

The Way of the Game

Lachlan Clarke/Jane Cooper



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Lachlan Clarke, American A-grade player and educator, and Jane Cooper, Champion Ladies Player of the 2003 World Cup give their insight on strategy, for new and seasoned players alike.



The Line-Up

Lach's Tips Most new players have trouble knowing what to do in a line-up. While they're thinking about what to do, the ball is thrown in and the opposition gets it. New players should know what they are going to do before coming into the line-up; indecision at that point of the game can be costly.

JANE When you are in the line-up watch the ball! Before you get into the line-up, know whether you are going to go for the ball or take a swing at your opponent's racquet. I always go for the ball. If the opposition snaps the ball, I'll still go for the ball on the next throw-in. If they get two snaps on me, I still go for the ball on the next throw-in. If they get three balls out of consecutive line-ups, I start belting racquets (before my teammates start belting me). Try to set your horse up and be in position, always concen-

trating on the ball. When standing in the line-up, think ball first, then umpire, then opponent, then horse. If you know you don't have a shot at the ball (maybe because your horse is not lined up correctly), HIT your opponent's racquet. Don't make anything easy for them.

Always save your horse where you are able. It is good to have the same amount of fuel in the tank on Sunday afternoon as you have in your first game of the tournament.

The Number 1 (The Glory Hunters!)

Lach's Tips New riders playing the #1 position tend to want to float in mid-field, waiting for the ball. They are passive instead of pro-active, and make few contributions to mid-field strategy. When new #1's do get the ball, they want to travel in a straight line toward their goal, no matter where the opposing defense players are positioned.

New players tend to avoid offside racquet work like the plague. They make "easy" racquet-side 10-yard throws, even if those lobs are directly toward an opposing player. If the ball is on the ground, beginners, fearing the long stretch of an offside pick up, will make every effort to maneuver for a racquet-side scoop. In both cases, opting for the "easier" racquet work often places the new player squarely in the strike zone for an opposing player's swing. We endeavor to get even the newest players to work on offside 10-yard throws and pick-ups, as these two skills are sometimes the deciding points in a beginner's game.

JANE First and foremost, you MUST be confident and believe in your ability to throw goals. This may take a fair bit of work at home. I like to get a 44-gallon drum with the top cut out and ride around it (10 yards away) and throw the ball into the drum. (It's not as easy as it sounds!) If

you have a set of goal posts in the paddock, place them closer together than usual when practicing to make things hard for yourself. The best thing about playing a #1 is that it doesn't matter how bad you are—someone is always going to give you the ball. A #1 must communicate with their players. Your teammates must know what you expect from them and how you like to play.

You need to judge your opposing player. See where they hold their racquet, how long their reach in the line-up is. I like to start with my racquet low and come up under the other player's arm. This puts my racquet first in line to receive the ball.

When playing a #1, I like to turn through the line-up on both sides. (Of course, if the ball falls outside you will roll back to it.) You will find that if you jump through the line-up for a while, your horse will begin to anticipate this and will jump forward as the umpire throws the ball in. It's much easier to catch the ball in the line-up this way. By turning through the line-up, you are already on course for your area. When your team members get the ball, you are already in front of them. It is important that your teammates don't have to wait for you to get to the area. The quickest goals (not necessarily the fastest) are best, because they are the least taxing on your horses.

If the ball is being brought to you by your teammate, keep eye contact with the ball carrier. As a #1, I like to pick my opposing #3 up in center field and take them where I want them. Once you control the #3 you only have to worry about the ball. Try to get to the area just in front of the ball carrier so that you are moving with them. If you are working in a pattern with your ball carrier, you can avoid that unattractive criss-cross effect where you just can't meet up to get the ball. You can spend five minutes cantering back and forth along the line and not get anywhere close to connecting with the ball carrier, wasting a lot of your horse while doing so.

If you are carrying the ball down yourself, pick your opposing #3 up if you can, and place them where you want them. DO NOT enter the area unless you are sure that you can successfully keep control of the ball. The most pressure a #3 can put on you is at the time you cross the 30-yard line and



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lose contact with the ball for a moment. Give yourself the best chance to retain possession of it.

Don't have a set play in the area. A #1 should be able to throw a goal from anywhere in the area. Face the flat of your forearm where you want the ball to go and throw it. It doesn't take a #3 very long to figure out the #1's that only have a couple of ways to score a goal. Once they work it out, they can stop you from getting those goals. Be confident. If you see an opening, throw the ball. It doesn't matter if you miss one or two goals, as long as you are having an honest go. DON'T stress over a missed goal; you cannot change history, so get on with it and try for the next one.

The Number 2

Lach's Tips

New #2's always want to protect the ball carrier, either by riding alongside as an "escort" or by attempting to peel off an opponent marking the ball carrier. In either case the ability of the ball carrier to maneuver is severely hampered, as defense players are drawn to that player like bees to a honeycomb. We try to get new #2's to look for the defense player closest to them, not only those closest to the ball.

The most often executed beginner error has to be the #2 or the #3 getting

the ball and running Mach I down to the penalty area ahead of their #1. New players see too much upper level play and try to imitate that speed, without having the same stick skills or tactical experience. They are in a big hurry to do everything fast. This creates a mad scramble at the penalty line and wastes precious equine energy as ball carriers avoid opponents while waiting for their #1 to arrive at the area. The usual result is that the ball is dumped into the area, and possession is often lost to the opposing side.

JANE

The #2 position is the easiest position to play, but it is the most difficult position to play well. The team with the strongest #2 will normally win a game.

The #2 player has to be able to switch from attack to defense quickly and continuously. You must always know where the ball is and where your players are. It is very important for a #2 to support his teammates.

The #2 player has to adapt to his teammates. You must communicate; know how they play, where they want you and what they expect from you. For example, know what your #3 likes to do when they come out of the area. Do they like to take the ball themselves? Do they like to pass it? Find out how they play BEFORE you get into the situation where you need to put that strategy into action.

Do not crowd your #1 in the line-up; give them room. If the ball goes out the back, don't rush your #3; give them enough space. Put yourself next in line to get the ball. Have your opposition where you want them. They will push you onto the ball. You must know your teammates weaknesses and strengths and compensate for them. Help your #3 if they are getting held out of the area. Help your #1 if they are having trouble getting to goals.

If you get the ball from the line-up, look for open spaces. Get out of the pack and have a look around. Sometimes you will see that your players are doing their job by holding the opposition away from you. DON'T go to where they are. Make it easy for your teammates to hold the opposition off you, and then carry the ball down to your #1. DO NOT just throw the ball in to your #1 any old way. Try to pass the ball only when you



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know they are going to be able to catch it. If you can't stop and you must let go of the ball, see if you can get it to your #3. If you're not able to pass it back to your #3, put the ball on the ground in the area where your #1 has the best chance of getting to it. DO NOT throw the ball so it runs out over the back line. This is a NEGATIVE play.

The most important rule in polocrosse (apart from getting the ball and scoring a goal) is to create winning play. If you cannot WIN a play, make it a NEUTRAL play, NOT a NEGATIVE play. Don't make anything easy for the opposition.

If your teammate gets the ball from the line-up DO NOT shepherd. Do not ride next to them guarding their racquet side. Shepherding eliminates the ball carrier's ability to turn in your direction. You are helping the opposition. Grab the closest

opposition player; it doesn't matter what number they are. Of course, if you can grab the #3, get him, but don't chase him down the field. Look after your player with the ball by keeping a player off him. If you have your man and the other player on your section has his player, then the man with the ball should only have one player to deal with, and he should be able to do this.

Once you have picked up that one player DO NOT swap. Stay with that player until the ball has gone into the area. If the opposition gets the ball from the line-up, you have to jump to defense immediately. Attack the man with the ball. Don't swing as you fly past them; park your horse next to them and then swing. Aim for the ball. If you swing from too far back, your horse will lose momentum as you lean so far forward. Each time you swing like this your horse



will drop back a bit further, and you will only get one or two swings at the opponent's racquet. Those swings won't be very effective ones. (They will also quite possibly draw a foul.) If you get your horse right up next to the opposing ball carrier and swing at him, you are in the correct position for your horse to keep gaining on their horse. Your horse will stay with the ball carrier's horse while you swing.

If you can only get to the non-racquet side of the ball carrier, keep the pressure up until another player from your section can get in and hit the carrier's racquet. If the ball carrier is not the opposing #1, follow him until he delivers the ball. Don't pull off the ball carrier at the line; you can go as far as he can, so keep up the pressure. If it is the #1 carrying the ball, pressure him right to the line, even if your #3 is caught out. The more pressure you put on him the more likely he is to make an error, thus giving your #3 time to get in and get the ball.

If you are playing the #2 correctly, there will be some chukkas where you have a lot of ball, but in some you may do most of the work and you won't touch the ball at all. Be prepared to work hard in the #2 position

The Number 3 (The Anchor)

Lach's Tips New #3's often forget that their first responsibility is to take the opposing #1. They too often go for the ball in mid-field and get caught out of position, allowing the opposing #1 to waltz in for a clean shot on goal. We try to get new #3's covering the opposing #1 first, then going for the ball, if possible.

JANE The #3 is my favorite position. (Except when my team is getting thumped).

It is imperative the #3 does their job in the line-up. Be sure to set your horse to first, HOLD in the line-up, then, to get out the back quickly. A #3 horse must hold for you to catch the ball if you are able to do so, then be able to get out the back if the ball goes out there. If you can't get to the ball first, endeavor to spoil the opposition chance at it. If the ball goes to the opposition side and you can't reach it, push his horse over the ball and hope your #2 will pick it up. Remember to

NEUTRALIZE a play if you can't WIN it. Don't make NEGATIVE plays.

The #3 must have a number of counter-action plans. If your team is not winning the ball in line-ups, you must be able to analyze why you are not, then have a plan to fix it. If you can't beat the other #3 out the back, stretch the line-up out and have your players pull the ball down. If you know you are much faster out the back than the other #3, shorten the line-up and have your players take the opponents racquets out, so the ball has the best opportunity to go out the back.

The best #3's are attacking #3's. Attack the ball; always know where it is. Be alert and ready to hound your #1. Don't let them out of your grip for too long at any time. Don't get sucked into the pack too far if you know you can't get out.

A lot of #3's wait until they get into the area before they begin working on the #1. If you attack your #1 all the time, you will wear them down by the end of the third chukka. Get physical and get in their face. Don't wait till you get into the area to do your job; attack the #1 center field. If the opposition has the ball, pick your #1 up early. I like to pick my #1 up before they get even over the centerline. Don't let them into the area. If they do manage to make their way down to the area, cart them over the back line.

Get your horse's shoulder in front of the #1's horse and control where they go. Stop them from moving. If you can't get in front of the #1, run them where they want to go, but at a faster pace than they can handle. Get them where they want to go too early, so they can't make the move they were planning. Get your knee under theirs and run their horse.

If your opposing #2 is hounding you, send your #2 to the opposing #1. Don't get stuck with two players from your section dealing with their #2. Just be sure you can get away from that #2 when you need to.

The best chance you have to intercept the ball is as it crosses the 30-yard penalty line. Whether it is bounced or passed in, this is the time when you as a #3 should put the most pressure on the ball and the #1. The more pressure you put on the #1, and the more time it takes the ball carrier to get the ball into the area, the more chances you have to force the opposition into an error! If the #1 has the ball in the area, be sure not to swing at the ball unless you are in position.

Keep your horse close when you swing so you don't over-ride. If you don't take the ball off the #1 with that swing, be sure that you haven't over-committed and given them an easy shot at the goal. WAIT for your chance!

As a #3 you should be able to read a game and determine where you are winning or losing plays. You have to be able to analyze your opposition and determine where their faults and weaknesses are. Use this knowledge when you work against them in the area. Know their strengths and block those. Force your opponent into making errors.

The biggest thing to remember about playing a #3 is to not be disillusioned. If you think you are going to go into a game and stop or spoil every goal, then you will be severely disappointed. Your job is to make it difficult for the #1 to throw a goal. If this results in a missed goal or a dropped ball, that is great, but realistically a #1 should be able to throw a goal the majority of the time

Remember

- The aim of this game is to get the ball and score a goal. It's VERY SIMPLE, really.
- When you are on the field ALWAYS know where the ball is.
- Attack the ball! Don't wait for people to miss it or expect someone else to get it.
- Get your head down and your bum up and go for the ball.
- It's important to remember that polocrosse is a game, and ultimately, games should be fun.



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