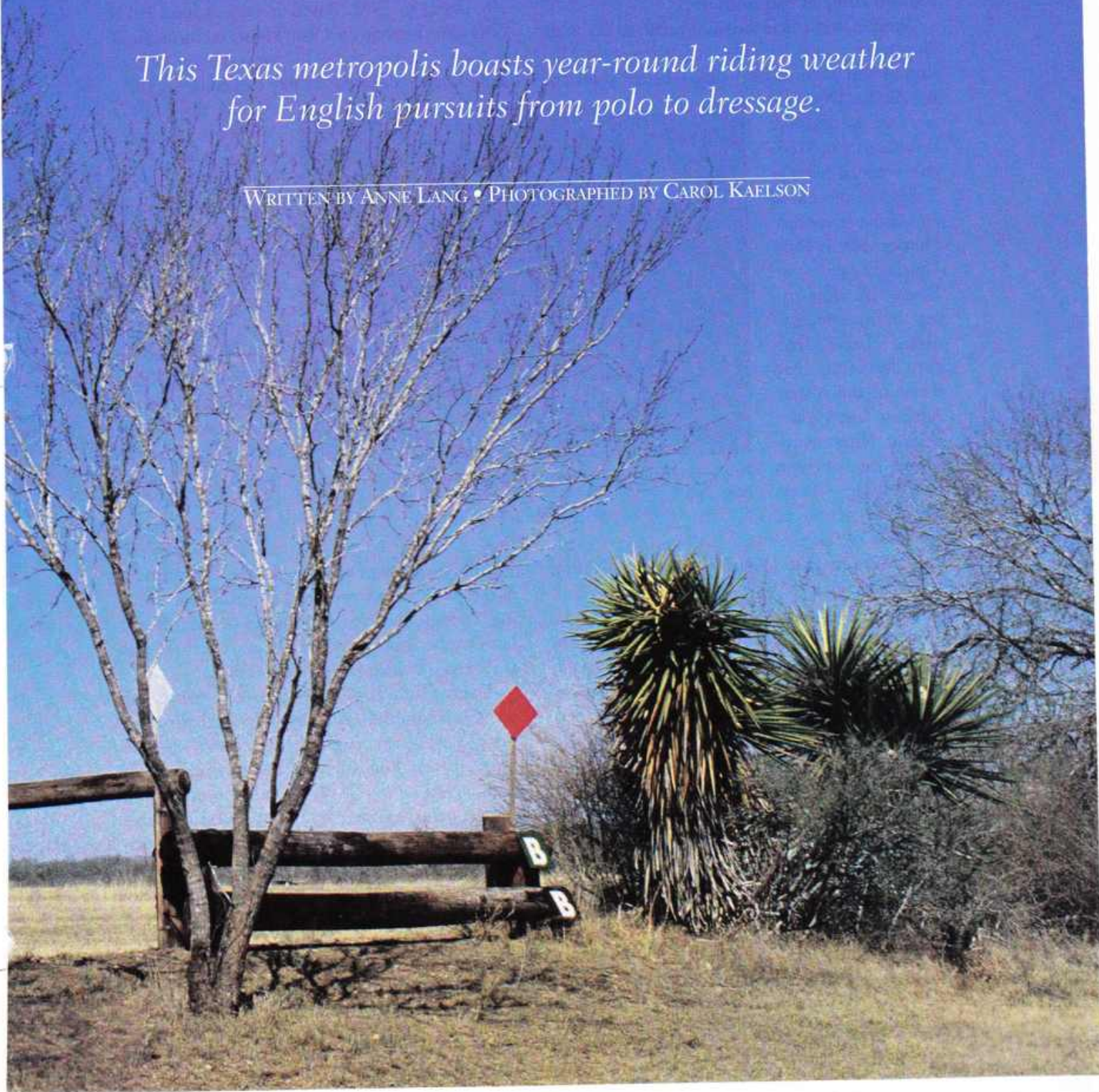


SPUR VISITS

San Antonio

*This Texas metropolis boasts year-round riding weather
for English pursuits from polo to dressage.*

WRITTEN BY ANNE LANG • PHOTOGRAPHED BY CAROL KAELSON



On a June morning in 1691, riding tall in their saddles, a party of Spanish explorers led by Captain Domingo Teran happened upon a gently rolling region in what is now south-central Texas. Instantly captivated by the peaceful countryside, Teran and his men could not have predicted the turbulent events that would shape the future city's identity. Indeed, their arrival coincided with a benevolent event: the feast day of St. Anthony of Padua. Hence the area's subsequent name of San Antonio.

Spanish settlement actually occurred 25 years later, most notably with the completion of the Mission of San Antonio de Valero—better known as the Alamo. Doubling as a fort, the structure became part of Mexico's eventual reign in Texas and the site of an infamous conflict. Heroes such as Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie fell while trying unsuccessfully to obtain Texas' freedom during the 1836 Battle of the Alamo. A month later General Sam Houston reversed the situation by leading Texas troops to victory in the Battle of San Jacinto. Mexican rule officially ended with Texas becoming a republic.

The gain of independence was offset by the substantial loss of human life on both sides. But in San Antonio today, descendants of those valiant pioneer soldiers abound, as do the descendants of countless horses who participated in the two battles. Fortunately, the modern-day careers of these equines remain in the peaceful realm—whether it is herding longhorns on the city's outlying ranches, performing a high-level dressage test before international judges or galloping the length of a polo field to help score a team goal.

That equestrian pursuits are plentiful in a city of 1.6 million inhabitants is not surprising. It's the broad variety of disciplines that might raise the eyebrows of outsiders who generally classify the Texas riding world as limited to the cowboy/rodeo

genre. While such activity certainly flourishes in San Antonio and throughout the state, this particular south Texas metropolis also boasts a rich offering of every type of English-saddle sport imaginable, with the exception of foxhunting.

One significant faction is the San Antonio Polo Club, one of America's oldest clubs. The 77-year-old SAPC proudly traces its roots to a 1920 charter establishment with the United States Polo Association, although San Antonio polo play actually began in 1872. Based at various local fields (including historic Fort Sam Houston) throughout its long existence, the SAPC has resided at Retama Polo Center since the facility's opening in 1975.

Among the SAPC's 30 active members are Joe Barry, Tommy Wayman, Stewart Armstrong and the 10-goal-rated Mike Azzaro.

"At one time or another, practically every pro in the U.S. has played in San Antonio," says former SAPC manager Jimmy Newman. "The primary reason is the mild winter climate; it's kind of the Florida of the Southwest.

For the majority of average players, San Antonio is the place for winter play, especially for training." (Ironically, Newman moved to Palm Beach last October after more than 20 years at the Texas club. His successor is Bubba Morrison.)

Sharing this particular slice of Texas is the SAPC's landlord, Retama Park. In 1991 the race-track's developers bought the polo club's 488-acre property, which mostly consisted of virgin meadows unused by the SAPC. The large-scale track, which opened in April 1995, now sits on 266 acres adjacent to the polo center. But while the two enterprises have always maintained a smooth relationship, Retama Park has not enjoyed an equally smooth road to success.

During its first two years of racing, the attractive Southwestern-style plant has managed to draw respectably large crowds. But due to San Antoni-



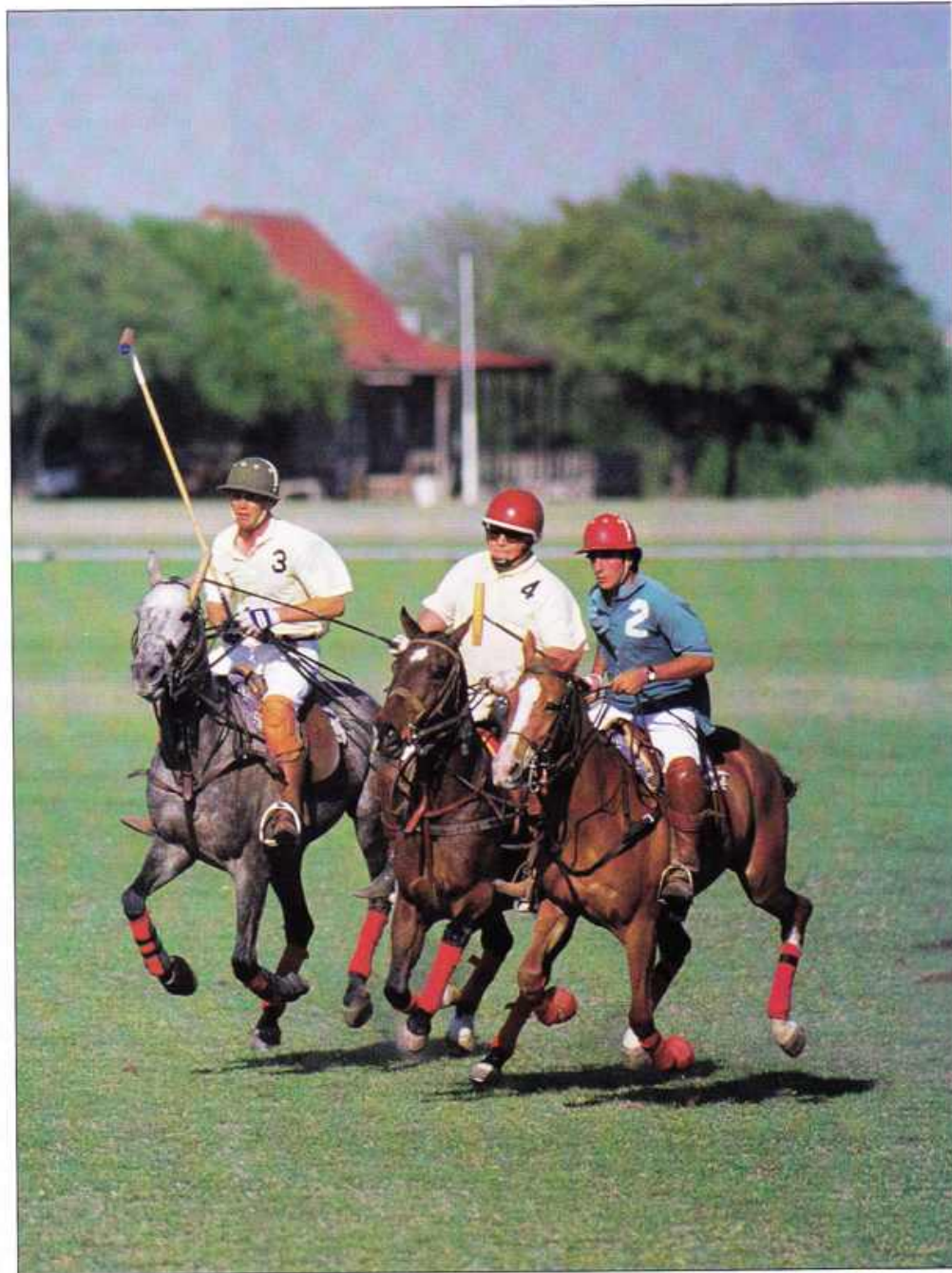
Polo great Tommy Wayman is an active member of the San Antonio Polo Club.

ans' lack of pari-mutuel betting experience and their predominantly modest incomes, Retama's on-track handle has fallen far short of projections—a dilemma that eventually forced track owners to file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in March 1996. New hopes have arisen, however, with Call Now Inc.'s acquisition of majority bond interest and the company's subsequent cash infusions. A recently approved bankruptcy plan will allow the track to continue operations, which include a four-month Thoroughbred meet beginning August 2. (The current season of mixed Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse cards runs through July 6.)

"There is still a long way to go for Texas racing to reach its potential and level of excellence that our race fans deserve," admits Retama Park Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Joseph Straus Jr. "But we know 1997 will be better." Straus and his brother David, members of a longtime and respected San Antonio ranching family and owners of Straus Medina Ranch, co-founded the track and remain integral parts of its management.

And San Antonio remains home to a number of prominent Thoroughbred farms geared to producing and/or training national-class racing prospects. In addition to Straus Medina Ranch, some of the area's well-known establishments include Ted Blanch's Double Diamond Ranch, Dr. Richard Mays' Key to the Hills Farm, Gene Palmieri's Silver Spur Ranch, Pepper Martin's Alamo Stud Farm and Dr. Jerry Black's San Antonio Equine Center.

The somewhat battered Texas economy has impacted other area horse sports as well. In fact, it's one of the chief contributors to recent growth in San Antonio's combined-training population, according to many riders who participate in that



discipline. They contend that to compete at combined-training events rather than at the state's A-rated hunter/jumper shows is significantly less expensive.

"But it's not just the reasonable cost that's brought new people to our sport," says Dr. Sally Nunneley, whose Mortgage Hill Farm hosts the area's premier event each March. "It's the camaraderie, too. Texas events are like big family reunions, and everyone's very cooperative—including trainers, riders and supporters.

Left to right: Kim Warren, Dr. Tolbert Wilkinson and Wesley Uys scrimmage on one of Retama Polo Center's fields. Two dozen owners and 150 ponies are based at Retama, which hosts five major annual tournaments.

There's very little of the political element that seems to exist in other types of hunt-seat competition."

That The Event at Mortgage Hill recently marked its eleventh year, with each division drawing an increased number of entries, is only one indicator of the sport's burgeon-



Left: "Texas has been good to me," says Anne Page. "Sure, I sometimes miss being back East, but I have no regrets about having settled here."

Below: Polo enthusiast Kathryn Newell, who was introduced to the game five years ago while living in England, enjoys her sport year-round in San Antonio.

ing popularity among San Antonio equestrians. And Nunneley helped launch the trend. A career with the U.S. Air Force brought the medical doctor from her native Virginia to San Antonio in 1975. (She now conducts research in aerospace medicine.) Soon after her arrival, Nunneley became a founding member of the Central Texas Combined Training Association, which initially consisted of a small but dedicated core of riders.

Today the CTCTA is 80 members strong. Its riders compete in the two dozen or so Zone 5 events (held mostly in Texas) sanctioned by the USCTA, of which Nunneley is a board member.

Over the past 20 years, there has been steady development of area barns that focus solely on combined training. Among them are Fair Oaks Training Stables and Indian Creek Stables, both managed by trainer Diane Hanrahan. She says she enjoys San Antonio's year-round mild climate, adding that she's "encouraged by the growth of participation in combined training down here. We're attracting a lot of adults who did the hunter/jumper thing as juniors, and now they're ready for a change."

Fellow eventing trainer Donna Kinney, who operates out of Marcos Stables, agrees. "There are a lot of people in Zone 5 who've competed outside the state, and they come back with wonderful experiences and ideas—which all contribute to the advancement of eventing in our area. I do wish we had more upper-level events; right now we only go up to Preliminary."

As Fourth Level and Prix St. Georges competitor Erin Snell and others can attest, dressage is alive and well in San Antonio. At its center is the 20-year-old Alamo Dressage Association, with 120 members—many of whom also are active in the CTCTA.

Other options aside, there remains a devoted legion of hunter/jumper riders in San Antonio. And the patriarch of all the local trainers in that genre is Colonel John Russell, who competed with fellow USET members on the Olympic show jumping teams of 1948 and 1952 (the latter team won the bronze medal). Russell has been a U.S. Olympic pentathlon riding team coach for nearly 50 years and supplied the 25 horses for all 32 international pentathletes at the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta.

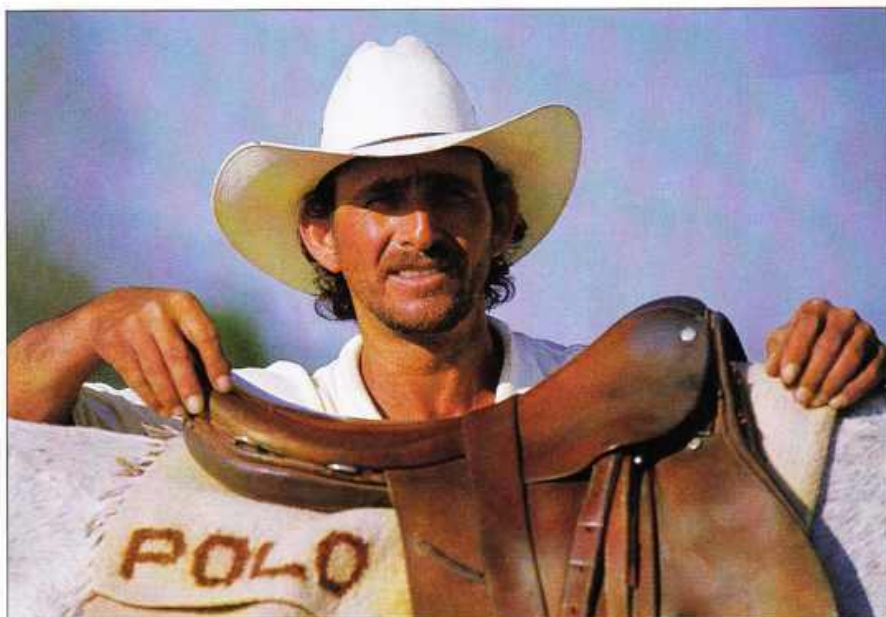
At Russell Equestrian Center, about 40 boarders (a mixture of juniors and adults) compete mostly in Texas-based hunter/jumper venues.

"The San Antonio hunter/jumper community has grown by leaps and bounds over the years," Russell declares. "We may only have a handful of hunters from this area who can





Above: Dressage rider Erin Snell competes at Fourth Level and Prix St. Georges. **Above right:** The aptly named Polo Cepeta rides for trainer Ralph Carpenter. **Right:** Dressage competitor Jay Lauver, here with her Second Level mare Sadie, serves as the Alamo Dressage Association show manager.



compete successfully at the really big A shows out of state, but we're coming along. When I came here in 1962, there was only one San Antonio woman involved in show hunters, and she only had three or four."

That's certainly not the case at Top Page Farm, arguably the area's premier hunter/jumper establishment. Owned and operated by trainer Anne Page, the farm is renowned as much for its numerous champions as for the signature names they're issued. Texas Hunter Jumper Association champions (several of them multiple times) from Top Page include Cover Page and News Page, with junior Kathryn Heymann; Dream Page, with Heymann and Dr. Elizabeth McRae; Turn The Page, with junior Rachel Grant; and Story Page, with Natasha Mallory.

A former resident of Virginia and Maryland, Page declares that it's the weather that keeps her in San Antonio. While allowing that the hunter/jumper scene is perhaps

more cutting edge back East, she adds: "I just got tired of chipping ice out of water buckets. But I maintain a first-class facility down here, specifically designed for riders who want to show seriously and successfully on the national circuit."

Charles McDaniel, owner of the 200-acre Wild Sunday Farm, is a San Antonio native (trained early on by Russell, Johnny Conn and others), so establishing his hunter/jumper facility there was an easy choice. McDaniel hauls his students to about 30 shows per year, half of which are out of state.

"There are advantages to living

down here that go beyond the nice climate," McDaniel says. "I find a lot of nice stock through local breeders, and I've gotten some decent horses off the track at Retama, too. Of course, the post-oil-bust economy isn't what it was before the mid-1980s, when people spent money like air on horses. And I think we're still fighting the image of Texas horses being used almost exclusively for roping cows and such.

"That image is an appropriate one," McDaniel concludes. "It's just that there are a lot of other aspects of the horse world here, too." 