



spotlight on

JOSEPHINE
ABERCROMBIE



*Thanks
for all the fun'*



OWNER/BREEDER JOSEPHINE ABERCROMBIE,
RECENTLY HONORED BY THE THOROUGHBRED
CLUB OF AMERICA FOR HER MANY ACCOMPLISHMENTS,
REFLECTS ON A LIFE WELL LIVED



Story and Photos by Michele MacDonald

PHOTO AT LEFT/MCCLASKY



The Pin Oak Stud owner has found tremendous satisfaction in breeding and racing Thoroughbreds.



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Abercrombie is a hands-on farm owner. Here she gives a treat to her homebred stallion Alternation.

By any standard, Josephine Abercrombie has led an extraordinary life. At 92, she continues to spur onward, seeking more zeniths in a career that already has eclipsed the dreams of many contemporaries.

She oversees her Pin Oak Stud in Versailles with the same enthusiasm she felt when she first journeyed to Kentucky in 1949 to help her father purchase Thoroughbred yearlings. She strolls across her farm every day with her Weimaraner, Baxter, at her side, and on mild evenings, she can be seen steering a golf cart around the fields and barns, checking on her horses.

Her bright eyes sparkle as blue as a spring sky, and her smile illuminates any room. She radiates the energy that propelled her as an award-winning Saddlebred rider in top competitions,

an unlikely but successful promoter of professional boxers, a committed philanthropist who founded The Lexington School and co-founded the Kentucky Equine Humane Center, a winning competitive ballroom dancer in her later years, and a breeder and owner of international renown.

Among the outstanding horses she has bred are Preakness Stakes winner Elocutionist; English and Irish St. Leger winner Touching Wood; her own homebred champion Laugh and Be Merry; and her Canadian champions Peaks and Valleys and Hasten to Add. She also has stood stallions who have sired significant runners for decades, including Maria's Mon, who gave the sport a pair of Kentucky Derby winners in Monarchos and Super Saver.

Trophies and awards — including the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association's National Thoroughbred Breeder of the Year and the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association/



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Kentucky Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders' Hardboot and William T. Young Humanitarian awards — overflow from bookcases in Abercrombie's office. Most recently she was feted as the Honor Guest at the Thoroughbred Club of America's 87th annual Testimonial Dinner Sept. 28 at Keeneland.

Married and divorced five times and the mother of two sons, Abercrombie has never been satisfied with just fitting into routine societal norms. A pacesetter for achieving women, the only child of Houston oilman J.S. Abercrombie aimed from the time she was a youth to attain the unique life she wanted — and to be the best she could be at all she pursued.

"When I was a girl, my mother had me take lessons in everything. I learned ballet, riding, piano, golf, tennis, swimming, ballroom dancing, elocution. She would have adored it if I had put on a hat and gloves and gone out to have lunch or tea with the girls. But I didn't want to do that," she told Sports Illustrated in 1987.

"I was different. My friends have always thought I was odd because I don't enjoy the things I'm supposed to enjoy. I like a man's world. I like what happens in a man's world. I love competition," she declared.

Joined by Pin Oak general manager Clifford Barry, who has worked with her since 1988, Abercrombie reflected on her life in a recent conversation she punctuated frequently with laughter.

Question: When did you first fall in love with horses?

Josephine Abercrombie: When I was about that big (holding thumb about an inch above forefinger). I just absolutely adored them. We lived in Texas, so



Abercrombie, with Pin Oak manager Clifford Barry, is a longtime Keeneland race sponsor.

ANNE M. EBERHARDT



During the Thoroughbred Club of America dinner, The Lexington School's Chuck Baldecchi honored Abercrombie for her founding of and commitment to the school.



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horses were a part of our lifestyle. And I've just been crazy about them ever since.

Q: Did you imagine, when you and your father bought land in Kentucky in 1952, that the Bluegrass would become your home and the heart of so much of your life?

JA: I did, actually.

Q: What attracted you to Kentucky?

JA: Everything. It's so beautiful here. It just draws you in — you can't help but adore it — and it really moves you spiritually. There's no question about that. I just adore being here, and I love going out for walks on the land. It's my way of life. Settling down in the Bluegrass, where I'm surrounded by horses and all the beautiful farms, has been absolutely perfect.

Q: What do you cherish most about Pin Oak Stud, which you built from the ground up after acquiring the current property in 1986?

JA: I appreciate the interaction with the farm on a daily basis. I simply enjoy its tranquility, the horses grazing in the fields, and the mix of wildlife here.



MICHAEL BOWEN

Abercrombie counts Peaks and Valley's victory in the Molson Export Million Stakes as one of her proudest racing achievements.

Q: How many acres do you have now?

Clifford Barry: A little over 900 altogether. We've got around 600 acres on this main side (with entrances off Grassy Springs Road) and then about 300 on the opposite side (of Versailles Road).

Q: Why did you want to breed Thoroughbreds?

JA: Nothing compares to it as far as the glory. When you breed a superstar, you're just on top of the world. It's what you're here for. You've made it. That's the way I feel.

Q: What racing moment thrilled you the most?

JA: Peaks and Valleys winning the (1995) Molson Million at Woodbine. It helped to change my program and outlook in this business. I can still hear the race caller say, 'Peaks and Valleys has reached the summit!' Peaks and Valleys took us over the moon.

Q: Which one of your horses has meant the most to you?

JA: They all mean a lot to me. I especially love watching the foals grow. I dream of how they will look with riders on their backs and in our colors breaking from the gate and doing what they are bred to do — run.

Q: Do you still enjoy going to the foaling barn for the arrival of a newborn?



Pin Oak raises young horses for the yearling sales but also keeps some to race.

JA: Oh yes. I go down as often as I can. There's nothing like seeing a foal born.

Q: What does it take to be successful in racing and breeding today, and why did you want to commit all the resources required?

JA: A long-term view, a great team from farm to trainer — and fast horses. I have been in it since the early 1950s. Growing up, I was around horses all the time — they've just been part of my life. I wouldn't know how to behave without the horses.

Q: Did you face any special challenges because you were a woman?

JA: I would say yes, but none particularly stand out to me now.

CB: Whatever they were, they didn't get in the way.

Q: Did you have a mentor while you were getting established in breeding racehorses?

JA: Alfred Vanderbilt was a good friend. He encouraged me and he was a big help in my early days. He was just always there for me if I needed him. He was a good person, and I liked him a lot.

Q: What has been your most gratifying accomplishment as an owner/breeder?

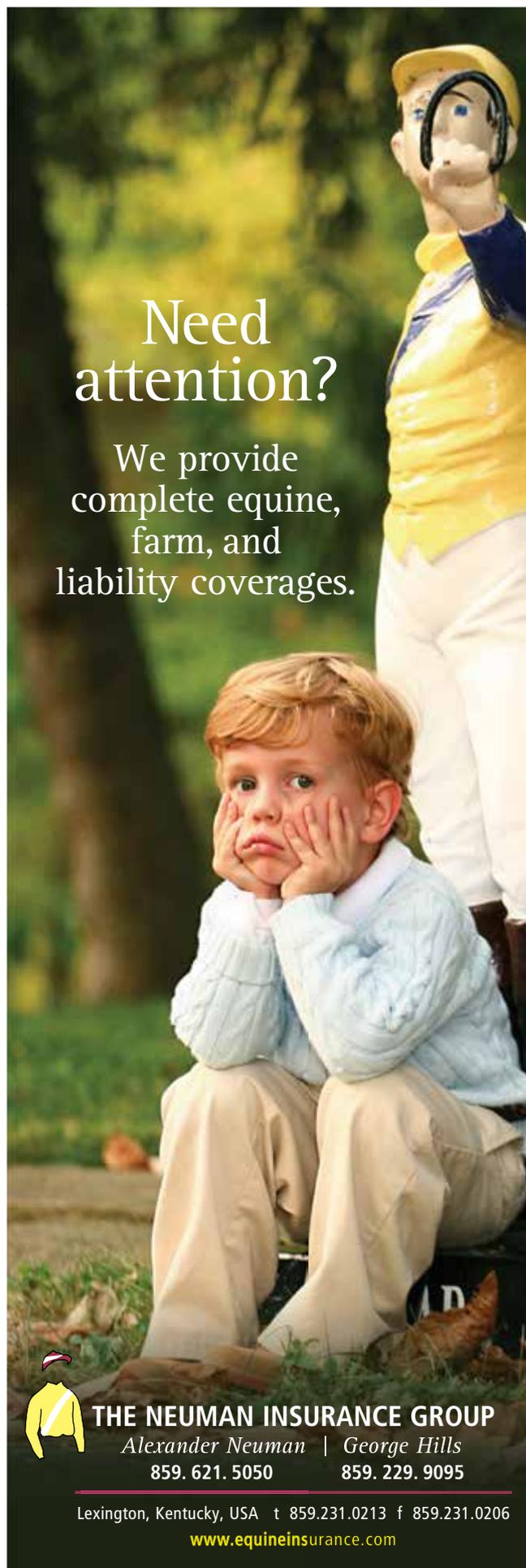
JA: Earning TOBA's National Breeder of the Year Award in 1995. I felt like the world was my own. It was just wonderful.

Q: Have you changed Pin Oak's focus in recent years toward more commercial breeding?

JA: The economy of our business has changed a lot since I first entered. As everybody knows, it's not a cheap endeavor, but continuing to run Pin Oak as a business, (for both) breeding and racing, has been and will always be my goal.

Q: You sold yearlings at the Keeneland September and Saratoga sales this year; how were the results?

CB: The market was very good; we were pleased. We sold 12 altogether, with 10 at Keeneland. Under Mrs. Abercrombie's guidance, we've always tried to run this like a business, and that leads us to sell some yearlings. We don't necessarily breed commercially — we still race, and we very much have a focus on trying to breed a



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Abercrombie's office at Pin Oak contains ample evidence of her success as an owner and breeder. In addition to horses, she adores her dog, Baxter.

racehorse. We try to keep some fillies and reproduce our families. Mrs. Abercrombie has developed an amazing group of mares, and we're always trying to make the broodmare band stronger. We keep around 35 mares.

Q: How many yearlings are you retaining from this year's crop to race?

CB: We'll have seven, four colts and three fillies. Last year it was 10, and that number varies. At the end of the day, we try to follow our business model. At the beginning of every year, we sit down with a budget ... and try to make it all match. Mrs. Abercrombie's first love is racing — and that's our goal here: to get her colors

to the winner's circle. It's important for us to try to breed with that mentality in mind.

Q: How many trainers do you employ?

CB: We've got horses with Malcolm Pierce in Canada; Graham Motion in Maryland; Michael Stidham in the Midwest at Arlington and Churchill, and he's actually at Fair Hill training now; and Donnie K. Von Hemel does Oaklawn and Oklahoma. Horses are picked to go to those guys based on level of competition where they are, the temperament of the horses, and what those trainers are best suited to. We try to do the best we can having the horse fit the trainer.

We've been with Donnie Von Hemel close to 30 years; Graham Motion about 24, 25 years; Malcolm Pierce about 15 years; and Michael Stidham about 12 to 15 years. In today's world, most owner/trainer relationships don't last that long, so it's pretty unique.

JA: We have such good trainers — they're caring. They care about the horse first, which is the way it should be.

Q: Are you still going to the races regularly?

JA: Oh yes! I love to go to the races. If we've got something running, then I'm there!

Q: Is Keeneland among your favorite



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Abercrombie's Padian-style home offers sweeping views of the farm.



In case visitors are too captivated by the rolling beauty of the countryside, a sign alerts that the Pin Oak entrance approaches.

tracks and what has it meant to you over the years?

JA: Yes. To me, Keeneland signifies all that is good in racing — quality racing with record crowds and a strong desire to give back to the industry, the surrounding communities, and to our state.

Q: How many horses do you have in training?

CB: We keep about 25 in training.

Q: How many horses do you have at the farm in training?

CB: We mainly use our training barn as a breaking and lay-up facility. All our yearlings get broken here. We do it in a very European way with a lot of line driving and ground work. We've got probably about 150 acres of wooded areas with trails, and we use that quite a bit. We've got the grass gallop and the main training track, and by early December we've got a pretty good feel for the yearlings. They'll go to South Carolina for the winter.

By April or May, whatever horses are not shipped to trainers will come back and spend whatever time they need here. And trainers sometimes send horses home for a little break.

Q: In addition to your horses, Pin Oak has been known for lively parties during Keeneland race meets and, of course, the unique white-table cloth dinner in the stallion barn to introduce Broken Vow when he began his stud career. How would you characterize your style with these events?

JA: If you're in this business and you love it, you're going to do all you can to make everyone else join you in that spirit. I just don't know what I could do that could make me as happy as this sport does.

CB: Mrs. Abercrombie always likes to see her guests having a good time. Coming up to these parties, she'd worry for days. She wanted to make sure that, from the time they came in the door, everyone felt comfortable and had a good time and left with a good feeling.

With Broken Vow, Mrs. Abercrombie wanted to do something to put the spotlight on the horse. Obviously, you have to have the right horse to be able to do that — not every horse is going to walk into a dining room of 400 people and



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stand there and not be on top of the tables. He was a horse with a good temperament, so we thought 'Let's show him off in a unique way.'

Q: Were your years of competitive ballroom dancing another special expression of your style?

JA: I love to do that — and I want to do everything the best possible way. Absolutely! The man I have danced with in competition, Harold Cottrell, is excellent. We've been dancing together for years and it's a lot of fun. I love to dance and have ever since I was very young.

Q: Of all your many pursuits, which has given you the greatest satisfaction?

JA: I have loved doing it all. I enjoyed the challenge and the competitiveness of each undertaking. They've all been exciting. And it's all been fun.

Q: Who or what has been your greatest love in life?

JA: I'd have to say all the dogs I've had throughout the years.



All animals are protected on Pin Oak as Abercrombie does not allow hunting.

They've been my constant companions through life. Right now, I have Baxter, and he's a real joy. I take Baxter for a walk every day and he loves to run and look at things, and that gives me a chance to exhale and just love being here. He takes care of me. He sleeps in the bed with me, but he never bothers me; he's just as good as he can be.

Q: Do you feel optimistic about the future of racing?

JA: Certainly. We have a lot of people in our industry who have a great passion for the sport and who I believe will continue to promote it for generations to come.

Q: What would you like to tell racing leaders?

JA: Keep up the good work. Stay committed to the horse.

Q: What would you change about the current state of racing?

JA: It would be nice to have one central body govern racing that would also oversee the health and welfare of retired racehorses. And I hope that someday we will see all graded stakes run at level weights for every horse entered and medication-free race days.

Q: Pin Oak is a founding member of Horse Country. Do you enjoy sharing the farm with racing fans?

JA: We're very lucky to have this place. I think the property, thanks to Clifford, has worked out beautifully for the horses.

CB: Mrs. Abercrombie has always allowed tours here, from the first time we opened the gates. It's always been a part of what she wanted to give back — let the outside world see it and know what it's all about. If we don't educate people, they'll never understand the sport. There is a huge stamp of Mrs. Abercrombie written all over this farm — you can just drive around and feel it.

JA: I don't know that that's true, but I'll let him say it. We are very happy here.

Q: Looking back over your life, is there any advice your mature self would give to your younger self?

JA: No advice. My mature self would say to my younger self, 'Well done. Thanks for all the fun!' **KM**

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