

# A Polo Shirt Primer

BY TIFFANY FIGUEIREDO

It's a wardrobe staple of virtually every man, woman and child in the country. So how did the polo get here and where is it going? Here are some of your most burning questions answered.



A classic polo goes from day to evening with ease. A form-fitting polo tops a long, beaded chiffon skirt for a look that's effortless. Lacoste stretch pique in apricot, \$72. Spicy Shop/Fort Worth. Hale Bob print chiffon skirt with beaded waistband, \$199. Carabella's/Fort Worth. Turquoise plastic scroll cuff, \$26; Sorelli Happy Birthday bracelet, \$145. Dolce Vita/Fort Worth.

My husband is a big fan of the polo shirt, and he is fearless in his color selection. I suppose the loudly colored (orange, green, pink) Polo Ralph Lauren numbers that he wears on casual Fridays at his conservative office are his way of saying, "OK boys, I will wear your uniform, but I'll do it my way." And although his co-workers rib him endlessly, they also give him his props for showing a bit of personality in their khakis-and-polo world.

Once reserved for tennis courts and polo fields, the polo, tennis or golf shirt — call it what you will — is everywhere. We all wear them.

The polo shirt was not created by the fashion designer Ralph Lauren, as many people believe, but by Frenchman René Lacoste, a seven-time Grand Slam tennis champion. In the early 20th century, tennis players wore long-sleeved shirts, trousers and ties, an ensemble that was both uncomfortable and restrictive. In an effort to gain a competitive edge, Lacoste, nicknamed "Le Crocodile" because of a wager he made over a crocodile-skin suitcase, designed a short-sleeved cotton pique shirt with a collar that could be turned up to block the sun (why that upturned collar later became an '80s fashion craze beats me).

Lacoste's practical, yet stylish shirt, emblazoned with his signature crocodile, went into mass production in 1933 and was quickly adopted by other athletes tortured by uncomfortable clothing, such

company in the 1950s. Lacoste split with Izod in 1993 and has enjoyed an unbelievable resurrection after all things preppy fell out of favor in the late '80s. The company is even regaining its status in the sports world, with American tennis star Andy Roddick switching to the Lacoste label after a longtime alliance with Reebok.

Other brands of yesteryear are making a revival as well. Original Penguin by Munsingwear shirts, once endorsed by Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Ward Cleaver wannabes, are now considered some of the coolest on the market. Appealing to a much younger crowd than in its fans in its '50s heyday, the decidedly uncool, slightly chubby bird appears on retro-inspired striped shirts and the classic Earls, which feature contrasting trim on the sleeves, placket and collars of shirts woven in subdued, '70s-looking colors.

Remember Le Tigre? Conceived in the late 1970s as a cheeky American answer to the popularity of France's Lacoste, the brand was re-launched in 2004. It has become a favorite of retro-loving teens and twentysomethings for its slim fit, vintage stripes, brilliant colors and slightly more affordable price (they're usually under \$50), not to mention that playful orange tiger.

Palm Beach socialite Lilly Pulitzer's candy-colored clothes have been a darling of jet set resort-goers since the late 1950s, but disappeared in 1984 when Pulitzer retired. Almost 10 years later, the line was revived and is stronger than ever. Featuring a palm tree logo, Pulitzer's polos come in bright colors, some with coordinating beachy prints sewn onto the button plackets, in both

sleeveless and short-sleeved versions.

Back to my husband's favorite: the Polo Ralph Lauren polo shirt. In 1968, Lauren, a Jewish kid from the Bronx, took out a \$50,000 loan and launched Polo Fashion, then a line of wide neckties. He later added sportswear, suits, women's clothing and home fashions, eventually creating the fashion empire that has made him an American success story and has defined American style. His classic polo shirt has been the cornerstone of that style, remaining true to its origins even as new versions are introduced regularly.

This season's riffs on the old favorite include the beloved Big Pony versions, which feature a palm-sized multicolor pony on the chest, as well as tattoo-inspired distressed shirts with, not ponies (gasp!), but a serpent, patriotic eagle and octopus. Folks with a creative bent can go to polo.com and design a shirt. Pick the cut and color, then choose between a polo pony or three-initial monogram for the chest. Costs

range from \$30 for infant sizes to \$100 for a men's classic long-sleeved polo, either of which will arrive in about two weeks.

For the most part, polo shirt prices hover around \$100 or under, making them very accessible, and because virtually every designer line includes at least one, it's a way for almost anyone to have, say, something from Juicy Couture, Tommy Bahama, Burberry London, Marc Jacobs, Paul Smith, Hugo Boss, even Dolce & Gabbana, without spending big bucks. With all the choices in fit, fabric and color, a polo shirt may be the Everyman shirt, but you can truly make it your own.

as golfers and polo players, giving the tennis shirt its other two monikers: the golf shirt and the polo shirt, the latter of which has become the more commonly used, thanks to Lauren. The little croc itself, thought to be the first designer logo in fashion history, is often mistakenly called an alligator, and the Lacoste shirt is often mistakenly called an Izod by people of a certain age (my teenage daughter, who loves Lacoste, had never heard of Izod). That name came from Lacoste's partnership with the Izod garment manufacturing