

Mallets for Melanoma Raises Awareness

By Marc C. Patoile
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A polo pony gets a good luck kiss.

Denver Polo Club hosted the Second Annual Mallets for Melanoma on July 26th, 2014. This polo tournament was started by Dr. Tyler Vukmer, a physician at University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, to benefit Colorado melanoma research, support, advocacy, and education. In an effort to pay it forward, 100% of proceeds go towards the cause, as it is operated on strictly a volunteer basis. This is a very fun, family-friendly event with live music, local food and drinks, vendors, and of course horses, polo, and sport.

The rates of melanoma have been rising for at least the last 30 years. Overall, the lifetime risk of getting melanoma is about 2% (1 in 50) for whites, 0.1% (1 in 1,000) for blacks, and 0.5% (1 in 200) for Hispanics. The risk of melanoma increases with age – the average age at the time it is found is 61. But melanoma is not uncommon even among those younger than 30. In fact, it is one of the most common cancers in young adults (especially young women).

Teams squared off in three divisions, starting with an arena Coaching League Cup featuring five teams. Then, on the grass, a Lieutenant Governor's Cup was played which had USB Financial beating out Equipage Black, Dark Clouds Polo, and Equipage Pink in a round robin. Then Jennifer Luttrell Benardoni, Ruben Coscia, Ignacio Saracco, and Francisco Benardoni for Cottrell Farms ran away with the win of the USPA Governor's Cup, over Tanweer Khan, Erica Gandomcar, Mark Wates, and Craig Russell, in the stirrups for the Denver Polo Club Team.

Dr. Vukmer said, "I had some great mentors in med school that showed me

how amazing dermatology could be. In so many cases, diseases, and conditions, the skin is the first to show noticeable signs of a problem. I loved this. It meant that someone well versed in this science could detect disease before it became apparent (often too late) to other medical specialists. I did not match into dermatology (the most difficult to obtain specialty residency in the industrialized world) straight out of residency." So he opted to wait for one and took a position at UC Denver doing molecular research in the field of melanoma genetics.

Dr. Vukmer continued to explain that while he was attending another polo fundraiser at the Denver Polo Club he developed the idea for this tournament. He said, "Given the steadily decreasing federal funding, the increasing rate of melanoma especially in the State of Colorado and the population I care so much about, I decided to address the issues head on. The idea was to do



The Equipage Pink Team battles it out with the Equipage Black Team during the Mallets for Melanoma charity polo tournament.



Dr. Vukmer stated, "It is my hope that this initiative, through this tournament and our other community engagement events will benefit the people of Colorado. I just hope that the education we put out, the screenings we offer, and the legislation we support will help to decrease the number of new cases of melanoma in our state (which have been steadily rising). Melanoma is a very curable disease if caught early. So I hope our efforts improving sun protection (a known risk factor for developing this cancer) along with other preventative or early-detection strategies aid in some way to combat this trend of this deadly form of skin cancer. This tournament is our flagship effort to bring researchers, clinicians, patients, and the concerned community together to have a dialogue about melanoma, its effects, its treatments, and its trends. By doing this we hope to continue to partner with friends such as Rocky Mountain Sunscreen, Genetech Pharmaceuticals, UC Denver department of Dermatology, Armada Logistics, Goetz Insurers, Klein Bundle, Sun Safe Colorado and others to reach our citizens and translate to real, measurable impact on the staggering (and overly represented) rate of melanoma in this state. This tournament helps us to bring everyone together and facilitates a conversation that is long overdue."



this from a grass-roots organization to improve early detection/screening, public education and advocacy, patient understanding and community social engagement I thought we could be in the position to do some real good for the citizens of Colorado. So it started with this idea, and it spread like wild fire."

Soon the Denver Polo Club, legislators, community activists, local doctors and local patients teamed up to spearhead this initiative. He approached the DPC because when he went to Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, he was invited to try out for the polo team. Dr. Vukmer quipped, "The invite read 'no experience needed' which was

perfect because I had never been on a horse before." Over the four years, he attained captaincy of his team and played against a slew of wonderful players including those that played for Texas Tech, Virginia Tech, Stanford, Yale, Harvard, UConn, and Cornell to name a few.

From left to right: Equipage Pink Team of Erica Gandomcar Sachs, Rebecca Patoile, Matt Hannah, and Troy Turner. Equipage Black Team of Craig Russell, Josie Vidic, Marc Patoile and Tara Vorhes Polson (not pictured). Erica and Craig also played for the DPC team in the Governor's Cup match.

