

Horse-Ball: A Wild and Fascinating Sport

Hang On! A rider leans off his horse to grab the ball during a fast-paced game of horse-ball.
Photos by Olivia Kohler JuNiThi



By Darlene Ricker

With eight FEI disciplines to choose from, why would a spectator opt to watch the horse-ball demonstration at the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games 2014 in Normandy? For Sernin Pitois, a French horse-ball player, the answer is simple: "There is so much action – the game goes fast and the horses go fast. It's very exciting! Horse-ball is like nothing you have ever seen."

That is especially true for those who don't reside in Europe or South America, where horse-ball is widely popular. It is particularly so in France, which has long been the sport's top-rated nation. For the rest of us, what surprises will horse-ball offer?

Just try to imagine a mesh of polo, rugby and basketball played at warp speed, with riders twisting and contorting every which way (sometimes out of the saddle or hanging off the side of the horse) as they grab for the ball while navigating a speeding Thoroughbred, all the while trying not to crash into one another. While every precaution is taken to safeguard the horses and riders, hard bumps are sometimes inevitable in this highly aggressive, fast-paced sport (although head-on collisions are prohibited). Competitors and their mounts are garbed in protective gear, which is reminiscent of the sport's origins as a game soldiers used to prepare for war in ancient times.

Horse-ball originated in the 18th century in Argentina, where it became known as "pato" (which means duck in Spanish, a throwback to the days when the sport was played



Horse-ball is very popular in Europe and South America.

with animals instead of a ball). Pato was declared Argentina's national game in 1953. After it spread to Europe and other regions of the world, the International Horse-Ball Federation (FIHB), the sport's governing body, was formed. The FIHB has 16 members, most of which are European nations, along with Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Cayman Islands, Israel, Pakistan and the United States.

The four current top-ranked European horse-ball nations – France, Spain, Portugal and Belgium – will participate in a four-day horse-ball demonstration at the Games in Saint-Lô from August 27 to 31. The first two days will be exhibition tournaments, with the semi-finals on the third day and the finals on the last day. Each day will have narration so that spectators can learn about the sport and understand the action on the field.

On a field measuring 60-80 meters long by 20-30 meters wide, players must grab the ball from the ground and throw it through a hoop-shaped vertical goal, which is 3.5 meters (almost 11-and-a-half feet) high. The ball has six leather handles, any of which can be grabbed by a player. The game is played in two halves, each lasting 10 minutes, separated by a three-minute break. The two most important rules are: a player cannot have the ball in his possession for more than 10 seconds; and each team must pass the ball at least three times among three different players before scoring a goal (or the goal will not be counted).

When the ball is dropped or falls on the ground, anyone can pick it up, but only if he is riding in the same direction as the game is going when the ball was dropped. The rules



Spectators at the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games 2014 in Normandy will have the opportunity to watch horse-ball.

for pickup are simple: The horse has to be galloping (or at a trot when the players are younger, usually 12-years-old or less) when a rider picks up the ball. Stopping during pickup is against the rules; it can hurt the horse's back and usually means that the player has less of a swing to pull himself back up, which can cause him to lose a stirrup or fall off.

In Europe, even young children play horse-ball. During part of each day of the Games event, there will be demonstrations by six-year-old players, with divisions for boys and girls.

The sport can be played indoors or outdoors. The Games tournament will take place in an indoor area. Sermin, who has played the game for 25 years, said the indoor arena at Saint-Lô is the best venue for a match, as it is extremely large and well laid out. The arena has seating for 3,000 spectators and he predicts the stands will be full of loud, cheering fans.

He explained the allure of horse-ball: "I love jumping and dressage, but in those sports you are alone with your horse. Horse-ball is a team sport that you play with your friends and with your horse. It is very different than other equestrian sports." (Polo is probably the closest.)

Some former Games attendees have had an opportunity to witness horse-ball, which was featured in a demonstration match at the 2002 World Equestrian Games

in Jerez. Fabien Grobon, CEO of the 2014 Games, who plays polo, said he finds horse-ball fascinating. When the demonstration sports were being selected for Normandy, horse-ball and polo won out. That came as no surprise to Fabien, who said one of the organizers' goals is to attract underrepresented groups to watch the Games. "When it comes to youth, and especially boys, they like the excitement of a team sport that is aggressive and fast," he said. "Horse-ball is all that and more."

Saint-Lô, the capital of the Manche department in Normandy, is located in northwestern France, about an hour's drive from the main Games venues in Caen, an hour-and-a-half from Rennes and three hours from Paris. It can also be reached by train from Caen, Rennes, Caen, Cherbourg and Paris. The nearest airport is located in Caen-Carpiquet, about 45 miles east of Saint-Lô.

For more information on the Horse-Ball demonstration at the Games, ticketing, lodging and transportation, visit normandy2014.com/the-disciplines/10/Horse-Ball

About the writer: Darlene Ricker is CEO and Editorial Director of Equestrian Authors, LLC (equestrianauthors.com), a firm that writes, edits and markets equestrian books, articles and films. A former equine law attorney and author of several published books, she covered equestrian sports as a staff writer for the Boston Globe and the Los Angeles Times. She was executive editor for the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games 2010 and will be covering the 2014 Games in Normandy.



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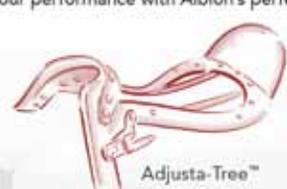
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