



The LIGARA Farm all-woman polo team: (L-R) Theresa King, Cristina Fernandez, Tiva Gross, and Jolie Liston

## Theresa King's All-Woman Polo Team Makes Aiken History

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Theresa King, tall and blonde and carrying herself with the confidence, poise and strength of a world-class athlete, looked out across the wide open expanses of green and the ribbons of fencing slicing across her LIGARA Farm and smiled.

“I built this with my own hands,” she said. “It’s my place, and I want it to be beautiful.”

Here, at her sprawling 24-acre horse boarding facility only eight miles but a world away from the city, King has forged her own place in Aiken’s storied world of equine affinity and heritage. Her place of being, much more significant than a dot on a map, is a beautiful groundbreaking for perhaps a new era in Aiken’s 135-year romance with the game of kings.

### The First-Ever

Last October, Theresa King captained the first-ever all-female polo team to compete against male teams in an Aiken Polo Club competition. This historic outing was an inspiring display of courage, determination, and resilience in a sport traditionally fueled by testosterone, machismo and male ego.

“I’ve always wanted to play women against guys, but every time that’s been done it’s been a one-off thing,” King said, her boots kicking at the dirt. “I just feel like women can compete on an even playing field against men, and I don’t know why it hasn’t been done more.”

Women represent the fastest growing sector of membership in the United States Polo Association, now making up almost 40 percent of the membership in an organization that in 1970s wouldn’t even allow female members. Despite the growth of women in the sport, King said, “I feel like we get less attention across the board.”

## Playing it Forward

On her individual journey, King began playing polo in 1992, picking up the mallet from her then-husband, Daniel Fernandez, a former 5-goal polo professional in his native Argentina. “I’d ridden my whole life. So I rode all the horses, but I didn’t really play polo until we got divorced,” she said.

Once liberated to compete, King threw herself fully into becoming the best possible competitor. “Because my husband was a pro, he had really difficult horses, so by the time I started playing, I could ride pretty much anything,” she said.

Though working full-time in real estate and investments to support her family after her divorce, King invested the time and energy to refine her skills on the polo field, eventually achieving a 1-goal handicap. She began traveling the world, competing across 12 countries in tournaments alongside male teammates and taking a starring role in all-female tournaments. King even played an invitational event in India, the birthplace of polo, that she still cites as inspirational in her decision to transition full-time into the equestrian arts.

In 2005, that love affair with the horse world brought King to Aiken County and her farm near New Holland Road. Rolling up her sleeves, she cleared and shaped the former corn fields to suit her very individual equine tastes, built an eight-stall barn to board polo ponies, and served as her own contractor for the construction of her home and a breathtaking guest cottage on LIGARA Farm.

## Like Mother, Like Daughter

As a strong-willed and loving mother, King imparted her knowledge of the game to her daughter, Cristina Fernandez, who began playing polo competitively in high school and later won the 2004 National Women’s Interscholastic Championship while attending boarding school in Maryland. Cristina went on to play collegiate polo at the University of Virginia and captained the 2009 National Women’s Intercollegiate Championship team that upset top-seeded Cornell University in the national finals.



*Theresa King and Cristina Fernandez*

In her official USPA player biography, Cristina Fernandez credits her mother with inspiring her enduring love for the game and with pushing her to become a fierce internationally-known competitor. “She knows the number one position so well, and the combination of her skillful hitting and competitive nature makes for an amazing athlete,” Cristina said of her mother in the USPA bio. “Throughout the years she has really shown me that if you set your mind on something, you can make it happen. Today, we are always challenging each other to be better players.”





### *Theresa King*

That native competitiveness between mother and daughter laid the foundation for the LIGARA Farm all-female polo experiment in Aiken, where polo has been played since 1882, but almost exclusively by male-dominated teams.



*Theresa, Jolie, and Tiva plot their game strategy between chukkers.*

By last summer, when her groundbreaking vision began to take shape, King already had years of hard-won experience in tournament polo. “But I always felt like women could compete against guys,” she said. “They do it in so many different sports. Why can’t we do it in polo? I think it’s possible to be competitive.”

## Recruiting the Team Members

With the same vigor she invested into building her farm, King took a giant step out in faith to make the “possible” a reality in Aiken. She recruited her daughter, now a member of Team USPA who works full-time at the governing body’s national headquarters in Florida, and two other gifted players, then entered the Aiken Polo Club’s Corey Cup 4-Goal Tournament.

Tiva Gross, a 2-goal international phenom from Kenya, was flown in to compete for LIGARA Farm alongside King, her daughter and Jolie Liston, owner and director of the Atlanta Regional Polo Center. During her visit here, Gross found Aiken to be an engrossing and inviting place to play.

“The polo is very competitive with many talented players. The support from family and friends was so nice to see, particularly for us girls,” Gross recalled. “Everyone was very friendly and welcoming, and I played some fantastic horses. The support for the all-female side was overwhelming. There were so many people who came to support our games and cheer us on.”

Though it had never been done before in Aiken, King saw no good reason why an all-female team couldn’t offer stiff competition to the other 4-goal teams in the Corey Cup.

“Guys are stronger than we are; there’s no doubt about that. But in a lot of cases, I think women tend to be better riders,” she said. “I think we have a little bit more finesse with the horse because we’re not as strong as the guys. We might not hit the ball 50 yards down the field, so we have to have a different strategy.”

## LIGARA Fans and Sponsors

Once entered in the Corey Cup, the LIGARA Farm team captured the imaginations of longtime Aiken polo enthusiasts and curious newcomers to the sport, according to Debbie Roland, who coordinated marketing and sponsorship development for the team.

“It brought more people to the polo fields than ever for this fall season,” Roland said. “There were cheerleading tailgate sections for the women. People were getting their pictures taken with the team. They wanted to be part of this moment.”

In spite of the fan enthusiasm, King confesses that breaking the glass ceiling in such a tradition- rich town was a test of her will and perseverance.

One challenge was recruiting visionary sponsors to support the costs of operating the all-female team for a multi-week tournament.





*Tiva Gross*

Eventually, four sponsors – Breezy Hill South dressage farm, Mike Hosang at Carolina Real Estate Company, Bespoke Fine Interiors, and Kelly Klee Private Insurance – stepped up on behalf of the LIGARA team.

## The Historic Team's Future Hopes

The all-female team also heard from a few vocal naysayers who pushed back against shattering tradition in male-dominated Aiken-style polo.

“Anything new meets with some resistance, and I understand that,” King said. “But I loved being a trailblazer. It wasn’t easy, but it was worth it.” In the end, LIGARA Farm sadly tasted defeat in all three of its outings in the Corey Cup, but to those who played on the first all-female team to challenge male competition – and long-held tradition – in Aiken, there was victory in just being on the city’s hallowed grass.

“Every time I step out on the polo pitch to represent the women in polo, there is a huge sense of fulfillment,” Gross said. “Women’s polo continues to grow globally, and I was so happy to be a part of making history in Aiken. Theresa King is such an inspiration with the energy and effort she has and continues to put into women’s polo in Aiken.”

King hopes that the story of women playing polo in Aiken will not end with the LIGARA Farm’s debut outing. She is hopeful more sponsors will step up and help her field a return engagement, if not this spring certainly by fall season.

“We did it, and we’ll do it again. I’d like to play four events a year, and not just in Aiken. I’d like to take this idea all over the country,” she said. “I think this has opened the door for more people to do it, which I think is great for polo and, yes, for polo in Aiken.”

*All photos by E. Hedley*

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