

Townsend Cup

An America win against England under US rules evens up the score, reports Herbert Spencer

A hard-riding USA team retained the John R Townsend Arena Challenge Cup in March, defeating England 15-9 at the Empire Polo Club in Indio near Palm Springs, California.

The Hurlingham Polo Association (HPA) and US Polo Association (USPA) fielded their strongest 22-goal teams to contest the cup, last won by the USA in 2008 at Great Meadow Polo Club in Virginia.

The last time the two countries met in an arena polo international, for the 2009 Bryan Morrison Trophy in the UK, England downed the USA by, coincidentally, the same 15-9 score as this year's Townsend encounter.

This mirroring of scorelines, winners and losers seems to reflect the significant differences in arena rules in the two countries. Under USPA rules in the US, USA wins. Under HPA rules in the UK, England wins.

The USPA and Empire Polo Club went all-out to make the 2011 Townsend Cup a major event. It was the first time it had been staged on the West Coast, having originated in New York in 1923 in the old Squadron A Armory, and then been revived 85 years later in Virginia.

Empire had rebuilt its palm-fringed arena just this year. It has concrete walls, rather than the usual, more forgiving wooden ones used in other arenas on both sides of the Atlantic.

A pool of 30 ponies was provided by Russ Sheldon of Poway Polo Club near San Diego; George Dill, polo manager at Eldorado Polo Club adjacent to Empire; and Eric Wright at Empire. Rather than the teams drawing lots for horses, however, the Americans chose which ponies they and the English would ride.

Before the match, the England players got a chance to play chukkas on their ponies and to try and focus on the unfamiliar American rules of the game. A major difference in USPA and HPA rules is that in the US, players ride back to midfield to line up for a throw-in after a goal is scored. In England, the ball is hit in from goal immediately after one is scored, making for more continuous action.

The USA took an early lead with two goals by John Gobin and a third by Tommy Biddle before England responded with points from Ryan Pemble and Sebastian Dawnay, leaving the Americans leading 3-2 at the end of the first chukka. In the second period, USA got a point on penalty, three goals by Gobin and one from Biddle. Captain Chris Hyde, Pemble and Dawnay each scored once for England, leaving the visitors 8-5 down at chukkas-end.

The USA's Shane Rice scored twice and Gobin once before England responded with a



single goal from Hyde, leaving the Americans 11-6 up in the third period. In the fourth and final chukka, the USA's Biddle scored twice and Gobin and Rice once each, against two goals from England's Dawnay and one from Hyde, giving the Americans a 15-9 victory.

On local television before and after the encounter, England skipper Hyde referred to the USPA's 'completely different rules', but was magnanimous in defeat. 'The best team won,' he said, 'but when the Americans come over to England again to play under our rules, they'd better watch their backs.'

It is clear that, until the USPA and HPA get together on their arena rules to bring them more in line with one another, the country that hosts internationals like the Townsend and the Bryan Morrison will hold the advantage.

1 Shane Rice stretches for the ball 2 Chris Hyde (left) and Shane Rice eye the ball

'When the Americans come over to play under HPA rules, they'd better watch their backs'