

Women's Arena Open, A Battle in the Saddle

Wild Dog Polo's Grit Ends OC Polo's Reign in USPA Women's Arena Open

ORANGE COUNTY, CA, UNITED STATES, November 7, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On Sunday, October 20, the finale of the [USPA Women's Arena Open](#) hosted by [Orange County Polo Club](#) in Silverado, California, pitted Wild Dog Polo (Jade Hiltbrand, Stephanie Colburn, Tiamo Hudspeth) against defending champions OC Polo (Kasey Morris, Mila Slutzky, Marissa Wells). Leading the team in pink, Marissa Wells aimed to secure a prestigious three-peat for OC Polo. However, an early lead by the challengers, along with strong team chemistry, propelled Wild Dog to the USPA Women's Arena Open victory.

[Arena polo](#), sometimes referred to as hockey on horseback, is a ball and mallet sport played on horseback. Arena polo is played in an enclosed arena with two goal mouths set into either end of the 300 by 150-foot dirt or sand arena. The game is played with teams of three players all mounted on horseback. All players are equipped with bamboo cane mallets and attempt to move the ball into their respective goals to rack up points.

Periods of play last for 7.5 minutes and are known as "chukkers". At the end of a game, consisting of four chukkers, the team that has the highest number of goals wins. Teams must abide by all rules to ensure the safety of players and horses. Arena polo is a unique sport because men and women and players of all ages compete on the same teams and on the same field of play. With highly trained, athletic horses as the most important teammates, the action is fast and reaction times are quick. The arena aspect brings the action up close to spectators who can feel the thunder of hooves and hear the players communicate with their teammates.

Seizing control early in the match, OC Polo's Morris opened scoring with a goal, followed by a



Jade Hiltbrand and Marissa Wells battle in the Women's Arena Open at Orange County Polo Club photo credit - Tequila Sunset's Photography

two-pointer and Penalty 4 conversion from Wells, creating a 4-1 advantage for the home team.

Mounting a fierce comeback in the second chukker, Wild Dog Polo erupted with all three teammates contributing to the scoreboard. Finding the goal mouth in rapid succession, Wild Dog Polo held 9-goaler Wells to just one goal to take a narrow 6-5 advantage moving into the half-time break.

Detailing the strategy required to contain Wells, Hudspeth shared, "We knew going into this game that Marissa was going to be a beast out there and give it all she had. We knew we were going to have to be disciplined about going to her and really staying with her if we found ourselves next to her, and then allowing the other two to handle the ball. Whoever found themselves with Marissa was supposed to stay with Marissa and allow the other two to work with the ball."

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We really had to trust ourselves & the horses we brought - they were a huge contribution to winning. I think knowing we had the horsepower & just getting gritty with it was the turning point for us."

Tiamo Hudspeth, Wild Dog Polo Team



Wild Dog polo team hoists the Women's Arena Open trophy

Wells kickstarted the second half with an equalizing goal, but Wild Dog Polo swiftly regained momentum and was back on the attack. Colburn capitalized in open play and Hudspeth delivered from the penalty line, keeping the pressure on their opponents. As the chukker came to a close, Morris struck once more narrowing OC Polo's deficit to just two goals, 9-7, heading into the final chukker. A back-and-forth battle ensued in the fourth and final chukker, and despite two goals from Wells, Colburn's heroic final effort with less than 30 seconds remaining secured Wild Dog Polo's 12-10 victory.

Leading Wild Dog Polo with seven goals in the final, Stephanie Colburn was named Most Valuable Player. Reflecting on their team chemistry throughout the tournament, Colburn stated, "This is a huge accomplishment. We've been working so hard. This is a team that we put together and have all made sacrifices to make this happen and work well together. Tiamo and I have been playing together and against each other

for years, and first time playing together in the arena, we're really excited." The Sportsmanship Award was presented to Mila Slutzky for her continued positive attitude, fairness and support for her peers on and off the field.

Best Playing Pony was awarded to Sevens, a 6-year-old mare played in the first and third chukkers, owned by Colburn and recently purchased from Hudspeth. Speaking to Hudspeth's passion for training polo ponies, Colburn shared, "We brought six horses to this tournament from Texas [...] four of the six, she trained all the way through, that played today. Those horses are just amazing and that's her skill set." Identifying Wild Dog Polo's string as key to their victory, Hudspeth expressed, "We really had to trust ourselves and the horses we brought. They were a huge contribution to us winning and being able to hold onto our lead. [...] I think us knowing we had the horsepower and just getting gritty with it—that was the turning point for us."

Credit - United States Polo Association

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Tiamo Hudspeth reaches to hook Marissa Wells during the finals of the Women's Arena Open at OC Polo Club photo credit - Tequila Sunset's Photography



Stephanie Colburn receives the Most Valuable Player Award from helmet artist Kasia Lindgren and Sedar Celik of Sermus



Wild Dog polo team celebrate their win in the Women's Arena Open photo credit - Tequila Sunset's Photography

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