

Feature Pablo MacDonough at La Irenita

The magic of MacDonough

In the wake of his Argentine Open win, Pablo MacDonough shows Alice Gipps round La Irenita, the Pampas powerhouse of the family horse-breeding empire

Awaiting embryo transfer at La Irenita, Pablo MacDonough's five best playing mares are rounded up for a brief introduction. Two weeks previously they were glimmering machines with split-second reactions, pumped up with excitement as they played flat out at Palermo, helping Ellerstina take home the trophy at the world's most important tournament, the Argentine Open.

Today they are relaxed, manes already growing into mohicans and coats faded in the strong Argentine sun – there is little to suggest these are the best ponies in Pablo's string. Without even a halter he jumps onto his favourite playing pony, Ellerstina Suegra, whilst laughing and chatting with Claudio Palomeque, his head groom. They have every reason to be happy, as Pablo has had an outstanding year, winning the Queen's Cup, the Triple Crown in Sotogrande and the Argentine Open. These ponies were all important to the success of his career to date.

Aside from many years of practice, all sorts of factors contribute to the success of a top professional player. Mainly, as any player will tell you, the most important element are the horses, and having good horses means having a spectacular set-up to produce them.

To get to where he is today, Pablo has not only bought top class mares from abroad, such as Cordelia from Alan Kent, but his family have spent many years breeding polo ponies, perfecting the bloodlines to suit their beloved sport.

Both Pablo and his brother Matias are fortunate in that their father, Jorge MacDonough, is not only one of Argentina's best equine vets, but in 1997 he had the foresight to buy part of the property La Irenita. Thirty years ago it was the most prestigious racehorse training farm in Argentina; now it is jointly owned by Pablo, his brother and their father. Pablo joined the business recently, buying a third share only three years ago. La Irenita is now one of the most famous polo embryo transfer stations in the world, aiding the fast track development of the Polo Argentino breed.

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La Irenita is 380km south-west of Buenos Aires. Surrounded by thousands of hectares of additional rented land, La Irenita itself is now 500 hectares, just a fraction of the original 4,000 hectares.

Two hundred stables remain from the racing yard and the MacDonoughs have added three polo grounds, smaller paddocks for the stallions and a state-of-the-art lab for the embryo transfers. There are six houses, including one for Matias.

Overall there are 2,000 horses on the farm, of which a third belong to Pablo. Such numbers require high volumes of staff – 60 people work at the farm at the busiest time of the year.

Pablo himself takes around 100 embryos per

year. He keeps the recipient mares, foals and weanlings at neighbouring La Liguria, but the stallions are always kept at La Irenita. Clarin, a small chestnut stallion played by Pablo in the Open, who was retired early in his career in 2006 due to injury, is a great hope for future generations. "He's the best horse I've ever played," says Pablo, evidently excited about the potential of offspring from the stallion that was bred by his father. As he only started siring foals in 2006, his offspring are unproven. La Irenita's best proven stallion, with offspring now playing the Open, is Irenita Lunatico, also bred by Jorge MacDonough.

Pablo, who has only really started to push ahead with his own breeding programme in the last three to four years, believes both the mare and the stallion to be equally important in producing good offspring. Important factors for the stallion are a calm temperament and action "close to the ground". Theoretically they pass on a good mouth, he says, but overall an amazing horse will pass on its best qualities 80 per cent of the time. While it is one thing to produce youngsters with such potential there is a lot more work to get them from foal to playing polo. Pablo is fan of Monty Roberts, and makes all his trainers and breakers watch the videos, an

important and progressive step towards sympathetic breaking and handling in Argentina. "Monty Roberts is a genius!" he declares.

No professional players are based full-time at La Irenita, but Pablo's young horses are played in chukkas three or four times a week by the permanent staff, while he spends time playing abroad in America, England and, for the first time this year, St Moritz. He stays in Argentina for a mere five months per year, from September to mid-January, but most of this time is spent in Pilar for the high-goal season. Pablo has bought land in Pilar with his brother Matias and Nacho Figueras, on which they are building polo

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grounds, stables and an exercise track. He says this was partly because of restrictions at Centauros, the club where he was previously based, regarding exercising after rain, which interrupted the fitting programme of his Open ponies "On our own land at Yacare we can set the rules!" he says.

The MacDonoughs like to give back to the

local community that has been so supportive over the years; in late December or early January every year, family and friends, such as Gonzalito Pieres and Martin Garrahan, gather to play a fun charity tournament in aid of the local hospital. A great success, it serves to confirm the well deserved warmth with which the MacDonough family is regarded. ❌