

By JOANNE O'FLYNN

SWEARING, sweating, screaming — it's not what you think, it's just another typical training session for the Cork Polocrosse Club.

Whether you're a speed demon, nervous rider or confident novice, polocrosse — a hybrid of polo and lacrosse — is a sport in which anyone can participate.

Two teams of three players battle it out for possession of the ball, while club founder Padraig Edwards acts as referee and coach. "Be sure of it Jess," he says, as Jessica Corbett prepares to pass the ball to team-mate Mike Murphy.

"Get down on it, stretch those arms," he roars as Mareike Graepel fights Majella McGee for the ball. Mareike sweeps the ball out in front of Majella's nose but Majella rackets hard and the ball flies out of Mareike's net. "That's the stuff folks, keep it up," he says and all the encouragement helps to improve the riders picking-up and ball-passing skills.

It's fair to say that polocrosse fever has well and truly set in at Hop Island Equestrian Centre.

The player positions are goal-scorers, mid-fielders and defenders and the playing field is divided into three areas.

Defenders can travel between the goal area and mid-field, mid-fielders obviously have to stay in the centre and goal-scorers can move between mid-field and the opposing goal area. Training sessions are held every Wednesday evening and Saturday morning with players getting expert advice from Padraig, who is himself a valued member of the Limerick Polocrosse Club.

"I had been thinking of setting up a club here in Cork for a while, it just came down to finding a base with good horses and people willing to give it a shot.

"The aim is to be ready for the tournaments next year but of course we always have a bit of craic at each session," said Padraig.

Hop Island on the Rochestown Road has become that base due to the quality of horses available and the keen interest in the sport by owner Liam O'Driscoll and a group of regular riders at the centre.

"I love seeing people try new things and it's great that there is something exciting for riders to participate in. This is a first for the equestrian community in Cork and the interest has been huge. There are only six other clubs around the country — Limerick, Waterford, Tipperary, Birr, Carrickmines and Horetown — so it's about time the Rebel Riders gave them a run for their money at the tournaments," said Liam.

Asking Padraig about what kind of horse you need to play polocrosse he explained that once it's fit and healthy, any horse can become a good player.

"Ideally the horse should have a nice temperament. Thoroughbreds are popular among the real pros around the world but some of the cobs in Hop Island, like Magpie, Foxy, Tilly and Raphael who are used for jumping and trekking, are fantastic and really enjoy playing. Even the small

little ponies like Goggles and Norman have given it a go. They're small and quick and can duck under the heads of the bigger horses to get to the ball first!"

One of the club's most experienced polocrosse players, Eoin Clarke of Passage West, is the youngest member at 13: "I've been playing for about four

Vikki Murphy riding Magpie.



Rebel



THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS: Cork Polocrosse Club founder Padraig Edwards riding Fluffy.

Picture: Jan Janssen

months and it's the best fun I've had on horseback. My riding has really improved because I'm concentrating so much on getting the ball that I don't worry about the horse or what I need to do to make him move — it just seems to come naturally."

Newest members Jean Morris and Shauna Sheehan have taken to it like ducks to water. "Although I have my own horse, I've never done anything like this before. I'm getting the hang of it fast and I've even scored a few goals!" said Jean. Shauna was doubtful that she would be able to play successfully: "I've never been good at ball sports and it looked quite tricky to pick up the ball. It took me a few minutes to get used to carrying the racket and controlling the horse with one hand, but the other players helped me out and I'm getting more confident every time I play. It's a real adrenaline rush and I love the fast pace of the game."

So can more people join the club? "One or two new people start every couple of weeks so I go easy on the rules and everyone goes hell

for leather," said Padraig. "That way the new people get a real sense of the fun of the game and the regular players get to go wild!"

"The rules are easy to learn though and everyone picks them up fast. It's common sense — don't ride towards another player in case of a crash, don't stop your horse over the ball in case another horse rides into the back of yours and so on. The team is looking really

promising for next year's tournaments so even though the footballers failed to do us proud last Sunday, the Rebel Riders won't be letting the side down next year!"

● **Polocrosse training sessions take place every Wednesday, 8pm and Saturday, 10am. For more details, phone 086-3499514, email info@corkpolocrosse.com or check out www.corkpolocrosse.com**

POLOCROSSE - WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

A TEAM consists of six players, divided into two sections of three who alternate chukkas of a maximum of eight minutes each. Six or eight chukkas compromise a full match. The three players in each section play the position of a No. 1 "attack", a No. 2 "centre", or a No. 3 "defence".

Players can pick up the ball from the ground, catch it in their racquet and ride with it. They will throw it to other players until the No.1 has possession in the goal scoring area. A player cannot carry the ball over the penalty line, but must bounce it so that they do not actually cross the line.

However, it can be thrown to a player over the line. When carrying the ball, a player must carry it on the stick side, i.e. right-handed players must carry it on the offside of the horse. They can, however, pick-up or catch the ball on the non-stick side provided they immediately bring it back to their stick side.