

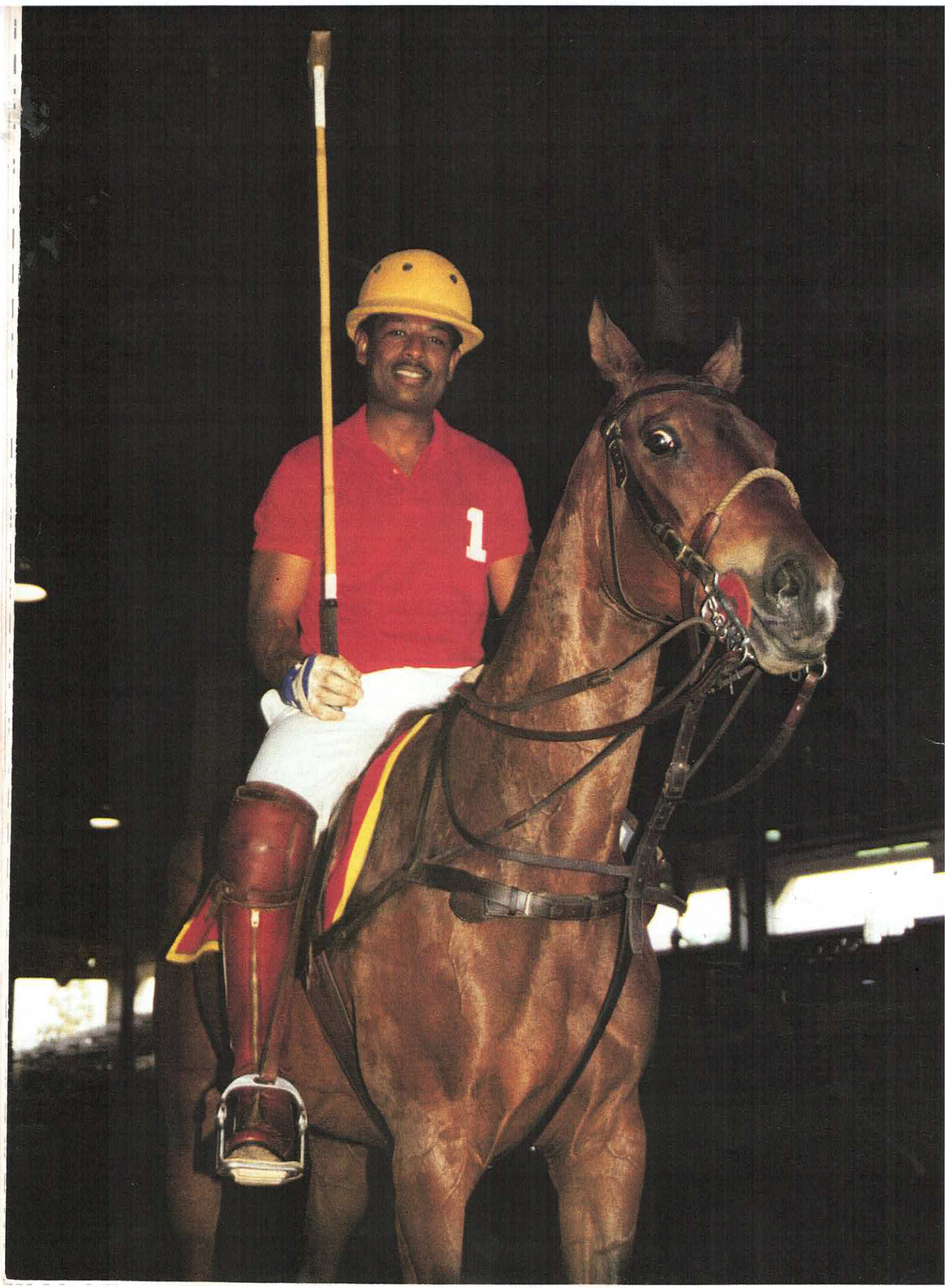
A full-page photograph of a polo player in action. The player is wearing a red polo shirt with the number '1' on the back, white breeches, a white helmet, and red riding boots. He is riding a dark brown horse and is captured in a dynamic pose, leaning forward with his mallet raised high. The background shows a grassy polo field with a wooden fence and trees under a clear sky.

L A C M A  
**Physician**

June 5, 1989

**Madison  
Richardson  
MD**

***Keeping His Eye  
On Two Goals:  
Medicine and Polo***



# Balancing Patients and Polo, Madison F. Richardson MD Keeps a Rein on Two Passions

By Terry Melia  
Assistant Managing Editor

**E**ver since he was a child, Madison Franklin Richardson MD has held a special love and appreciation for horses. For their beauty, their power, even their majestic gait, Dr. Richardson's admiration has never waned throughout his 45 years.

His exposure to the equine world came early in life. As the second of four children born to a compassionate country doctor in Huntsville, Texas, he literally grew up riding ponies and mustangs around the family ranch.

His father, William, a rider himself and the only physician around for a few hundred miles, served as a terrific role model for young Madison. In fact, to those who knew him, "Doc Richardson" was considered a godsend.

"He was the true universal general practitioner," says Madison with a smile. "He delivered every baby in town and still did tonsillectomies on the weekends."

A conscientious physician, William also knew how to have fun with his family. One of his favorite outlets was riding at a sprawling cattle ranch he acquired, a piece of property once owned by General Sam Houston. Here, the good doctor could always find his children practicing their horsemanship and trick riding stunts on the weekends.

When Madison was just seven years old, however, his father died unexpectedly. The Richardson clan — led by mother, Vivian — eventually relocated to Los Angeles

to start anew, but until he turned 15, Madison religiously spent his summers riding at the Texas ranch.

"When we moved, I found that the riding was nothing like what I was accustomed to back in Texas," he says. "The horses in Los Angeles weren't nearly as exciting and trailwalking just never did anything for me."

It's been more than 30 years since Dr. Richardson frequented the "Raven Hill Ranch," but his memories remain intact. And though much has happened to this upstart wrangler during the past three decades — marriage, three lovely daughters and a prestigious medical career to name just a few events — his love for horses has never been greater.

**A** mild-mannered, cordial sort, Madison F. Richardson MD seems far removed from the hectic schedule he leads day to day.

A busy and successful otolaryngologist specializing in head and neck surgery, he simultaneously maintains two thriving practices — one

based in the Mid-Wilshire District, the other in Inglewood. In addition to treating his private patients, he serves as chief, Division of Head and Neck Surgery, at the Martin Luther King, Jr./Drew Medical Center; board member, Board of Medical Quality Assurance, Division of

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# Dr. Richardson

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Allied Health Professions; member, LACMA Committee on Sports Medicine; assistant clinical professor of surgery, at both the USC and UCLA schools of medicine; and to keep things interesting, as a Los Angeles County Deputy Sheriff.

But what makes this physician extraordinary so unique isn't simply his lack of rest (he swears he needs just four hours of sleep a night), but rather, what he manages to accomplish during his waking hours. On top of his varied professional duties, this human dynamo plays up to 15 hours of intense polo every week.

Whether indoors (arena) or outdoors, practice or game situation, Dr. Richardson faithfully pursues his precious pastime week after week, and he's been doing it for the past 10 years.

"I've always been interested in athletics," he says. "Contact sports and vigorous sports have always appealed to me."

Not only have contact sports appealed to "Matt," as he is called by close friends, but he's managed to master most as well.

For instance, during his senior year at Los Angeles High, he played two-way halfback (both offensive and defensive) for the varsity football team, which went on to finish second in the L.A. City Championships.

"Banning [High] really beat the hell out of us," he recalls.

Highly recruited to play college ball (Oregon State, University of New Mexico and UCLA all showed avid interest), he instead chose to attend Howard University in Washington, DC — for athletic, as well as educational reasons.

"I wanted to be a student-athlete, with the emphasis placed on student," says Dr. Richardson. "I knew that Howard had a good medical school, but what was equally important to me was that it allowed its athletes to play with-

out any scholarship restrictions attached. You played because you wanted to play, not because you had to play.

"At those other schools, I would have been majoring in football."

Despite that reasoning, Dr. Richardson still carried a tremendous sports load in addition to his pre-med studies at Howard. Besides football, he was a conference champion wrestler (167 pounds) and a member of the school's golf team.

He graduated in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in zoology, and went on to attain his medical degree from Howard University's College of Medicine in 1969.

**H**is interest in polo, like other sports, blossomed early. He vividly recalls, as a wide-eyed 15-year-old, watching Saturday afternoon polo matches at Will Rogers State Park.

But actual playing time for the universal sportsman did not start until 1978, at the ripe old age of 35. By this time, he had finished "grooming" his medical career — which included a 10-year hitch with the U.S. Army — and was now in search of yet another challenge.

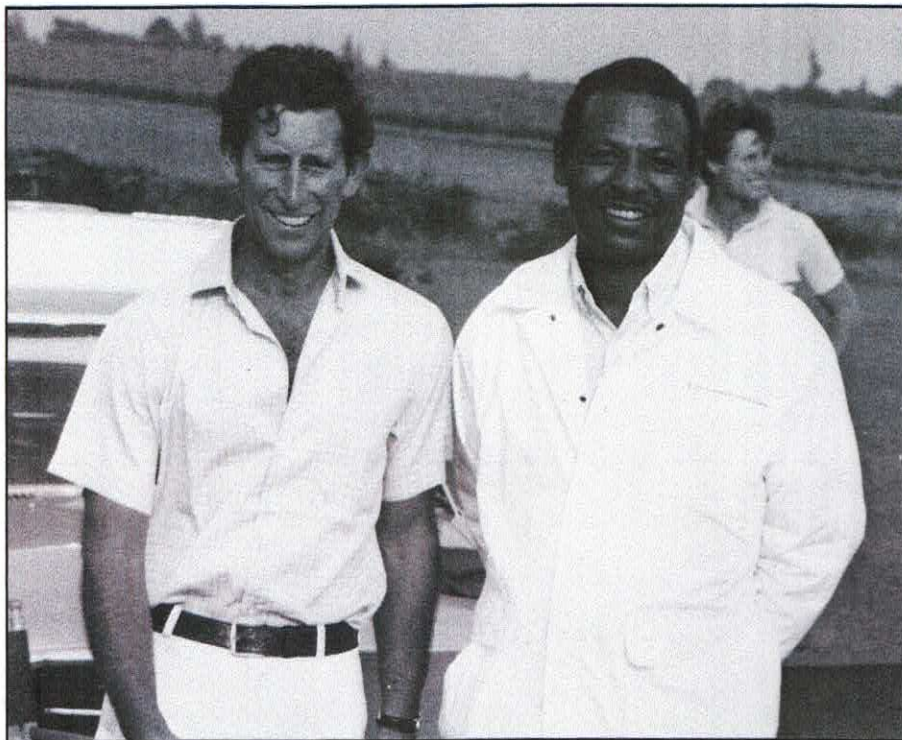
"Polo was always something that was in the back of my mind to do when the opportunity arose," he says.

His premiere took place at the Fair Hills Polo Club in Woodland Hills. There, he routinely practiced indoor or "arena" polo, a version of the sport played on a much smaller scale — roughly the size of one football field — than its outdoor counterpart (300 yards long by 200 yards wide). Eventually, he went on to play at Will Rogers, where he received his first dose of exhausting, outdoor competition.

"Some dreams really do come true," says Dr. Richardson, remembering his days as a mere spectator.

Standing six feet tall and weighing 190 pounds, he can be an intimidating figure on the playing field — especially

David Lominska



*Following an overseas competition, Britain's Prince Charles finds time for a post-chukkar chat with Dr. Richardson.*

when he's slinging a 54-inch mallet while riding atop an 1,100-pound thoroughbred, an animal that routinely gallops at speeds in excess of 30 miles per hour. But in his own estimation, bigger doesn't necessarily mean better in polo tournament play.

"It turns out that the better polo players, like the better jockeys, are lighter," he says. "Since polo is considered a game for gentleman on race horses, the element of speed is very important."

An accomplished amateur, Dr. Richardson is one of about 2,800 players who belong to the United States Polo Association. Every one of its competing members receives a handicap rating each year from "minus-one goal" to the best rating of "10-goals." In order for a player to qualify to play professional polo, he must hold a five-goal rating or better. Presently in the United States, there are less than 200 professional players.

To demonstrate how difficult it is to attain a high-goal handicap, of the

roughly 10,000 polo players worldwide, less than a dozen own a 10-goal handicap. Dr. Richardson currently sports a three-goal handicap in arena competition and a two-goal rating outdoors. (For details on polo, and its different levels of competition, see article below.)

**A** typical day for Dr. Richardson includes seeing as many as 25 patients, performing a 5:30 pm surgery, then partaking in a two-hour practice session at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in Burbank, where he currently boards two of his horses.

Home of the United States Arena Polo League — and one of its teams, the L.A. Stars — the Equestrian Center boasts a 4,000-seat indoor arena called the "Equidome." This is where Dr. Richardson patiently works on his horsemanship, strokes and shot placement.

"I've been out there as late as midnight sometimes," he says. "What's

good about the Equestrian Center is, number one, it's close to my home, and number two, it's well lit."

Suzanne Peica, polo public relations coordinator for the Center, can attest to Dr. Richardson's diehard dedication.

"Nobody works harder or plays harder than Matt," she says. "Sometimes I see him here at 10 or 11 o'clock at night training. He's constantly striving to be the best player he can be."

A dangerous and demanding game, polo requires utmost precision, preparation and concentration.

"It's the type of sport that appeals to my spirit," says the unassuming physician. "It's intense and there's an element of risk involved, and it requires total commitment and dedication."

"You can't participate in polo on a casual basis," he continues. "Your horses require exercising every single day."

To help with training his horses, Dr. Richardson recently hired one of the world's foremost polo authorities and

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## By the way, what exactly is polo?

**P**olo, considered the most ancient of games played with stick and ball, derived its name from the Tibetan *pulu*, which means "ball." Played on horseback, the game can be traced to Persia as early as 522 BC.

The first Western polo players were British tea planters. The sport made its debut in the United States in 1883, and in 1890, the U.S. Polo Association was founded.

Outdoor polo, a dangerous, vigorous game, is played with four members on each team. Its small, light ball, once made of willow or bamboo root, is today made of plastic. Roughly the size of a baseball (3½ inches in diameter), it weighs just 4½ ounces. A player's mallet, which weighs about a pound, can measure between 48 and 54 inches long and comes equipped with a narrow, nine-inch wooden head that is set at a slight angle. Unlike croquet, the ball is struck with the long side of the mallet's head, not with the forward face.

A full size polo field is 300 yards long by 200 yards wide, and its goals measure eight yards wide. The object of the game seems simple; just pass the ball between the goal posts. A regulation match is divided into six seven-minute periods known as "chukkers." On the average, horses gallop between three and four miles per chukkar. For this reason, players will bring between four and six ponies to a match so they can play each chukkar atop a fresh horse.

There are two mounted umpires for every contest. The most important rules of polo are those concerning the safety of men and ponies. For instance, no player is allowed to cross the line of another in going for the ball and the last man to strike it has the right-of-way.

In recent years, another version of the game has evolved called "arena" (indoor) polo. The major differences between the two include: three-man teams instead of four; a dirt field the size of one football field instead of a grass field

the size of nine; and six five-minute chukkers instead of six at seven-minute intervals.

All players competing in tournaments are given a handicap each year by the governing bodies in their own countries. This rating system ranks players at different levels of competition, including low goal polo (combined team handicap of less than eight goals); medium goal polo (eight to 14 goals); and high goal polo (over 14). For example, Dr. Richardson, who sports a two-goal handicap outdoors and a three-goal handicap indoors, plays "medium goal" polo.

A powerful wrist, a good eye for hitting the ball, great stamina and lots of determination are essential for any polo player. Another critical element is experience. The latter, in fact, is so important that it is widely believed polo players don't reach their best form until at least age 45. (Note: Dr. Richardson turns 46 in December.) ■

# Dr. Richardson

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top-notch trainers, James Rice.

"He's the most famous polo trainer in the world. I'm just lucky to have him here," says Dr. Richardson. "He's been in polo for over 50 years. He's worked with the best polo ponies and polo players in the world."

When asked how many horses he owns, Dr. Richardson says, quite frankly, "I never answer that question directly because I really don't know. Right now, I am playing with six to eight different horses."

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***"It's the type of sport that appeals to my spirit. It's intense and there's an element of risk involved"***

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Regarding the expenses that go along with the sport, often referred to as the "sport of kings," he jokingly says, "Well, it's a lot cheaper than owning your own yacht."

He adds, "You can play this sport for \$5,000 a year or \$500,000 a year. It just depends on who you are." Asked where he falls in the equation, Dr. Richardson answers, "I'm somewhere in between."

Concerning the elements of danger in the sport, which include getting thrown or trampled by your horse, Dr. Richardson keeps himself well informed in his position as chairman of the United States Polo Association's Safety Commission.

"Rarely do I go to a polo match and not take care of some type of injury," he says. "Most of them are orthopedic, but a lot of them are just scratches, bruises and bumps. I have a file of injuries that I've treated. Many are breaks, strains and sprains, and lacerations."

The ball which the players wallop about, once made of willow root, is now made of plastic and is about the same size as a baseball. Regardless of its size

and content, if it hits you, it can hurt you.

"When that ball gets going, it's like standing in front of a Nolan Ryan fastball [92 mph]."

Asked if he's suffered any injuries himself, Dr. Richardson replies, "I'm sort of bruised all over about twice a year — nothing incapacitating, but I have taken some nasty spills."

**D**uring his college days, Dr. Richardson acquired the creed "gnotheseautem," which is Greek for "know thyself." He continues to test himself while realizing his limits at the same time.

"I play at the level and the commitment that I really enjoy," he says. "I'm competing at the level of competition that's comfortable for me."

A founding member of the Rancho Santa Fe Polo Club, and a member of both the Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club, and Eldorado Polo Club in Indio, Dr. Richardson has come in contact with many of the rich and famous associated with the elite sport.

Close friends with actress and fellow polo enthusiast Stephanie Powers, Dr. Richardson often plays with such Hollywood celebrities as William Devane, Doug Sheehan, Alex Cord and Sylvester Stallone. Of Stallone, he says, "He's the nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. Just a great guy."

The sport has also taken him all over the globe, including to competitions in England, Kenya, Argentina, Mexico City and Hawaii. He's also crossed paths with another well-known competitor, Britain's Prince Charles, on more than one occasion.

Despite his numerous activities, Dr. Richardson comes across as completely relaxed. He claims polo has helped him to deal better with day-to-day pressures.

"It's called stress reduction exercise," he says.

Coupling his medical practice with his taxing community involvement —

which includes serving as Chairman of the Board of the National Urban League and as a member of the Board of Directors of the Charles R. Drew Medical School — he needs a physical activity that demands that same level of commitment and dedication. Polo fills that prescription.

"The reason I played three sports in college is that I found that when you have committed time, you're more productive," he says. "If your time is committed to something, then you'll be more productive."

"My grandfather used to tell me to always find something constructive to do with my time. He knew that I had a high energy level."

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***"You can play this sport for \$5,000 a year or \$500,000 a year. It just depends on who you are. I'm somewhere in between"***

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Almost as if by osmosis, Dr. Richardson's energy seems to have trickled down the family tree. He and his wife Constance (Connie), who he met at Howard University (he was the football star, she was the cheerleading captain), have three daughters — Kelly, 18, Kimberly, 14, and Karen, 12. All athletic, they are each dedicated to their individual pursuits.

"Kelly rides, Kimberly is an accomplished ballet dancer and Karen, studies tap," says their proud dad.

Always interested in athletics, Dr. Richardson was asked why he chose head and neck surgery, rather than a specialty more closely associated with sports activities, such as orthopedics.

Without hesitation, he answers, "I liked the challenge of head and neck reconstructive surgery."

Another challenge — it just seems to fit. ■