

Mandy Pope proudly shows off one of her prize acquisitions, the champion Groupie Doll

Joe DiOrio photo



GIRL POWER

Mandy Pope goes from strength to strength acquiring prominent mares and fillies

By Cynthia Grisolia

girl power



It was one of the most dramatic Thoroughbred-industry stories of the year: In the fall of 2012, reigning Horse of the Year Havre de Grace went on the auction block. Following a heated bidding war, the hammer finally fell, astonishingly, at a cool \$10 million, the highest price ever paid for a broodmare prospect in North America. Adding to the theatrics was that it wasn't Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed or another deep-pocketed international buyer signing the sales ticket. It was Florida-based owner-breeder Amanda Pope, who, until that moment, had rarely ventured into the seven figures at a Thoroughbred auction, let alone eight.



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Above, Mandy Pope and Timber Town Stable's Wayne Sweezey attended the 2013 Keeneland November sales where the Whisper Hill Farm owner purchased champion Groupie Doll from trainer Buff Bradley (shaking Pope's hand) and his family.

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“The atmosphere was highly charged,” remembered Glenye Cain Oakford, author of *The Home Run Horse* who now covers bloodstock sales for *The Blood-Horse*. “And when Pope kept on bidding, it just added to the drama. Very few of us expected her to push that far.”

But Pope’s headline-making moment didn’t end there. The next day, in the Keeneland sales pavilion, she signed another sales ticket with trembling hands, this one for \$4.2 million for 2011 Kentucky Oaks winner Plum Pretty. “That kind of spending does give a signal,” added Oakford. “It tells the market that the spender will bid aggressively and passionately for horses that are perceived to be collector’s items.” In little more than 48 hours Mandy Pope solidified her new role as an industry high roller. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime shot, and I’m taking a shot at it,” Pope told reporters following the sales, “and we’ll see what happens.”

Here’s what happened.

On a chilly March day a little more than a year after the historic purchases, the staff at Timber Town Stable in Lexington awaited Pope’s arrival — her flight was expected to land any minute. Time passed; then suddenly she appeared. Dressed entirely in black — apart from her rainbow-colored shoelaces — the diminutive and soft-spoken Pope carried a grande coffee in one hand and a bag of horse treats in the other. Pope had flown in — as she often does — from her Whisper Hill Farm in Citra, Fla., to see her girls, Gracie and Plumy, and their month-old foals: respectively, a filly by the industry’s sire du jour Tapit and a colt by Distorted Humor. She also was here to visit her acquisitions from a follow-up 2013 shopping spree: Betterbetterbetter (\$5.2 million), a daughter of the revered European sire Galileo who now has a War Front filly by her side; Indian Vale (\$725,000), a grade II winner with a Medaglia d’Oro colt; and, most notably, two-time Breeders’ Cup and Eclipse Award winner Groupie Doll, for whom Pope paid \$3.1 million just four days after the mare captured her second Breeders’ Cup Filly and Mare Sprint. The new girls have joined the band of 30 or so broodmares Pope boards in Kentucky, the lion’s share of them at Timber Town with owners Wayne and Cathy Sweezey.

The herd is a bit daunting, even for a horseman as seasoned as Sweezey, and they’ve come with a unique set of challenges for the 250-acre boutique farm. “It changes your life to manage a \$10 million mare,” said Wayne Sweezey, who began his relationship with Pope more than 20 years ago, when he was a partner and general

manager at Darby Dan Farm and she was a client.

“To take care of a horse day to day, that wasn’t a factor. But it meant making some large expenditures that were ahead of the curve for us,” he added, pointing to upped security measures, new fencing, and even a revamped website and Face-

During a March visit to Lexington, Pope inspected new foals out of her mares Funny Sunny, top, and Indian Vale.

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book page to keep up with fan demands about the famous mares. “We’re small. We’re not Lane’s End,” said Sweezy. “But we get lots of calls now, and when people come we try to accommodate them.”

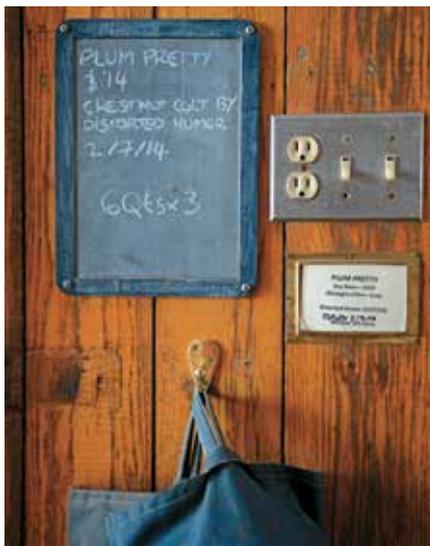
Down at the barn Sweezy’s assistant manager, Shelley Bunning, began walking out mares and foals so that Pope could inspect the troops, so to speak. “Oooh, she’s grown a lot!” she exclaimed as Havre de Grace and her daughter were walked out for photos. “Look, she knows how to pose,” Pope cooed, as she tickled the fuzzy filly behind the ear. While she’s most at ease around her mares and loving on their babies, being in the limelight these past months has not been as effortless for the publicity-shy Pope. “It’s hard for me, but I’m getting more comfortable with it,” she acknowledged. Though that’s only one of the changes this premiere broodmare band has brought to Pope’s life. “It’s definitely been a major, major financial commitment,” she said. “But it’s also opened doors to a more inner circle, to people [in the industry] now recognizing me.” She points to an invitation received from Keeneland president and CEO Bill Thomason and his wife, Barbara, to be their guest at this year’s Kentucky Derby. (“I was

thrilled to death they thought of me,” said Pope.) More importantly, perhaps, has been a shift in her confidence as a breeder. “I’ve begun to trust myself more,” she said. “And having a lot of people believe that I picked out good-quality horses — not just expensive but good-quality; that’s been very exciting.”

Buying and breeding Havre de Grace and Plum Pretty have given Pope a thrill, but having Groupie Doll, she said, has been “a wonderful adventure.” Pope bought the mare at the Keeneland November sale with the clear intention of retiring her. But after meeting with Groupie’s former co-owner and trainer William “Buff” Bradley shortly after the purchase, Pope announced the champ would stay in training. Groupie would make a pair of starts for Whisper Hill, the last of which was the Hurricane Bertie Stakes at Florida’s Gulfstream Park on Feb. 9. Despite a precarious start “the Doll” didn’t disappoint, ending her race career with an emotionally charged seven-length victory. “My heart was down on the floor when she broke so badly,” recalled Pope. “But [when she won] I had the thrill of my life for sure.”

“It was one of the most impressive races of her career,” said Bradley, for whom Groupie was also a beloved homebred, “and I could not have been happier for Mandy. That was such a ‘wow’ moment for me.”

Horses have always been the thrill of Pope’s life. She was born in North Carolina, the daughter of John Pope, a retail magnate who grew a small business into the conglomerate Variety Wholesalers



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Pope treats Groupie Doll to a mint. Above, Plum Pretty’s nameplate and chalkboard, which notes the particulars of her foal

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Inc., which operates approximately 500 discount retail stores throughout the South. The lucrative family business — which since her father's death in 2006 Pope co-owns with her brother, Art — has allowed Pope to pursue her equine dreams.

She began riding at a young age, getting her first pony when she was only 6. "When I was growing up, I would count the hours until I could get out of school and go get on a horse," she said with a laugh. "It's all I ever wanted." An avid competitor, Pope progressed through the ranks and as an adult showed hunters in the amateur owners division. By 1979 Pope had made her way to the prestigious National Horse Show, which was then held at New York's Madison Square Garden. She then took her horses south, to Ocala, Fla., for the winter circuit. "And I just fell in love with it there," said Pope, "and I met people that were involved with racehorses. I was getting tired of showing and traveling, so I decided it was time to settle down." Over the next few years Pope learned the racing ropes working at several Thoroughbred farms, including New York Yankee owner George Steinbrenner's Kinsman Stud.

In 1982, with the help of her father, Pope was able to buy a farm. She christened it Whisper Hill, after her former show



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horse, Blue Whisper, a Thoroughbred that would become her first broodmare. "My father would have preferred that I come home and work in the family business," said Pope, "but he was always very supportive of whatever passions we had." Whisper Hill, originally 55 acres, has grown to encompass 340 acres where Pope's young horses are raised and many of her retirees live out their lives. Pope has a roster of about 35 horses racing or in training, some of which, such as the 2013 Kentucky Derby contender Mylute, she owns in partnership with Gold-Mark Farm. All of Pope's breeding operations, however, are in Kentucky.

Pope has, on occasion, considered making the Bluegrass her home, but she sighs, "I'm a Florida girl." But if the Sunshine State is her true love, Kentucky is her frequent paramour. "I

love it when I have horses training at Keeneland," said Pope, who keeps a home in Lexington for whenever she visits. "I get up in the morning and go and watch them work out. Keeneland is friendly and open, and I enjoy that. Some tracks are almost hateful about people on the backside."

And as a new member of the Thoroughbred Club and the Keeneland Clubhouse, she's doing a lot more socializing in town. "Lexington is a great place to go out with all the restaurants. It's much more of a social environment than Ocala," she noted. "And you feel like wherever you go you're going to run into somebody you know in the horse business."

These days more people than ever know Pope. And many in the industry are even grateful to her. At the historic sale of Havre de Grace, when the auctioneer hollered Sold! "there was a mix of surprise and jubilation in the pavilion," said the *Blood-Horse's* Oakford. Surprise over the price tag and "jubilation that the mare would remain in an American breeding program." Guarding that vital pedigree is a responsibility Pope and Sweezey take very seriously. "We spend days, and, in the last couple of years, weeks, working on matings," said Sweezey. "We're trying to do the best for those mares that we can. Mandy really wants to leave a legacy," Sweezey added, "and I think her legacy is going



Pope gets close to the Tapit filly produced by Havre de Grace.

to be creating a tremendous broodmare band."

For Pope the year of living a little dangerously has been eye opening but also the ultimate mix of business and pleasure. "This is what I love," she said, "this is my passion, and this is the only thing I ever really wanted to be around." KM



Pope admires Plum Pretty and her foal, a Distorted Humor colt. Right, Havre de Grace accepts a treat from her owner.

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