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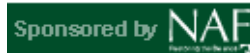
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Puffa polo blog: Even polo ponies don't like plastic bags

Karen Spinner, H&H features editor

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Ok, I admit it. I like talking about the weather. I know us Brits are obsessed, but there's something incredibly reassuring about having a good old whinge about the rain. Or the sun. Or the hail. Or, in the case of the Puffa charity polo day at Rowfant in West Sussex on Sunday, the wind. Buffeted across the ground, hair very much enjoying a life of its own, I fear that I've somewhat failed to achieve that polo glam look I was going for. Note to self: time to rediscover the ponytail.

But of course, today isn't about style and fashion — even though the female players look enviably groomed both in and out of the saddle — but the far more serious matter of strangles. There is nothing glamorous about this incredibly unpleasant disease. Strangles is the most commonly diagnosed infectious equine disease in the world. It can be fatal. And, as pretty much everyone I'm speaking to today agrees, it's a disease that is often shrouded in stigma.

So this afternoon's tournament is designed to achieve two very important things. One, the equestrian community — in other words, you and me — still needs to raise £80,000 to fund a strangles vaccine, a vaccine that would hopefully eradicate this horrible disease for good. And secondly, today is all about awareness. Puffa has done a grand job here and the long driveway into the polo ground is dotted with posters conveying facts and figures about the disease.

Although the message is a sober one, today is about fun and I'm finding the gutsy polo ponies utterly captivating. As the riders change ponies, the commentator — who really should consider a career in stand-up — tells us there's Greenwich Meantime and then the much more sedate Sussex Polo Club time, but there's nothing sedate about play.

Plucky and determined, the nimble ponies throw themselves into the action, seemingly nonplussed by flying mallets, a ball that often has a life of its own and the shouts of their excited riders. And they are so relaxed in between chukkas, too!

However, when an errant plastic bag wafts onto the pitch — the wind is playing havoc with some very lovely picnic arrangements — there is spooking all round, which serves as an important reminder to me that for even the most docile of equines, the plastic bag is an item to be loathed at all times.

As I chase yet another plastic cup along the ground — a new national pastime for the summer months, perhaps? — I realise how impressed I am with the relaxed, but at the same time enthusiastic, atmosphere of the day. Quality sport, plus the chance to give something back to our horses — it's a win-win situation.

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