007 when they met again while on vacation in Punta del Este, Uruguay. They married on his parents' farm in December 2013 during a brief break between the Argentine Triple Crown and the Palm Beach polo season. Together, they have two young daughters, Lavinia and Amber.

“It's funny because almost everything in my world is named Lavinia,” Ulloa says. “All the horses I breed have Lavinia as part of their name, my parents' farm is Lavinia, and so is my daughter. We end up saying, ‘Lavinia is at Lavinia watching Lavinia horses.’”

As for Amber, Ulloa says they “wanted a name you rarely hear in Argentina.”

The family and their two Jack Russell Terriers accompany Ulloa wherever the game takes him. A longtime personal trainer also joins the caravan to ensure Ulloa's agile, lithe, and strong, while tutors help his daughters keep pace with classmates in Argentina.



“*He teaches me everything. Not just polo, but how to work hard and be a better person.*” —Carlos “Toly” Ulloa

Ulloa stables 25 horses in the U.S., 12 to 14 in England, and more than 100 in Argentina. There, the Las Monjitas team practices on La Hache, the 50-acre farm he bought seven years ago. “It always was my dream,” says Ulloa, who notes that horse-breeding is his greatest polo pride. It's a love he inherited from his father, and a task that requires much patience as mares can take up to eight years to reach their potential. Heroica, Ulloa's 5-year-old chestnut on which his brother Salvador competes, was named this year's American Horse Polo Association Best Playing Pony.

He shares this passion for horses with his daughters, who often visit his stables in the late afternoon to play and ride the ponies. He'll never pressure them to follow in his footsteps, however. “It's up to them to choose whatever career they want,” he says.

Ulloa's fatherly role extends to his fellow players. “He teaches me everything” says his younger brother, Toly. “Not just polo, but how to work hard and be a better person.”

“I pick his brain, and he's more than happy to go above and beyond to help me,” adds Zenni.

Caset says Ulloa brings out the best in people. “When you see him playing that fiercely, it makes you want to play harder.”

Once Ulloa retires from competition, he hopes to make his living breeding and selling horses. He also intends to expand his own polo club in Pilar from its current 20 members. “I plan to offer a place where I and others can play.”

Who will dominate? Take a guess. ◀◀

