

IN THE

driver's Seat

MISDEE WRIGLEY MILLER,
MEDIA MAGNATE AND GOLD
MEDAL-WINNING COMBINED
DRIVER, EXCELS IN MULTIPLE
ROLES

Misdee Wrigley
Miller, with her
horse Saco,
relishes time
spent at
Hillcroft Farm.

*By Jamie Lucke
Photos by Kirk Schlea*





spotlight on

MISDEE WRIGLEY
MILLER

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Misdee Wrigley Miller is heir to a love for horses and for the land, as well as to a family tradition of ingenuity in marketing. All three legacies have now taken root in Bluegrass soil.

Miller was part of the United States' first gold-winning team in an international driving competition, at the 2018 World Equestrian Games in Tryon, North Carolina.

She also pilots a media group in Lexington that can create, produce, and deliver a client's story via the latest digital platforms. It is attracting talent and attention from both coasts.

"It's been a magnet for talented people," said Miller, who calls Wrigley Media Group "my happy place — so much creative energy and people having fun." That is quite an accolade when you

consider she has ridden or sent American Saddlebreds to multiple national championships, trains in the Netherlands for international driving competitions, and owns a polo club in Florida.

Miller sees Wrigley Media Group as a way to advance the horse industry and the state she adopted in 2001 when she bought a farm north of Paris in Bourbon County.

She and her husband, Lexington businessman James Miller, an accomplished polo player and aspiring carriage driver, have built Hillcroft Farm into a 1,400-acre diversified agricultur-



Top, the trophy room at Hillcroft Farm testifies to Miller's many equestrian accomplishments. Above, Miller's carriage collection includes a park drag coach, considered the Rolls-Royce of coaches. It was the first coach she purchased.

al operation that opens its gates to equine competitions and clinics and good causes of all kinds.

Her knowledge and hands-on experience with horses are extraordinarily broad and rooted in the history of an extraordinary American family.

Her great-grandfather, manufacturer William Wrigley Jr., introduced Juicy Fruit and Wrigley's Spearmint gum in the late 19th century. An early master of advertising, Wrigley built an international brand. He also owned the Chicago Cubs, hence Wrigley Field, and Santa Catalina Island off the California coast. "I wish so much I could have met him," said his great-granddaughter.

Although the man — who owned a pacer named Spearmint — died in 1932, he and his wife, Ada Elizabeth Foote Wrigley, played critical roles in their great-granddaughter's 21st-century emergence as an international competitor.

Miller's grandfather, Phillip K. Wrigley, who led the company and the Cubs after his father's death, was a pioneer in promoting baseball via the new medium of television. Phillip and his wife, Helen, also were instrumental in



Hillcroft Farm is home to several horse breeds as well as to a variety of crops.



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MILLER

introducing the Arabian breed to North America.

Miller says her grandmother instilled in her a love of horses and fondly recalls Helen Wrigley, seated at the desk Miller now uses, explaining breeding strategies. “The strength of the distaff line — she hammered that home with me.”

Santa Catalina also played its role. While Catalina captured the popular imagination as “the island of romance,” as the Four Preps crooned in a 1958 hit, for the Wrigleys it was a testing ground for their Arabians, a rugged desert where the family roped, reined, and worked cattle.

In the early 1970s her grandparents put their share of the island into a nature preserve overseen by the nonprofit Catalina Island Conservancy. She has similar plans for conserving her piece of the Bluegrass.

Supporting the Catalina conservancy and other land conservation efforts remains one of Miller’s philanthropic priorities, along with therapeutic riding and driving programs and education at all levels, including university research.

The budding horsewoman grew up in Scottsdale, Arizona, where she was bitten by the show bug at age 8. Her mother, Dorothy “Deedie” Wrigley Rich, ran a large equine operation and was among the first to cross Arabians and American Saddlebreds to create one of the newest breeds, the National Show Horse, which can be ridden under saddle or driven.

Named after her mother, toddler Dorothy was dubbed Little Miss Deedie by a family associate, and it stuck.

Her stepfather owned the local CBS station where the teenage “Misdee” hung out when she wasn’t with horses. Journalism piqued her interest, and she went on to earn a broadcasting degree from Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism. Miller was on a promising but all-consuming path in television news when she decided horses were the life she wanted.

Her mother handed over management of her business, including sending Miller east to find Saddlebred mares. When her mother died in 1992, she downsized and moved to Ocala, Florida, but her interest in Saddlebreds brought her to Lexington for long spells even before she bought the farm.



Top, rock from Hillcroft was used for what Misdee describes as the “bridge to nowhere.” Right, husband James plays polo and also drives carriages.



The main house at Hillcroft Farm

However, an unexpected question rooted in the past would soon bring a new venture. It started with a phone call: “Would you like your carriages?”

“I didn’t know my mother had donated two carriages to a museum in Yuma, Arizona, with the condition that if it closed, they would find me.”

The heirlooms had belonged to her great-grandparents. Miller’s research revealed they were built by Brewster & Company, renowned for its workmanship. One was a bachelor brougham, the other a wicker vis-a-vis (passengers sit facing each other) that her great-grandmother would have taken on spins through Lincoln Park in Chicago.

As the new owner of a pair of carriages, Miller just had to try them out. It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. Those carriages have grown into an exquisite collection of horse-drawn



This Edward Bohlin-designed saddle originally belonged to Miller’s grandmother, Helen Wrigley.

vehicles restored, lovingly preserved, and displayed at Hillcroft.

She had driven roadsters and fine-harness horses, but guiding one horse and a two-wheeled buggy is a far cry from managing two or four horses pulling a heavy four-wheeled vehicle.

She put herself on the “fast track,” said husband James, who credits her concentration and finesse for helping her quickly become competitive against the men who dominate pleasure driv-

ing, an event in which she began to compete.

“Going from zero to hero in less than five years is asking a lot of anybody. It’s physically demanding,” said James Miller.

She got her first taste of combined driving while lending a hand to the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Lexington, which needed competitors for a test event on the Kentucky Horse Park’s new course. Miller drove experienced horses she already



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MILLER

owned. She quickly became “hooked” and soon began competing and winning in the combined driving pairs division.

A three-day event on wheels, combined driving consists of dressage, a cross-country obstacles course (during which drivers and passengers exchange their formal clothes for helmets, goggles, and safety vests), and, finally, a tricky course that horses and carriages negotiate at high speeds in a stadium.

In 2013 another turning point arrived. It looked as if the United States could not raise a team for one of the combined driving events at the World Equestrian Games in Normandy, France. Recalls Miller, “I thought, I drive a four-in-hand for pleasure ...”

So began nine months of grueling training and testing different combinations of horses. She had to “kiss a lot of frogs” before settling on the Dutch Warmbloods (four and a spare) she drove at Normandy, where the three-person U.S. team finished an unexpectedly high fourth.

Even as she fully embraced the sport of driving, her passion and talent for journalism remained an ever-present undercurrent. In 2017 one of the combined driving’s early advocates, Great Britain’s Prince Philip, who took up the sport at 50 after giving up polo, gave Miller his first and only interview, having announced he was retiring from his royal duties. The interview with the-then 95-year-old prince is part of an hour-long Wrigley Media production about the Royal Windsor Horse Show that aired on NBC Sports Network and in Britain on Horse & Country TV. The prince was in fine form. “We spoke for an hour, so much so I was embarrassed for keeping him for so long,” Miller said.

She recalled first meeting the prince at a formal event at which guests understood they were to keep their greetings short. “I told him that I was excited to have just



Miller inherited several carriages from her mother.

learned to drive a four-in-hand. He said, ‘Oh, my dear, you should have bought yourself a red Ferrari instead.’ ”

Last year at Tryon, Miller scored high in dressage; her self-described “Capricorn brain” likes the precision. But by the third and final morning, 90-degree heat and hu-

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YOU MAKE TIME TO DO
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TO DO.”

— MISDEE WRIGLEY MILLER

midity bearing down on the airless stadium left her so shaky and pale that a volunteer, alarmed by her appearance, rushed to bring her water as she walked the course.

She said her teammates, Chester Weber and James Fairclough, urged, “Misdee, just finish.” If she failed to complete the final event, her dressage score would not count, knocking the U.S. out of contention for the gold.

She said she barely remembers how she and her horses got around the cones, but they did, helping the U.S. win gold for the first time, a feeling that, despite the heat “I remember still.”

Like many other ambitious people, she said, “You make time to do the things you want to do.”

And for recharging there’s Hillcroft. On an early spring morning the silence is broken only by birdsong, the clapping of 16 hooves, and a soft trill coming from Misdee’s lips — the universal slow-down signal to carriage horses — as her team descends a hill. Her dog, Turbo, a sighthound-cross called a lurcher and historically associated with poachers and Gypsies, lopes ahead. She points out the “bridge to nowhere” — a masterpiece of dry-stone masonry — that McAlister Stone built of rock from Hillcroft, after she told her husband she needed a little wooden bridge to practice driving over and under.

She hopes young people, including her four grandchildren who live in Portland, Oregon, will know the communion with horses and land that has enriched her life.

How to keep the horse industry relevant when Americans have so many choices with their leisure time is a challenge she takes seriously in her volunteerism as a member of many boards and in her media work.

She made that point to a gathering of University of Kentucky students and faculty in 2016 when she delivered the UK Ag Equine Program’s Distinguished Industry Lecture. “Especially for our youth because there’s no better way to raise children than with horses ... I’m thankful every day for the things the horses taught me.” **KM**

MOVIES AND MORE

Filming of a major motion picture in Lexington recently shone the spotlight on a local media production company. Wrigley Media Group helped shoot “The Stand-In” starring Drew Barrymore, who filmed several scenes in the Bluegrass.

From “The Stand-In” to other current work such as a series of DIY gardening lessons and a project celebrating The Jockey Club’s 125th anniversary, Wrigley produces a range of storytelling. The company’s capacity to push that content out to clients’ desired audiences in a marriage of creativity and marketing is what sets it apart in a landscape increasingly ruled by social media, said majority owner Misdee Wrigley Miller and CEO Jayne Hancock.

“I will hold us up to any production facility in Los Angeles or New York,” said Miller, “the equipment, but most important the talent, the creative people.”

By telling Kentucky stories and creating good jobs, she added, “we can have such an impact on the state; it’s really very exciting.”

Kentucky clients include UK Athletics, UK HealthCare, VisitLex, Kentucky Horse Park, Tempur-Pedic, Keeneland, and several distilleries.

The company founded in 1992 by Wood Simpson as Post Time Productions now has a roster of more than 30 employees, including executive producers Danny Tepper and Ross Babbitt, who bring extensive prime-time production experience from network and cable TV. (Babbitt’s sister, Jamie Babbitt, directed the Barrymore film, “The Stand-In,” which also shot on location in Versailles and Lexington.)

Wrigley Media employs Kentucky graduates as well. Creative director Santos Lopez, a Western Kentucky University alum, helped create hit shows on HGTV before joining Wrigley.

David Silvernell, who studied architecture at the University of Kentucky, oversees



The studio at Wrigley Media Group



Miller and CEO Jayne Hancock

computer-generated special effects and animation, including a virtual reality tour of Town Branch Park, which is helping fundraisers in their efforts to make the downtown Lexington project a reality.

Asbury University film and video grads are finding jobs at Wrigley.

With Hancock, who helped launch DIRECTV and started her own digital marketing company in California, at the helm, Wrigley was quick to adopt OTT or over-the-top marketing, which uses streaming

services to deliver content and interact with consumers in new, flexible ways.

Miller calls it the “format of the future.” One example is the short segments Wrigley Media produced for Coca-Cola. In them, young NFL players return to the scene of their college glory and take viewers on a tour of the stadium and a few of their favorite eateries and wash down their favorite meals with ice-cold Coke. (Spoiler: There’s good barbecue in college towns.)

Elayne Fowler, a Californian and veteran of big-name advertising agencies, is focusing on Wrigley’s Horse Network. Still more a labor of love than a profit center, the digital platform offers all things horsey, from reader-submitted content to live streaming of horse shows.

Fowler also is putting her Harvard sustainability training to work, helping Wrigley achieve Lexington’s Green Check certification.

The headquarters off Newtown Pike is an airy space with concrete floors, barn doors, and wood from Churchill Downs’ old test barn decorating the entrance.

Executive producer Tepper said that while the company prides itself on “punching above its weight,” the work-life balance available in Lexington is a selling point. He’s developed a routine for wooing new hires and clients that begins with taking them to breakfast at the Keeneland track kitchen, then walking through the paddock onto the track. “It’s like when I was a kid, walking into Yankee Stadium ... It’s intoxicating when you drink it all in the first time.”

The company is growing, but Miller considers smallness an asset, enabling it to be “nimble and creative.”

“I’m proud of everything that everyone is already accomplishing,” she said, “and I’m proud of being the majority owner of a company in an industry that can be male-dominated and tough.” **KM**