

# He lived in a chicken hut and worked as a builder but Tarquin Southwell is the horsey set's darling

DAVID LOMINSKA



LEAP YEAR: Tarquin is riding high after humble beginnings in a council house. Now he mixes with the highest in the land and last week was presented to the Queen

# The man who put the 'oh' into polo

**P**OLO player Tarquin Southwell, 24, was a Page Three pin-up last week. Long blond hair, smouldering looks, athletic physique. White-jodhpured legs. Astride in soaring temperatures and leather boots.

The office of John Manconi, owner of the Alcatel team, was besieged with calls. Tarquin, the English back, had been singled out by insiders, a national newspaper and female fans as this season's best young player.

*He moves in a world of galloping wealth, unbridled promiscuity and sweaty bodies.*

Of fillies with excellent legs and teeth who — like Fergie's mum, Susan Barrantes, and Kate, wife of beef baron Lord Vestey — run off with Argentinian professionals. And a world of handsome colts — from Carlos Gracida, the Mexican £700,000-a-year ace, to Chilean Gabriel Donoso, who also plays for Alcatel and is married to former model Lisa Butcher.

The divine Tarquin fits this world like a tractor at a wedding. Or a beefsteak at a Hindu feast. For Tarquin



By  
*Caroline Phillips*

has lived in a chicken hut, a caravan and a council house. He was forced to leave school after his O-levels. First earned £40 a week. Drives a D-reg Golf, which he shares with his brother. And rides a pony that cost him £500. Oh, and he's unmarried and doesn't have a girlfriend.

Tarquin, handicap three, is one of Britain's most talented young players. This season he won the Prince of Wales Trophy and got a Dunhill pen in the Queen's Cup as runner-up — his female fans will forgive him. Yesterday he played in the Gold Cup at Cowdray. To the girls he is a hero, beaten or not.

We meet at Dell Park, Surrey, John

Manconi's estate. Tarquin, bare-chested and cracking a whip, kicks up a cloud of dust as he crosses the stable yard. No, let's get real. Tarquin, in a baseball cap and jumper, walks out of the estate office. He's smaller in life than the imagination. Not quite Tom Cruise, but still only 5ft 10in. And with a big bruise on his rump (a horse bit him on the bottom). And his flowing mane? He cut it off last week. Too warm under his polo hat.

But he's bronzed and fit as a flea that teaches aerobics. And the real-life hunk is more celestial even than his photo. Polite, kind and a little — swoon — moody.

He was raised in Sussex. ("Winnie

the Pooh country," he says. "We had stables by Pooh Bridge. I started to ride aged seven but didn't play polo until I was 16.")

His parents separated when he was three. His mother, Vivien, moved into a caravan in the Ashdown Forest with her new husband, Mark Good. "Money was tight. The mobile home was so small that I had to leave and live with a friend," says Tarquin, looking away sadly. He was seven.

A year later the family (stepfather and four siblings) moved to a three-bedroom council house in Withyham, East Sussex. "Fortunately we had the end house on the estate, with the communal grass which we took over for horses."

And when his father, David, made some money printing plastic Smiley stickers, Tarquin was sent to Ardingly College, West Sussex. Three years later, the company went bust and Tarquin was forced to leave in the middle of his A-levels. In 1989, aged 17, our hero started as a groom at Ascot Park polo club. Then he flexed his muscles on a building site, saving the fare to

Argentina to stay with Carlin Duarte, a Latin groom with whom he'd communicated all summer in sign language. (He knew only hello and goodbye in Spanish.)

"Carlin drove me to a chicken shed near Buenos Aires and his family walked out of it to greet me." For six months Tarquin lived in this hut held together with asbestos and tyres, working unpaid with the horses and existing on £200. "The shed had a mud floor. To wash we sat in a big dish and splashed ourselves."

**B**ACK in Britain Tarquin earns £100 a week working for Philip Elliot, a polo professional. In 1992, in dirty whites and beaten up Ford Sierra, he met Prince Charles, who greeted him from his Aston Martin.

"I was going to polo practice. Major Ronald Ferguson said, 'This is His Royal Highness.' I was a bit shocked." His next big break is when he's playing with Memo Gracida, the Mexican Maradona on horseback who says

losing a wife is less humiliating than losing a competition. They're at the Royal Windsor and it's raining so heavily that Memo is wearing gold Jimmy Savile tracksuit bottoms over his whites and three anoraks. But they still win.

In 1992 Tarquin is talent-spotted for media magnate Kerry Packer's Ellerston White team and taxied to polo matches by helicopter. Then he's picked for the Black Bears. Which brings us to 1995, when our hero joins Alcatel for an undisclosed salary (of £18,000.) Last Sunday he met Her Maj. "I bowed and said 'Did you enjoy the game, Ma'am?' She replied, 'It was great, very open and fast, well done.'" He understood what she meant.

Tarquin doesn't have Gucci saddlebags of the root of all evil. "I don't have a spare penny. I spend all my money on accommodation, food and ponies. If you're without a good pony, it's like trying to play football when you can't run."

He has collected 10 ponies over the years. "You can spend £20,000 on a polo pony but I've bought horses off

the racetrack for £500." Now time to set hearts a-flutter. Three months ago Tarquin finished a two-year relationship with Charlotte, 24, a club hostess. And he doesn't have a current filly. "I don't have the time. Girls demand as much time as ponies."

The sport, says author Jilly Cooper, attracts very fit, gorgeous young men. Do you fit this category?

"I'm not sure that I do." Are the Brits supplanting the Argentinian pin-ups? "Oh no, it's foreigners who attract."

*So do Argentinian girls fall over you? "No, because they're religious." Which girls clamour for you? "It's not like that," he says.*

Do you think you're good-looking? Our hero repeats the question with horror. "Not the sort of thing you admit to. Anyway, I'm average looking." But with your chiselled good looks and flowing blond hair, you fit the stereotype of dashing polo player, don't you? "That's very kind of you."

Yes, yes, you're very handsome, I say, dropping my pen nervously. And Heart-throb disappears, once again bare-chested and cracking his whip.



**FOOTLOOSE:** Tarquin doesn't have a girlfriend. "Girls demand as much time as ponies"