

HOW TO LEAVE A MISTRESS: Prof. Campbell Retires from Polo

"It's so hard... to say goodbye... to yesterday."

– R&B song by G. C. Cameron

I confess. Fortune's let me live with three bewitching mistresses all at once. The first, that famously jealous one, is law— with whom I've toiled most of my life in courtrooms, boardrooms, classrooms, etc. The second and the sexiest is my wife Drusilla— with whom I've shared 44 volatile years. Third is polo— full-bodied passion of my later life. I've romped with this mistress nearly every weekend for the last fourteen years. Indeed her manifold enticements have captured me like an addictive drug.

No other sport— not five years of boxing, 10 years of rugby, or 40 years of running— has pulsed so much adrenalin and ecstasy through my veins. When my ego brags that polo is the planet's fastest (and 2nd-most lethal) contact sport, Dru downsizes me with truth: "Art, compared to chasing women at your age, polo is much safer, cheaper— and you have a better chance to score."

Aye, scoring: there's the rub. When I first swung a polo mallet my learning curve shot up so fast I snagged three MVP awards in low-goal tournaments riding on three different mounts. Now my learning curve has not just flattened out; it's been stomped into the ground.

The turning point occurred two years ago in a tournament on my best polo pony (Chloe, R.I.P.), who once had played professionally. Chloe dumped me when she turned sharply towards the ball while I turned my body sharply the other way to play defense. I lay paralyzed for half a minute and wondered, "Have I crushed one broken collar-bone that healed with an overlap? Have I mashed the other, held together by a steel plate and screws? Have I'd ripped my sawed patella, or concussed my noggin for the final, seventh time?" Suddenly I regained feeling in my spine and jumped up feeling fine.

Only later did I learn the fall had severed nerves that stabilized the muscles in my shoulder blade so it could anchor all the dozen muscles used to swing a polo mallet.

Since then I've not been able to fine-tune my stroke with even moderate consistency. Sometimes I hit straight shots but usually smack the ball too far left or right or miss the bloody thing entirely! I've been x-rayed and examined by a top-flight sports doctor; prodded, bent, and yelled at by physical therapists, and modified my half-century regimen of pumping iron. All the while I've been waiting, hoping that the severed nerves would (against the doctor's odds) somehow regenerate. After two years it's fairly clear they won't.

The upshot? Words I never thought I'd hear myself say: "Polo is no longer fun." Those miss-hits are sooo frustrating! I'm no longer helping teammates drive the ball to goals; instead I'm dragging down the team. Lately at game's end I've been riding off the field, feeling miserable. Although I'd hoped to play the game a few more years, I now know it's time for me to hang my mallets up.

But how to leave? Perhaps, like parting with a human mistress, I should just say sweet goodbyes and walk away. But I won't abandon my three loyal steeds. Moreover every time I visit Hering ranch to ride them I'll also see the polo field and pass my teammates' nodding horses, each with its own personality. I'll flashback to some of my most thrilling times in life and ponder comrades from the field of combat— and, of course, our post-game, beer-laced camaraderies.

Bottom line? Since I can't avoid seductive memories and fierce cravings for my mistress, I'll have to treat withdrawal from my lifetime's favorite sport like recovery from addiction. I'll simply face it one day at a time.