

Polo Es Mi Vida

Wayne Ewing's Documentary Autobiography

By PAM GLEASON

Wayne Ewing has been fascinated with horses since childhood. An award-winning documentary filmmaker, he has lived in Aiken since 2021, and his polo team, Wayne Ewing Films, has been playing in tournaments at Aiken, Wagener and O.C. Farms Polo Clubs every season. This September, the first installment of his documentary, *Polo es Mi Vida* (*Polo is my Life*), will be featured in the upcoming Equus Film Festival and Mustang Summit that will take place at Aiken Equine Rescue on Glenwood Road.

As Wayne explains it, the title for the film comes from the journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Thompson is best known for his book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) and is considered the father of the so-called gonzo style of journalism, in which the writer injects his own personality, beliefs and opinions into his stories. Wayne Ewing lived

During the time that he was working with Hunter Thompson, playing polo was both his passion and an emotional outlet: "But for the horses, I would have gone crazy," he said in his film.

The film, *Polo Es Mi Vida*, is the filmmaker's autobiography, loosely framed by his experience trying to train two essentially wild and unhandled horses to play polo. It was the early 2010s, and he had heard of a man called Britton Smith, who supposedly bred and raised polo ponies that were so good they shipped them back to Argentina to play the high goal. Wayne was intrigued, and eventually tracked down Smith, who had started a polo breeding operation on his Colorado ranch. It was not an especially well-planned operation: Smith had acquired a number of retired polo mares, turned them out with his quarter horse stallion, and ended up with a whole herd of foals. He did

not, however, have a plan to train them, with the result that they were essentially wild horses roaming free on thousands of acres. "I doubt any of them were ever shipped back to Argentina," said Wayne, who nonetheless bought two horses and brought them home.


"It was a bit of a quixotic quest," he admits. "And I didn't do it with the idea of filming it. But I thought it might be interesting to document. So I started just first with my cell phone and then used more elaborate equipment. And then, I got this idea that I could do something more than just the story of me trying to turn these wild horses into polo ponies. I could use that as a thread to make this cinematic autobiography, because, you know, so much of all the work we do of horses is metaphorical for everything else in life."

Wayne enlisted help to get the two horses, Charlie and Sugar, going under saddle – something he realized that he had to do after Charlie bucked him off so violently he broke both his hands. "I was on my 17th ride," he said. "What I didn't do – but I should have – was set up a camera to film the whole process. Then I would have seen how many times I came off. If I had to witness it on film I never would have continued, probably."

The first installment of the film includes clips that show some of the horses' training, interspersed with scenes from other documentaries, including several that he did for *Bill Moyers Journal* (PBS) in the 1970s and 1980s. There are scenes from his film *Cowboys* (1975) and his political documentary *If Elected* (1973 – see footage of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter on the campaign trail) as well as *Playing With Magic* (2013) a film that he made about equine assisted therapy during the time he was waiting for his broken hands to heal.

Polo Es Mi Vida premiered at the Aspen Film Festival in 2019, and since that time, Wayne says he has finished the series, totaling 11 episodes. The first episode, which will be screened at the Equus Film Festival, is also available on the website WayneEwingFilms.com, and Wayne says that he hopes to have the whole series picked up by an online streaming service in the future.

And what about the horses Charlie and Sugar? Wayne did manage to get them playing, but they were never very good and now they are retired. Although he did not fully realize his goal of playing polo with a string of horses that he trained from the ground up, he did learn from the experience, and he is still addicted to the sport of polo.

"I guess I'm an adrenaline junkie," he said. "But I love that synchronicity that happens when you really have a great relationship with a horse out on the field – it truly is like playing with magic. When it works, it's like lifelong dream, one where you can imagine being one with a horse." 



Above: Wayne Ewing playing at Aiken Polo Club, Photo by Richard Schmon

next door to Hunter Thompson's Owl Farm in Colorado in the 1980s and 1990s, and the two men became friends. Wayne eventually made a documentary about him (*Breakfast with Hunter*, 2003), and helped him edit his novel, the *Rum Diary*.

Although Thompson himself did not play polo, and in fact was afraid of horses, he had been involved in the polo community, and had started a novel called *Polo is My Life*, parts of which were published in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Wayne Ewing, who attended Culver Military School for a time, had learned to ride in his youth but came to polo later in life.