

?Polo for Heart? a high-class affair with charity at its centre



By Jake Courtepatte

One would find it easy to get caught up in the glitz and glamour of Polo for Heart, held at the Toronto Polo Club in Richmond Hill. After all, the equestrian enthusiasts from across Southern Ontario who converge on the grounds annually for a weekend of high-fashion, fine food, and the sport of kings are among the area's elite: though at its core, the main focus of attendees and volunteers alike is charity.

In fact, an incredible \$6-million plus has been raised over the event's 39 years to help fund heart disease and stroke treatment and research.

?It's helped us do all kinds of innovative work,? said Susan Mullin, President and CEO of Southlake Regional Health Centre, the recipient of the funds. ?We've had a couple of ?world-firsts' at Southlake, thanks to Polo for Heart in part.?

The ?firsts? Mullin refers to includes the first surgery of a ventricle inserted through the arm, as well as the first electronic monitor for a heart implanted in North America.

?This is an organization that has supported us for years, and we're just thrilled to partner with them?it's such a natural partnership. Historically dampened by bad weather conditions in recent years, this year's event went off without a hitch on Thursday evening, opening with the highly-anticipated Polo Under the Stars.

Saturday's agenda followed up with everything from a pair of intense polo matches, to a performance by the Canadian Cowgirls show team, to the traditional champagne divot stomp, where guests enter the field at halftime to smooth the field while enjoying a glass of bubbly.

Though Sunday's weather was deemed to treacherous for riders and guests alike to attend, the event still drew thousands of attendees between Thursday and Saturday, something Mullin said plays an important role in Southlake's participation.

?It's not just about the money,? said Mullin. ?It's about creating the awareness. ?Southlake serves York Region, South Simcoe, and as far north as Muskoka for our cardiac programs, and we need to get that word out. It's about fundraising for us, but it's about community awareness raising as well, and that's key.?

Every seven minutes, someone in Canada dies from heart disease and stroke. An estimated 1.6 million more are living with the devastating effects of these diseases, while nine in ten Canadians have at least one risk factor, such as high blood pressure, obesity, tobacco use, lack of physical activity & diabetes.

Over 10,000 cardiac patients are treated at Southlake each year.