

A photograph of a brown horse and its foal running through a green grassy field. The horse is in the foreground, running towards the left, with a white blaze on its face. The foal is running alongside it, slightly behind. In the background, there is a black metal fence and a blurred landscape.

CHARGING AHEAD

With a Breeders' Cup champion in the stable, prized broodmares on the farm, and high-priced yearlings going through the sales ring, Town & Country Farms is making a big impact

By Maryjean Wall / Photos by David Stephenson



charging ahead

A timeless Bourbon County landscape, tucked into a corner of Russell Cave Road, spills like a dew-kissed river of grass across the rolling Town & Country Farms. Louise and Kiki Courtelis view this vista, feeling their new farm has forever been their old Kentucky home.

What matters most is this thriving Thoroughbred nursery is now home to the mother and daughter team known as Town & Country Farms. The Courtelises blended quickly into Bluegrass culture after moving from Florida in August 2007. By transplanting Town & Country from the Marion County horse country surrounding Ocala, they were completing another transition begun a few years earlier: from dominant players in the Arabian horse world to newcomers in the larger world of Thoroughbreds. They began where they left off in Arabian racing, seeking the highest rewards at the top levels.

This was how they came to win the 2015 Breeders' Cup Distaff at Keeneland with Stopchargingmaria, a daughter of Tale of the Cat, whom they purchased privately in 2014 from Mike Repole. He had placed her value then at \$3.15 million. The Courtelises intend to place her in their broodmare band when she ends her racing career, for she is the type of mare they are pursuing for breeding.

The mare represents the Courtelis action plan: Never do anything in a small way. Kiki told how her father, the late Alec Courtelis, "was always attracted to the best," a philosophy that brought Town & Country into a long association with Lasma Arabians. Lasma, based in Scottsdale, Arizona, and Louisville, was more like a mega-power in the 1970s and 1980s than a collection of breeding farms. Its founder, Dr. Eugene LaCroix, imported an Arabian racehorse named Bask from Poland in 1962. Bask became the foundation sire for Lasma and is memorialized in a bronze sculpture at the Kentucky Horse Park.

Alec and Louise, as founders of Town & Country, became major supporters of Arabian racing in this country. Alec was founder of the Arabian Jockey Club in the United States. As the core of their horse business, the Courtelises once boarded 300 Arabian mares for Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum and kept another 100 of their own. They spent big in the Arabian world.

Now, their short history in Thoroughbreds indicates a similar pattern of going only for the best. They are investing in every phase of the business,



Town & Country Farms has invested selectively in high-end broodmares for its commercial breeding operation.

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from broodmare prospects such as Stopchargingmaria to stallion shares.

“Our goal is to be a commercial breeder of graded stakes winners,” said Shannon Potter, president of Town & Country. “Whether it’s breeding for someone else to race (via sales yearlings) or whether it’s us (with a sales prospect returned home), it’s always a win/win for us.”

Potter joined the Courtelises in January but has been acquainted with them for nearly 13 years, when he worked at Taylor Made. Frank Taylor, vice president of boarding operations for Taylor Made, calls Potter “a smart young guy with ethics.” Town & Country farm manager Levi Dunlap also came over from Taylor Made. “One of our best people,” Frank Taylor said. “We gave him up to let him grow.” Taylor Made has advised Town & Country in management and handled its sales consignments, with the association working well for both.

“I’ve been working with new people coming into the business for a lot of years,” Taylor said, “and basically success boils down to three things. They [at Town & Country] have figured out how to do all three things.

Taylor laid out his three-point plan for success that he gave the Courtelises:

“You’ve got to spend money: That’s the easiest [of the three] to come by,” Taylor said. “And then you’ve got to have an actual written plan of what you’re going to do. And that’s the second-easiest thing to do: to set goals and stick to a plan.”

Taylor’s No. 3 factor is horsemanship. “And that’s one of the toughest things to come by,” he said. “They’ve got all those things. Kiki is a good horsewoman and her mother is a good horsewoman and they love their horses ... They’ve got good business deals, and they surround themselves with good people. They use top people like Todd Pletcher [Stopchargingmaria’s trainer].”

From Arabians to Thoroughbreds

Horsemanship for Kiki, the CEO of Town & Country, began when she was about two-and-a-half years old. Her father, Alec, took her on weekends to a shopping center in Kendall, near Miami, for pony rides offered on site. Kiki took to the ponies right away, and Alec was happy to indulge his only daughter.

He was self-made in real estate and construction. Born in Alexandria, Egypt, to Greek parents, Alec arrived at age 20 in the United States in 1947 with a small amount of cash that was to help pay his tuition at the



Stopchargingmaria gave Louise and Kiki Courtelis their first Breeders' Cup victory when the filly won the 2015 Distaff at Keeneland.

University of Miami. Only problem was he quickly spent the cash. And not on tuition.

Alec's solution was to work at three jobs to pay his way through school. He toiled at mowing lawns, parking cars, and working as a short-order cook. Graduation with a degree in civil engineering led to success in real estate development as the Courtelis Company, founded in Miami in 1963. Eventually he also became a renowned Republican fundraiser, serving as finance chairman for George H. W. Bush's successful presidential campaign in 1988 and Jeb Bush's unsuccessful Florida gubernatorial campaign in 1994. He also advocated for education. The Courtelis Center for Research and Treatment in Psychosocial Oncology at the University of Miami is named for him. He was appointed to the University of Florida Board of Regents in 1987.

Louise Courtelis, who met her husband at the University of Miami when both were undergraduates, also advocates for education. She served as a trustee at the University of Florida and helped raise more than \$8 million while serving as chairwoman of the Dean's Advisory Council for the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine. The Alec P. and Louise H. Courtelis Equine Teaching Hospital is named for the couple.

Louise had always liked horses, after growing up with them, and passed this on to her daughter. They acquired their first Arabian horse almost by accident: Kiki had a spotted horse that paced instead of trotted. The family took the horse to a trainer who kept Arabian horses in his barn. The trainer suggested they buy an Arabian.

Louise and Kiki began showing Arabians, with the mother driving

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Well-bred mares and foals are the bedrock of Town & Country. Left, president Shannon Potter said the farm's goal is to breed graded stakes winners. Below, left, James Frederick leads the broodmare Bares Tripper and her Fed Biz foal.



horses in the ring and the daughter riding at a variety of disciplines, from park to pleasure. When it came time for Kiki's older brother, Pan, to attend the University of Florida in Gainesville, the family purchased 200 acres at McIntosh, near Ocala, in 1974. Louise moved to the farm to be closer to Pan at Gainesville while Kiki and her father flew up from Miami on weekends. The family chose the name Town & Country in reference to their 12 acres at Kendall, near Miami (town) and the farm near Ocala (country). The Marion County farm expanded over the years to 1,100 acres.

Among Alec's close friends was the late Frank De Francis, who with partners Robert T. Manfuso and John A. Manfuso Jr. owned the Thoroughbred tracks Laurel and Pimlico. "They were like brothers," Kiki said, and through De Francis, Courtelis was able to initiate a race day for Arabians at tracks at Tampa, Delaware, Los Alamitos, and Houston.

All the while, the Courtelises were familiar with Thoroughbred racing, partly through De Francis. "We liked to go to the races," Louise said. "For my mother-in-law's birthday, I always took her to Hialeah and she loved it." Then, during the Ocala era of Town & Country, Kiki's father presented her with a daughter of the well-renowned broodmare sire Stage Door Johnny. The Courtelises might not have realized it, but they were taking their first steps to transitioning to Thoroughbreds.

The turning point came after Sheikh Mohammed began to cut back on his Arabian broodmares and young stock. Town & Country had also cut back.

"We saw that as an opportunity," Kiki said. "Mom and I just loved the Thoroughbreds because it was a much bigger playing field, and it's nice to be a little anonymous. And so we made the commitment and spent the money on mares."

Alec died of pneumonia in 1995 following a two-year struggle with cancer. He was 68. Then-Gov. Lawton Chiles of Florida told the *Orlando Sentinel*, "one of Alec's greatest achievements was to lift the priority of education above partisan politics."

The family was to endure more

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sadness. Kiki's brother, Pan, also suffered with cancer and died within six years of his father. During Pan's illness, Kiki was introduced to Rhodesian ridgebacks because her brother wanted to own a dog of this breed. She wound up showing ridgebacks and terriers, winning at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, among other events. She brought her interest with her to Kentucky. Breeding in partnership with Tammy Lynch, Kiki's Mystiko Kennel is headquartered at Town & Country Farms.

Embracing the Bluegrass

Kiki began transferring her expertise to Thoroughbreds while still in Florida. Her entrée was as a pinhooker, or reseller of yearlings as they became 2-year-olds. She said learning pedigrees, race records, and the ideal conformation of another breed was not as daunting as it might seem. She learned by "buying them. Pouring through the [sales] catalog. Asking questions." By 1999 and 2000 she was pinhooking 10 or 12 young Thoroughbreds annually under her own name.

Town & Country simultaneously stepped up the number of Thoroughbred mares the farm was breeding. Louise and Kiki had not planned on



Lemon Kiss and her Medaglia d'Oro colt stretch their legs in an expansive paddock.

buying property in Kentucky, but as Louise said, "what happened was you need to breed to the stallions you need to breed to, up here. You bring the mares up to Kentucky and you've got to find a place to stay. You can't be driving back and forth."

Initially they purchased seven acres on Newtown Pike and stayed during their visits in a townhouse they purchased at Griffin Gate. "But it was still back and forth, back and forth," Louise said.

Then one night Kiki phoned her mother, saying she had found an ideal place for them on Russell Cave Pike at the corner of U. S. 460, the road between Paris and Georgetown. The place had been known as Harper's Island. "When I came and saw it, it just hit me that I was ready to move everything," Louise said. "This was home. It feels like home."

Kiki describes the present Town & Country operation as a boutique farm, where the small number of mares allows the farm staff to give a considerable amount of individual attention. Her mother visits every corner of the farm daily in the company of her pet ridgebacks and her assistant, Marta Ramirez. Kiki also can be found going back and forth over the farm. "I'm at every foaling if I'm in town," Kiki said.

The number of mares populating the farm varies in the low 30s. When their offspring reach yearling stage, they move to Town & Country property on the other side of Russell Cave Road to be prepped for auction.

"All horses go to the sales," said Potter, the president. If Town & Country fancies a particular yearling for its racing stable, it still offers the youngster for sale, so all buyers can have a chance at it, but applies a steeper reserve price.

"Our goal is to be a commercial breeder of stakes winners," Potter said.

Over recent seasons Town & Country has spent money aggressively at sales, always with an eye to increasing the quality of its broodmare band. Major purchases at the Keeneland November sales have included \$1.75 million in 2013 for the mare Upperline in foal to War



Louise and Kiki Courtelis take a hands-on approach to operating Town & Country Farms.

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Front and \$950,000 that same year for Amen Hallelujah. Many more six-figure acquisitions went through the Keeneland sales.

"I would say what works the most for us is buying not just proven mares but mares in that mid- to upper-level range," Potter said. "If you buy in foal to the right horse, you can usually make things work for the farm a whole lot better."

Town & Country has partners in some of its equine residents but does not accept clients. Last year the operation

initiated six investment deals with mares in foal, the deals offered to "friends, people we know," Potter said.

The farm also partners on a number of racehorses through Eclipse Thoroughbred Partners. "And we just started a new partnership with Spendthrift Farm," Potter added. "We bought 2-year-old colts with Spendthrift. We are racing just colts, for the breeding shares." This is in addition to the breeding shares Town & Country owns in various stallions, constituting what Frank Taylor called "a nice stallion portfolio." Town & Country also has a sport horse

Louise Courtelis says Town & Country immediately felt like home. She lives in the farm's main house, right, and visits the entire property every day.





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division in Europe. In the modern horse business, it's all about diversification.

A golf cart tour of Town & Country Farms reveals what makes the infrastructure work for the operation: top fence rails made of rubber instead of wood, so horses will have less chance of injuring themselves; footing in the shedrow of the yearling barn that is a mix of Keeneland Polytrack with more silica sand added; plastic curtains on exterior windows of the yearling barn that can be cranked to roll up or down. The farm keeps a horse trailer always hitched to a truck in case it should be needed in emergency.

One equine resident is almost a curiosity for her parentage. This is The Last Meow, the last foal sired by the late Storm



Cat, who sired only three offspring in his final crop in 2009. The Last Meow is in foal to Temple City and has a Graydar foal by her side.

Town & Country continues deepening its ties with the local horse culture. Kiki has been appointed to the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission, and she is chair of the Kentucky Horse Breeders Incentive Fund.

Almost as a nod to the past, a lone Arabian horse roaming a paddock turns out to be the teaser for the breeding operation. "Having Arabians was the best education we could ever have had," said Louise. But the focus now is all on Thoroughbreds, with a Breeders' Cup win underscoring Town & Country's new direction. **KM**



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