

From Her Back Yard To The Olympic Games, Abigail Wexner Shares The Joy Of Show Jumping

*Her equine passion isn't limited to supporting the U.S. team—
it's made a profound impact on an Ohio community as well.*

Molly Sorge



APHOTO SITS ON Abigail Wexner's desk of her famous show jumper Authentic. It's not an image of Authentic soaring over a jump with rider Beezie Madden. And it's not a picture of Authentic and Madden picking up medals at an Olympic Games or World Equestrian Games awards ceremony.

Instead, it's a candid shot of Authentic turned out in a grassy paddock, curled up for a nap.

Even though Wexner has witnessed Authentic winning team and individual silver at the 2006 World Equestrian Games (Germany) and team gold and individual bronze at the 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong, she favors this photo of him snoozing. It's the kind of picture an owner of even the most humble equine cherishes.

Wexner has been in love with horses all her life, but she didn't own one until she was in her 30s. Now she's making up for lost time, owning top show jumpers for both Madden and Jeffery Welles, supporting the U.S.

Equestrian Federation show jumping team and hosting a top grand prix—the \$100,000 New Albany Classic—at her home in Columbus, Ohio.

Since Wexner just rides for pleasure herself, backing top riders has given her an opportunity to live out a dream. "The idea of being able to sponsor a world-class rider was unbelievably fascinating to me and an incredible privilege. It's a way that I can kind of follow and be involved in a sport I love," she said. "Obviously, I don't have the talent or the ability to do those things, but forming a partnership and supporting the riders who are able to do that and represent the country and compete internationally has just been an awesome experience for me."

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—Abigail Wexner

"She's in the stratosphere of some very rare owners," said U.S. show jumping Chef d'Equipe George Morris. "She has the passion and the means to support the passion at the top level. She's very loyal and consistent. There are very few owners in the world like that. She's exceptional."

In addition to her ownership of top horses, Wexner also hosts 30 of the country's top riders on her home turf for the New Albany Classic Invitational Grand Prix and Family Day each year. This year will be the 15th anniversary

of the event, which serves as a fundraiser for the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence. Since its inception, the event has raised more than \$17 million to benefit the Coalition.

The New Albany Classic brings together two of Wexner's passions: show jumping and promoting healthy families.

"For a while, they didn't look like two issues that necessarily went together, but coupling the grand prix with this family day was really important to me in terms of changing the image of both things. We try to highlight both the accessibility of riding and family violence issues," Wexner said.

"I wanted to explore ways I could take my love and passion for the sport of show jumping and try to apply it to not only benefit the sport itself," she added, "but also to use it to some purpose, so I didn't feel selfish about all the resources that had been spent in my riding."



A photo of her famous show jumper Authentic napping sits on Abigail Wexner's desk.

Giving Back

In her youth, Wexner was as horse-crazy as any girl, but she had limited access to all things equine.

"I absolutely loved horses and was fascinated with them. But I grew up in New York City, and I really didn't have an opportunity to ride, either from a financial point of view or from an opportunity point of view," said Wexner, 50. But there's not much that can stand in the way of a teenager bitten by the horse bug. By the time

she was 16, Wexner had figured out a way to get in the saddle: lessons in Central Park.

Wexner graduated from Barnard College (N.Y.) and New York University School of Law before embarking on a career that took her all over the world. She practiced law from 1987 to 1992 with the London and New York offices of Davis Polk & Wardwell.

She kept riding as a hobby but didn't own a horse. "I traveled quite a bit, and I used riding as a way to go places and see things," she said. But that all changed in 1993, when she married self-made billionaire Leslie H. Wexner, the chairman and CEO of the Limited Brands corporation.

Wexner moved to her husband's home base of Columbus and built a small barn on the property for her first horses. "I just felt so privileged to be able to do that," she said. She dabbled in the adult amateur hunters but decided not to focus on her own career in the ring. She rides a few times a week aboard her dozen or so horses—some pleasure mounts, some young horses and a few retired ones—in Ohio and enjoys riding Western at the family's Aspen, Colo., property.

Wexner's four children, Hannah, Harry, David and Sarah, range from 13 to 17 years, but they're not aspiring riders. "None of my kids have the absolute passion about riding



Abigail Wexner still rides, but mostly for pleasure, as when she's visiting the family's Aspen, Colo., ranch.

Who Are The Wexners?

Abigail Wexner's husband, Leslie H. Wexner, was born in 1937 into a family of Russian immigrants. His parents owned a small store called "Leslie's" in Dayton, Ohio, and he followed them into the family business after graduating from college and serving in the Air National Guard.

Wexner borrowed \$5,000 from an aunt to start his own store, called The Limited, in 1963. From there, the business grew into Limited Brands, including The Limited, Express and Lane Bryant. Wexner expanded his empire to become a leader in U.S. retail. Limited Brands now includes Victoria's Secret, Bath and Body Works, PINK, La Senza, Henri Bendel, White Barn Candle Company, and C.O. Bigelow, and generates more than \$10 billion in revenue yearly.

Wexner is also known for his philanthropic work, founding the Wexner Foundation in 1984 to foster Jewish leadership. In 2010, the Wexner family and Limited Brands Foundation made a \$100 million donation to Ohio State University. He is also a generous supporter of the United Way and other causes.

that I do, but that's fine. They have other things, and either you have it or you don't have it," she said.

In the Columbus area, Wexner has been an active advocate for family issues. From 1994 to 1996, she led a fund-raising team that collected \$15 million for the renovation of a Columbus YWCA facility. She's founder and board chairman of KidsOhio.org, an organization focused on improving public education in Ohio, and she's founder and chair of the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence.

When she started the New Albany Classic in 1998, she envisioned it not only as a fundraiser for the Coalition, but also as a day of healthy and affordable entertainment for local families, including a concert. Music acts in recent years have included the Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato, and American Idol winners Jordin Sparks and David Archuleta.

"I think now it's really well established and people really look forward to it. Our attendance [more than 15,000] increases every year," Wexner said. "We constantly try to keep it new and add new things. It's a really wholesome day for families, and they get exposed to a whole array of things that they don't see in one place often."

Past winners of the New Albany Classic include Madden, Welles, McLain Ward, Laura Kraut, Lauren Hough, Kent Farrington and Todd Minikus. "The riders have been

SHOW JUMPING ISSUE

Abigail Wexner once enjoyed showing, but she now rides recreationally, leaving the competition to the show jumpers she owns.

tremendous in terms of coming back. I think they feel good about the fact that it does good in the community and that they're part of something that's supporting a greater good," Wexner said.

The show jumping takes place literally on Wexner's back yard, and she's consulted with footing experts from Spruce Meadows to perfect the grass footing.

Saving The Day

While she was organizing the first New Albany Classic, Wexner met Beezie and John Madden. The Maddens traveled to her home a few times to help her with her horses and her riding, and then she approached them with the idea of owning a grand prix horse. So Wexner purchased a nice 6-year-old, Desilvio, in 2001. It was the same year that Elizabeth Busch Burke and the Maddens bought Authentic.

Desilvio and Authentic went head-to-head in the selection trials for the 2004 Olympic Games, and Desilvio was leading the standings after the first few trials. But an injury took Desilvio out of the running, and Authentic, now owned by a syndicate, ended up making the U.S. team and winning team gold in Athens.



(Cathrin Cammett Photo)

By 2005, the syndicate that owned Authentic had received multiple high-dollar offers for him from overseas buyers, and syndicate members were considering selling.

So Wexner saved the day and bought Authentic to keep him competing under the stars and stripes. "Having established the relationship between Beezie and John, I wanted to be sure that the horse stayed with them, and it was an incredible opportunity for me to help in allowing Authentic to stay an American horse," Wexner recalled.



Each year, Abigail Wexner (*left*) hosts the \$100,000 New Albany Classic Invitational Grand Prix and Family Day at her home. In 2005, her horse Authentic won the class with Beezie Madden aboard. Jon Dargusch (*second left*) and Jack Kessler helped Wexner present the awards.



(Lisa Hinson Photo)

Abigail Wexner enjoyed going to the 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong to watch her horse of a lifetime, Authentic, compete. She took her children, (from left) Hannah, Sarah and David with her.

"She saved us, and she stepped up and bought him," said Morris. "She salvaged him for this country. She's been most generous in buying horses for John and Beezie, horses meant for the highest level of the sport, and she's also been very generous to the U.S. Equestrian Team Foundation, which helps support our teams. All in all, I can't say enough good things about her."

Just after she'd bought him, Authentic promptly rewarded her by winning the \$100,000 New Albany Classic in 2005. And he went on to team and individual medals at the 2006 WEG and 2008 Olympic Games. "It's been really exciting. He is a once-in-a-lifetime horse, and being at the Olympic Games was probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience," Wexner said.

"All in all, I can't say enough good things about her."

—George Morris

Authentic hasn't shown since 2009 after suffering an injury, but Wexner has been unflinching in her support of Madden's international goals. She accepts that there will be disappointments along with the victories.

"Frankly, after Authentic's injury, you go through periods of rough luck, and I had rough luck with Danny Boy, who looked really promising but had a bad reaction to a virus and didn't live up to what we hoped he would [at first]," she said. "I knew that I was in the hunt for

another horse or two who could compete at that level."

Her grand prix string now includes Danny Boy and Mademoiselle, and in 2011 she added the powerful Cortes C to the barn. Last year, she also bought Vanilla, the daughter of Beezie's mount for team gold and individual silver at the 2011 Pan American Games, Coral Reef Via Volo. Beezie also shows two talented 9-year-olds that Wexner owns, Amadora and Zhivago.

"She's been the kind of owner everyone dreams of having," said Beezie. "She loves to bring the young horses along, and she loves seeing them become grand prix horses, but she's also fantastic at supplying elite grand prix horses. She has a real passion for horses, so she likes to see their progression—how they learn and develop. She has a lot of fun with that. But I think she also realizes that the special ones are few and far between. She realizes that sometimes you just need a good horse at the right time, so she's been right there for us."

She's also owned horses for Welles, including Armani, who was shortlisted for the 2006 World Equestrian Games and the 2008 Olympic Games. He also won the 2010 \$200,000 Gene Mische American Invitational (Fla.) and the 2009 New Albany Classic.

"I just felt that in trying to support a rider who was trying to reach that highest level, that Jeffery was definitely deserving of the support," said Wexner. "He's a wonderful human being. He's helped me with my own riding and found some wonderful horses for me, so where I can, I'm supportive of his career as well."

Supporting The Team Well

Just before the end of 2011, Wexner added even more ammunition to Beezie's string with the purchase of Simon, the No. 1 ranked horse in the world.

"I really hadn't planned on buying Simon, but again, it just came up," Wexner said. "I just decided that I was going to give it everything I could in terms of having my best shot at having a horse go to London [2012 Olympic Games]."

"She's been the kind of owner everyone dreams of having."

—Beezie Madden

Beezie plans to contest the Olympic selection trials with Wexner's Simon and Cortes C, as well as Coral Reef Via Volo, who is owned by Coral Reef Ranch.

"For me, the interest level centers around the international teams," Wexner said. "It's not about just a grand prix horse. It's an incredibly elusive thing to pursue at that level. The pleasure is being able to see the team supported well. I don't think that as a country we do it well enough. Frankly, I don't think owners are aligned in that common goal, to say how do we find the best horses and support our riders in order to have the best team that we can."

Wexner loves watching her horses jump, and she travels to see them whenever her schedule allows it. But she's not the type to sit idly at a VIP table. "I jump every single jump. I feel exhausted when the round is over. I sometimes feel like I ask myself why I bother to come because I actually suffer through it. I clearly get far more nervous than Beezie does," she said with a laugh.

And what does Wexner's husband, Leslie, who is decidedly not a horse person, think of her passion for show jumping? "My husband is literally a prince," said Abigail. "The horses are not his thing, and he doesn't really get it, but I also don't get his interest in cars. I think we kind of appreciate each other that way. He can show me several cars and they all look alike to me, but I'm sure it's the same for him with the horses. He is the ultimate partner, and he's very supportive of it."

Leslie doesn't usually go to shows, but he witnessed Beezie and Authentic's battle for an individual medal at the 2006 WEG in Aachen, Germany. Abigail laughed when she recalled how amazed he was that one rail meant the difference between individual gold and bronze.

"That absolutely blew his mind in terms of frustration. He wondered how I could be so invested in a sport like this, where one tiny mistake can cost you that title. But to me, that's the joy and the challenge of it. It's because it's so difficult that makes it so interesting," she said. ♣

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