



CECIL AND BIG RUBE

Cowpunchers who changed the game of polo

Two cow-punchers from the plains of Llano Texas ended up leading the pack of polo players during the heyday of the sport. Cecil Smith and Rube (Hubert Winfield) Williams were both raised on hill country cattle ranches and learned to master the art of horse whispering at an early age.

Born in 1904 on Moss Ranch, Cecil Smith's father was the foreman and put him in a saddle and spurs and on a horse at the age of four. By 10, he was in command of any mount that came his way. In his teens he was roping, steering and cajoling as a \$1-a-day cow-puncher and rodeo rider.

Hubert Winfield Williams' father gave him the nick-name Rube because he was lazy like one of his ranch-hands named Rube. Rube might have been lazy on the ranch in Llano, but on the polo field he was a hard-charger and knew how to make a horse come around, no matter how untamed. He began training quarter horses and mustangs.

Bob Cooke wrote about Rube's philosophy on polo ponies in the *New York Herald Tribune*. "They're a little different ... You carry them along at reduced speed. For example we've got a horse at the ranch named Super Salesman. He's liable to jump into the infield and there's nothing you can do about it with a horse like that except let him age. Like fine whiskey."

That is exactly what happened in March 1931. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Always spectacular, cowboy Rube Williams provided another unscheduled thrill yesterday at El Cerrito Field. The fifth chukker, when the polo-playing Texas cow puncher's mount bolted over the rail, raced dangerously through scattering spectators, zigzagged



The press loved Rube Williams' somewhat reckless style of play.

through rows of parked automobiles and finally drew up near some tall and appetizing green grass." The press loved Williams' freewheeling, almost reckless style of play.

At a young age, the reputations of Smith and Williams had reached George Miller, a crusty cowboy himself who owned a livery stable, a playing field and a string of pony prospects in Austin. Just 65 miles southeast of Llano, the capital city offered these former cowpunchers an opportunity and they harnessed it. Miller wanted them to train and break the string

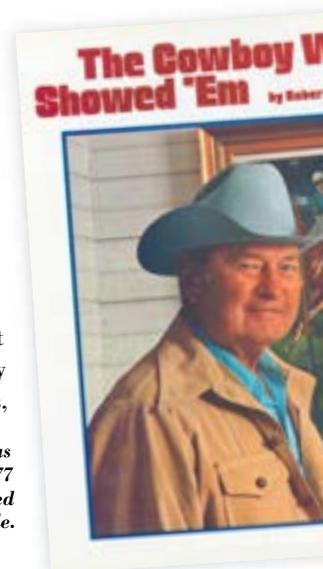
of polo ponies that he often sold to the established polo clubs on the East Coast. *The New York Times* reported, "Smith made a mallet out of an old broom handle and started practicing polo by hitting rocks and tin cans." In the article Smith was quoted, "It was like learning to play baseball in a railroad switchyard."

Legend has it that it was Rube Williams who was the first to put a real wooden mallet into his future teammate Smith's hands.

In 1924 Smith took two of Miller's horses back to Moss Ranch in Llano to break. He did not know much about polo, and had a ways to go before he would compete in the sport of kings, but knew he had a knack. According to a 1977 profile in *Sports Illustrated*, Smith said, "I took to walloping the balls into the hills that surrounded the ranch, then giving chase on horseback like a fox hunting rabbits."

In the shadows of Llano's Enchanted Rock a star was born. Instinctively, he knew how to train polo ponies to do what they needed to do in the game. Most polo players will concur that a good mount accounts for 75 percent of a player's success. Smith and his well-trained steeds were a winning combination. Speaking about his father's way with horses,

Cecil Smith was profiled in a 1977 Sports Illustrated article.



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Charles Smith, also a ranked polo player, said, “He knew they had to run fast, stop quick and have good minds.” He added, “Unlike race horses, polo ponies are asked to go for seven and one half minutes, to bump into other horses and change direction on a dime and my father knew how to make all this happen. He also knew the best horses went to the best players.”

In 1930, after six years of stick-and-ball matches against ranch hands in Texas, Smith and Williams joined George Miller in forming the Austin Polo Club. They were soon outclassing the cattle country’s best mallet wielders and began traveling, seeking more competitive matches. Wearing short embellished cowboy boots and still riding on western saddles, on their first visit east they met Harold Talbott Jr. who invited them to join the Roslyn, Long Island, New York Team. They made a big splash in the polo capital and brought back home proper English-style apparel and accoutrements to boot. Smith was touted as a “great strategist and fearless rider,” and was chosen as a spare on the 1930 International Polo Team. It was during those years polo reached its pinnacle.

Smith, tall and bulky, and Williams, small and wiry and 11 years Smith’s



Cecil Smith and William “Billy” Post during the U.S. Open at Meadowbrook in the 1930s

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According to author Blair Calvert, Rube Williams, above, was the best back with whom Cecil Smith had ever played.

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among polo players of the world by the United States Polo Association with a 9-goal handicap, one goal under the leader, Tommy Hitchcock Jr., the only 10-goal man in the world.” Williams held the ranking of a 7-goaler at the time and could often be heard coming on the field with his Texas drawl, hollering, “Watch out cowboys, here I come.”

According to “Cecil Smith: Mr. Polo” by Blair Calvert, Rube Williams was the best back Cecil ever played with.

In 1933, Smith and Williams were ascending to the highest levels of the sport and they were chosen as two members of the West Team in the legendary East-West match, which featured teams made up of the best players from both coasts of the country. It was often referred to as the World Series of Polo.

The match was played in Lake Forest, Illinois at the Onwentsia Country Club. Smith and Hitchcock were pitted together and the bookies were betting on the latter’s team to win. But after three games, the dream team from the West won with a 2-1 victory. But it was not an easy win; Smith suffered a concussion when his horse fell on him and was

senior, made quite a team and with their horses achieved a symbiotic combination of distance, deadly accuracy and timing. *The Milwaukee Journal* reported on Smith in 1933 under the headline Polo No Longer for Swells. “The former Texas cowboy, Cecil Smith is ranked second



unconscious for 20 minutes. As the ambulance chugged onto the field to take him to the hospital, he said, "Take that thing away, I am going to finish this game."

Williams collided with a goalpost and was hit in the ribs by a swinging mallet, a blow that grounded him for 15 minutes. According to *Sports Illustrated*, "Better polo had been played, but probably none so brutal. The underdog West team was made up of cowboys Smith and Williams, Elmer Boeseke, a rancher and Aidan Roark, a California movie company executive. The Eastern Team of Tommy Hitchcock, Michael Phipps, Winston Guest and his brother, Raymond Guest, were 100 percent New York Social Register."

The East-West game changed a lot of stereotypes. Following the high-profile match, cowboy-comedian Will Rogers said in *Sports Illustrated*, "The hillbillies beat the dudes and took the polo championship right out of the drawing room and into the bunkhouse. The East always thought you had to have a birth



C.V. "Sonny" Whitney, Earl A. S. Hopping, Cecil Smith and Rube Williams

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daughter of old Long Island money, Mary Miller."

According to Williams' daughter-in-law, Edith Williams, "Rube Williams came to play a match at the Rumson Country Club in New Jersey and my mother-in-law, who came from a prominent local family, fell madly in love

with him." Elizabeth Neilson's father had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange and an ancestral pedigree to be proud of.

Due to World War Two, polo lost much of its popularity and in 1948, Rube Williams gave into his chronic sciatica, which many believe began with his injury in the 1933 East-West match, and gave up the game. He turned his talent into training race horses for polo player Peter Grace. He had a debilitating stroke in 1958 and passed away in 1961 at his home in Shrewsbury, New Jersey.

Smith was first rated 10 in 1934 and with few exceptions he held that rating until 1962. George DuPont, executive director of the Polo Hall of Fame in Lake Worth, Florida said, "The record certainly sets him apart from the rest." He added, "Some people peak and get to that level for six or seven years, but to be there for so long is quite a feat. It's going to be tough to top it."

Cecil Smith remained actively-involved with horses and according to his obituary, "He more or less retired from polo in 1967. Despite warnings from his doctor, he continued to ride and train polo ponies on his 100-acre ranch in Boerne, Texas. After hip-replacement surgery, he kept riding. He played his last polo game at 83," his son, Charles said. "The last time Dad was on a horse was when he was 92, but didn't do much but walk it around." Smith died at his ranch north of San Antonio in 1999, just short of his 95th birthday.

Cecil Smith and Rube Williams were two cow-pokes who took polo from the tumbleweeds of Texas to fields of glory! ♦

certificate to play. Now polo has gone to the buckwheat belt. The cowboys had earned the permanent respect of the polo world. It was to the credit of the blue-blooded Easterners that they henceforth accepted the red-blooded Texans for what they were worth." Quite a victory in the win and in the words of noted entertainer and poloist Rogers, for two cow wranglers from out West.

Coincidentally, the teammates ended up marrying girls from what could be called "high" society. In 1934 when Smith was new to front-page news, he married a girl from Wading River, Long Island. According to *Sports Illustrated*, "It startled the polo world, for Smith was then known only as a polo-playing ranch hand and his bride was the



Stewart Iglehart, C.V. "Sonny" Whitney, Mrs. George H. Bostwick, Cecil Smith and Mike Phipps after the 1937 Monty Waterbury Cup

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