

Staff Spotlight

Maggie Mitchell Executive Administrator, USPA Umpires, LLC

For as long as I can remember, I always wanted to own a horse. I was born and raised in San Jose, California. In high school I met Kim Kelly, who owned a horse: instant friendship! Dark Secret was boarded behind the school and every day after class we would go to the barn and ride double bareback through the adjacent cherry orchards.

I began college at UC Santa Barbara and then transferred to UC Davis. I ended up buying Dark Secret for \$350 unbeknown to my parents. I kept her at a stable outside Davis. I didn't have a car, so I hitchhiked after classes to go riding. After hearing UC Davis had a polo club on campus, I realized keeping my horse on campus was the solution to my problem. I was told I could join the club, but I would have to learn to play polo. After my first lesson, I fell in love with the sport. Fortunately, my horse took right to polo, which made my learning curve much easier.

Susan Walton, Kim Kelly, Cindy Halle (née Wilson) and I put together the first UC Davis women's team. We won the National Women's Intercollegiate our first year, beating Cornell University in the final.

After college, I continued to play polo even though I was moving around a lot. But no matter where I lived, I would always find a small polo club that was happy to have another player join in. I groomed for a few seasons at the Eldorado Polo Club in California, before Walton asked if I would be her assistant polo manager at the Willow Bend Polo Club in Plano, Texas. I loaded up my three horses and drove to Texas. The club was owned by Norman Brinker, whose high standards, positive outlook and personal integrity not only impacted



the club, but also had a huge impact on me as a young adult. His incredible success in the restaurant industry was based on people believing in themselves, their ideas and having the highest standards possible, and he brought these ideals to Willow Bend.

I was the polo manager for the next five years and was able to play in the club leagues and tournaments. With Kim Kelly, we put teams together and won the U.S. Women's Handicap five consecutive years. I was rated 1-goal outdoor and in the arena. My string of horses grew to seven—some bought, some given to me.

I worked seven winter seasons at Palm Beach Polo & Country Club (believe me, I have seen and heard it all!). My first season I oversaw "getting" the players to umpire, which turned out to be a next-to-impossible job. When I returned the following season, I was happy to learn they were starting a professional umpire program.

Willow Bend was being sold and I moved on to manage other summer clubs: Broad Acres Polo Club in Oklahoma; Myopia Polo Club in Massachusetts; and Santa Barbara

Polo Club in California. I was tired of moving every six months and wanted to get out of polo when I received a call from a man who would become the next major influential person in my life, Robin Uihlein.

He asked if I would manage the Sarasota Polo Club. It became a year-round job, where I was also able to use my creative side with the club magazine, special events and sponsorship sales in the off season. What a great run we had for 12 years. Uihlein's philosophies were "right is right and wrong is wrong," zero tolerance for bad behavior, respect for the sport and respect for each other. The club was one of the largest and most successful clubs in the U.S. at the time, with nine fields and 75 players. Unfortunately, the repercussions of the 2008 recession hit the club hard.

In 2013, I started working for the USPA Umpires, LLC. Since then, the program has grown tremendously. Clubs are using full-time seasonal umpires more and more each year. I oversee the logistics of 30 professional umpires throughout the year, writing their contracts as well as those for the USPA clubs employing them. In 2022, Umpires LLC professionally officiated over 3,300 games. The Tournament Support Program has increased the outreach of professional umpire services to over 135 USPA member clubs, umpiring 195 USPA tournaments.

What started out as a hobby played on a backyard horse became my life and livelihood. I have lived, played and worked all over the country with amazing role models and mentors that taught me valuable life lessons. I have worked hard and made countless friends. I truly enjoy helping grow and improve the sport of polo by the work I do with USPA Umpires, LLC.

