

# Teenage Snowbirds? Just Part of Being a Young Equestrian

## [A Chance to Soar](#)



Josh Ritchie for The New York Times

By Holly Peterson

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Wellington, Fla. — Each Sunday evening of the winter months, a sea of girls in riding breeches, muddy paddock boots and fitted navy blazers crowds the JetBlue gateways in West Palm Beach, Fla., heading home to the New York area for the school week.

“We get a lot of people staring at our outfits as we go through security,” said Vixi Press, 16, one of the elite riders who climb off their horses in the rings here after a weekend of frenzied show jumping.

Some parents show their commitment to athletics by traveling to baseball doubleheaders in Yaphank, N.Y.; for others, it's getting to an early morning hockey game at the Lasker Rink in Central Park.

For the parents of the horse set, it's commuting to the Winter Equestrian Festival, a training and showing marathon held over 12 weekends at the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center, a 500-acre complex where these girls compete alongside 2,500 world-class riders.

At the festival, which ends this weekend, young athletes earn points for national or world rankings as spectators take mud-spattered golf carts or dirt bikes to the 18 outdoor rings.

For these riders, most of them girls, taking part in the winter circuit is a big commitment, one that means missing out on parties, school plays or hanging out with friends on a weekend.

Ms. Press, who lives in Manhattan and is a junior at the Riverdale Country School in the Bronx, has trekked to Wellington for seven winters, cramming in homework and SAT prep on those flights, as well as between competitions and bedtime.

She attends a full day of school every Thursday, is picked up by her mother and whisked to a flight that puts her in bed in Florida by 10 p.m.

She sets her alarm for 5:50 a.m. on Friday to make her 6:30 a.m. lesson. There, she will jump over several fences, hone the position of her hands and shoulders during a trot and practice squeezing her thighs against the saddle just so to coax her horse into a seamless transition from walk to canter.

After the warm-up, she will compete against almost 100 other girls in her division until 4 p.m., in classes where a handful will be awarded ribbons for style, speed and accuracy. After that, it's two late-afternoon lessons in which her trainers try to refine her competition performance; then a quick dinner, homework and to bed by 10 p.m.

"It's not easy when I think about what I'm missing at home on Saturday nights," Ms. Press said. "Looking at Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, it's pretty easy to feel like I'm missing out. But, in my eyes, it's worth it."

On a 70-degree Saturday in January, 9-year-old Sienna Pilla from Ridgefield, Conn., climbed atop her pony, cantered around a ring and jumped over eight short fences; on the sidelines, under shaded huts, judges hunched forward to analyze her posture.

Her father, Philip, an entrepreneur and former professional soccer player, focused just as intently as his daughter guided her pony's strides and leaps.

A few rings away, Lillie Keenan, an 18-year-old senior at the Spence School in Manhattan who is considered by many in this milieu to be the best young rider from the city, competed in a 80-second mad dash during which she sent her horse over five-foot fences, persuading the animal to suspend itself in midair. She recently took third place against Olympic-level riders.

For these competitors, the ultimate goal is a place on the United States Olympic equestrian team. There is prize money also at stake: On Saturday nights, the most skilled riders competed for six-figure purses.

But for the youngest of these athletes, the cost of competing will outreach most monetary prizes.

The amounts range from \$5,000 to lease a pony for a year to \$1 million to buy a grand-prix-caliber Dutch Warmblood. A stall costs \$3,500 for the 12 weeks of the festival, trainers and vets receive upward of \$10,000 per rider, and transporting a horse to and from Florida costs about \$2,500.

Add on show fees that range from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars per weekend, and accommodations. Parents say an average three-night weekend in Wellington can cost \$3,000 for airfare and hotels.

(There are some elements of financial aid, with sponsors enabling the Palm Beach Riding Academy to offer lessons to anyone for \$35.)

“I’d be lying to say that it’s not expensive to run a barn and to ride horses,” said Brianne Goutal, 26, a top trainer in Wellington and a member of the United States show jumping team. “On the other hand, it’s tremendous work. You can’t just pick up a tennis racket and make it to the U.S. Open. If you don’t put in the time or energy, it just doesn’t happen.”

Traveling to Wellington is not the only way for New York riders to keep active during the winter, but it is the warmest.



Sienna Pilla, 9, and her father, Philip, travel to Florida from their home in Ridgefield, Conn., on weekends so that she can compete in the Winter Equestrian Festival. Credit...Josh Ritchie for The New York Times

Riders who don't make the trek continue to train in local barns, in chilly indoor rings where the footing is less safe and harder on the horses' hooves. Up north, shows are much less frequent during the winter and the best riders are scarce, meaning it's more difficult to increase one's ranking.

Yet hard-core riders believe that shivering through frigid training is an important rite in a young rider's life.

"Being stuck at small shows in freezing cold farms is really earning it," said Georgina Bloomberg, 32, a daughter of the former mayor. "That taught me more character than competing against the best."

She is ranked fifth among competitive American riders, according to the United States Equestrian Federation, the governing body of sports like show jumping and dressage.

"I've never thought it's a good thing to start coming to Wellington too early," she said. "It's something you may earn the right to do at about 15, when you have shown the ability to balance school and tutors, and do the work."

But for devoted riders who can afford the commute, the allure of Wellington is tough to resist.

"I went down at 9 or 10 years old, and I was really serious about it," said Jessica Springsteen, 23, the daughter of Bruce and one of the highest-ranked female riders in the country. "You miss out on so much, but you decide that it's something you want to pursue."

The Winter Equestrian Festival is the brainchild of Mark Bellissimo, a former tech entrepreneur who is the managing partner of a group of investors who bought 85 acres of Wellington horse show properties in 2007. They brought in high-end sponsors such as Rolex and turned the festival into the world's largest and longest-running horse competition.

"You have a hedge-fund guy getting muck out of his daughter's horse's foot and you have local families enjoying the free carousel and less-expensive lessons we provide," he said. He helped structure a tutoring center for the most dedicated young riders, who move to Florida for the winter and skip 12 weeks of their regular school.

Mr. Bellissimo, 53, said the goal was to lure the best, and then ultimately develop and sell adjacent real estate.

There are horse owners who treat their stables — some of which have more than a dozen stalls and cost upward of \$10 million — like Park Avenue apartments, with dark burnished-wood stalls covered in fuchsia bougainvillea and stamped with brass plates of each horse's name.

"There are parts of it that are ridiculous, like some stables down here that are nicer than most people's homes," said Ashley Holzer, 51, a former weekend-warrior mom and four-time Canadian Olympic team member. "But it's world-class down here. If you build it, they will come. Well, they built it, and we all came."

For other parents, a big draw is the social part of the sport. The horse moms, many of whom have never ridden but don riding breeches and tight jackets to look the part, spend downtime strolling by the 100 vendors set up in well-appointed tents, much like a farmers market for the well-to-do, with art galleries and an Hermès store. Next to the sea salt potato chips, the snack bar offers \$40 half-bottles of rosé.

“It’s keeping up with the Joneses, trying to fit in every which way,” said Cornelia Guest, 51, the blue-blood accessories designer who competed at Wellington from the age of 14. “The father just made a lot of money. His best friend’s kid rides, and the next thing you know they suddenly have five ponies. But, in the end, it doesn’t ruin the sport because those people fall off the wayside eventually.”

Becky Gochman, 51, who for three years held the Wellington title in the amateur-owner hunter division for riders 36 and over, said she has enjoyed bringing her two young daughters from Manhattan to compete here.

“For 90 percent of the families, you’ll see a very committed sports family who really want their kids to succeed academically and athletically,” she said.

Some trainers transplant their entire operations for the season. Andre Dignelli, 47, of Heritage Farm in Katonah, N.Y., moves to Florida for three months and sometimes takes 70 horses to the Wellington show rings on a weekend day.

His team of 50 includes supplemental trainers, grooms, exercise riders and a manager who handles the logistics of everything from braiding the horses’ manes to lunging a jumpy horse on a line.

“There’s a lot of layers to make a two-minute stint in the ring look like something special, and it’s so much work for everyone to succeed,” Mr. Dignelli said.

For young riders, taking part in the Wellington festival provides not just athletic advantages but life lessons, too.

“I think it’s a pretty big honor just to be riding in the same place as the great riders,” said Sophie Gochman, 12. “I like riding because I get to feel different horses, get to see their personalities, get to learn how to do something that is pretty difficult.”

“It helps me with other things in life,” she added. “I have to learn how to get along with animals. It helps me be able to memorize things for school. I’ve learned from this that people and horses are pretty similar in some ways.”