



Dress by Alexis Mabille

Katherine Bellissimo: *at the* **Top Of Her Game**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELENA LUSENTI

STYLIST SUZIE DRASNIN / HAIR AND MAKE UP BY VIVA LA GLAM STUDIO / WARDROBE ARMARIUM

“A STRONG WOMAN LOOKS A CHALLENGE DEAD IN THE EYE AND GIVES IT A WINK.”

What started as a summer love affair with ponies grew over time into an expansive equestrian empire for the Bellissimo family. Katherine with her husband Mark and their partners bought the Winter Equestrian Festival in 2007 and have since not only expanded the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center into a premiere equestrian lifestyle destination but have also added The Stadium, home of the Adequan Global Dressage Festival, International Polo Club Palm Beach, and The Wanderers Club as well as the Rolex Central Park Horse Show, Colorado Horse Park and Tryon International Equestrian Center (hosting the World Equestrian Games) as jewels in the crown.



Dress by Sachin & Babi



Dress by Jason Wu



Katherine herself started riding when her two daughters Paige and Nicole were young. A desire to continue riding year-round as well as escape winters in the North East led the family with their sons Matthew and Michael to Wellington, Florida. There she and Mark saw an opportunity to not only take over the show but make it an ultimate destination for exhibitors and spectators alike. As Chief Marketing Officer and Director of Sponsorship across all the properties, Katherine uses her business acumen including a degree in Communication Studies with a minor in Economics from Northwestern University and experience in real estate development to grow the business and put equestrian sport front and center on the world stage. It hasn't been without its struggles but she has proved a graceful guiding force.

**PUISSANCE AMERICA
EDITOR HEATHER
BUCHANAN SAT DOWN**

**WITH KATHERINE
BELLISSIMO TO
DISCUSS THE KEY TO
HER SUCCESS AND
CHALLENGES OF
MAINTAINING LIFE'S
BALANCES. AND NOT
WITHOUT HUMOR, THE
DISCUSSION REVEALS
HER EXTREME
VERSION OF CASUAL
FRIDAYS.**

**HOW DID YOU FIRST GET CONNECTED
TO HORSES?**

Every year since the children were born we have spent our summers at our lake house in New Hampshire. One day a friend who also had several small children introduced us to a local stable that not only gave lessons but also had a great camp program. The children began really at the true grass roots level, and were able to spend time not just

in the saddle but also with hands-on horsemanship. Of course, somewhere along the way someone decided it was a good idea to put me on a horse as well and so began my very "amateur" career.

**YOUR ORGANIZATION HAS GROWN
QUICKLY AND ACROSS MANY
PROPERTIES. WHAT HAS CONTRIBUTED
TO THE SUCCESS OF THE VENTURE?**

Each opportunity made sense in light of our overall strategy and was strongly supported within our partnership. We are fortunate to have a group of partners that are equestrians themselves either directly or through a family member. We all share the same vision of creating a welcoming, inclusive equestrian lifestyle destination. Obviously, the vision is very important but it is only as good as one's ability to execute that vision. We have been blessed by not only a group of highly supportive partners but also some key managers that have been able to develop and lead teams beneath them to ensure our vision is followed through on a daily basis.



HOW DO YOU WORK WITH YOUR HUSBAND MARK?

Initially when we first started with this effort we both worked together on everything as really it was just the two of us. Luckily a blessing came in the form of our President Michael Stone who joined us as we began to operate the horse shows. As we have grown, we have divided oversight to better manage the depth of the operation. While we both stay involved in overall operations of each property, I oversee all of sponsorship, marketing and media departments while Mark stays more involved with construction and development and of course "vision" projects.

**HOW IMPORTANT HAS YOUR FAMILY BEEN TO THE PROCESS
AND HOW DO YOU FIND A BALANCE?**

Family was the true reason that we became involved initially. We were the customer and needed to find a means to make the experience enjoyable to everyone or there would be no long-term solution for us to stay involved in the sport. The children have been involved since the beginning, the girls with show jumping, and both boys in varying degrees with polo. Family dinners were a must when the children were younger and in school. The meals not only served as an important means to unite the family but also to discuss the business and get their input. It has now been in excess of 10 years since we first began, and we still have those family dinners with the kids and their friends. Each of the children has actually found some component of the business that has peaked their interest and has contributed respectively. I have to remind myself that the reason that we became involved in the first place was our passion for riding. If I work so much that I am no longer able to ride and watch my daughters ride and compete then I have lost the balance.

**YOU HAVE A BROAD OUTREACH TO THE COMMUNITY,
SCHOOLS AND CHARITIES.
HOW DO YOU INCLUDE THEM IN THE EXPERIENCE?**

We realized when we first began operating the horse shows that although the local non-horse community was generally aware of the facility they really had little information and opportunity to visit and participate as spectators.

We needed to make the venue welcoming to the community before we could then reach out to encourage them to come.

Mark spent much time and effort on designing a main entrance that was open and inviting to all. He installed a carousel as well as paved open areas to house performers, activities and pony rides to make the venue not only relatable but fun and free. We moved the main competition to Saturday evening and termed it “Saturday Night Lights” enhancing the evening with entertainment and hospitality, thereby making it a great night out for the entire family.

The next step was to reach out to the 12 local schools and highlight one each week during our season. Each Saturday evening the selected school was able to set up an area to highlight its performers, run a bake sale to raise funds for a specific project, have the marching band perform in the main arena and have center stage to sing the National Anthem. In addition, we offer Luncheon Tours each week allowing an insider’s look to our show operations as well as the equestrian discipline. Thousands of people join the tours each year. It is a wonderful way to become oriented to the facility and the sport in a friendly and non-intimidating way. Our most important and personally rewarding connection to the community is through our yearly Great Charity Challenge. This event was the brain child of my daughter Paige and Mark and has grown during the past 9 years to become Palm Beach County’s largest charitable fundraiser raising a total of \$12.2 million. Basically, all Palm Beach County 501c3 charities are invited to apply to be included in the event. We qualify the charities then randomly select in excess of 30 to be paired with a Pro/Amateur 3-person relay team that rides for the charity

during the evening of the event. Each year we have been able to raise and distribute in excess of \$1 million at the conclusion of each event. Each charity selected wins a minimum of \$15,000 scaling awards up to the main event winner earning \$150,000.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO SAY THIS IS JUST AN ELITIST SPORT?

I would certainly agree that the sport itself is not inexpensive. There do exist opportunities through local schools and universities that are low cost as well as programs for developing riders through our local and national federations. We as an organization have built into our mission to make the sport more accessible to all and that includes financially. I personally have worked to establish a riding academy located at Equestrian Village that offers a low-cost entry into the sport. We have also this year established a riding school at International Polo Club offering entry level polo lessons.

We are hoping through our efforts to make equestrian sport in general be presented as more of a mainstream sport it will continue to attract additional television coverage as well as sponsorship. One of the by-products of this would be the industry itself presenting a model that could support not only more prize money trickling down through all levels of the sport but also more substantial sponsorship opportunities for the professional riders.

THERE ARE MANY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA, BUSINESS, AND ENTERTAINMENT WORLD WHO ATTEND YOUR EVENTS. WHY ARE THEY MOST COMFORTABLE IN THIS ENVIRONMENT?

WE HAVE WORKED VERY HARD TO CREATE AN EXPERIENCE THAT SPEAKS TO THE SHARED PASSION FOR THE HORSE.

That is the unifying factor across all of our properties whether you are standing at the pony ring or the Grand Prix arena. I believe that we create within that experience a means to relax, enjoy and spectate in a secure environment. There is a general culture here that respects people’s privacy that is gently enforced when necessary by our staff. Although we have sports photographers on site covering the competitions we do not allow outside photographers in our VIP tent and are vigilant even internally about what we share and post as an organization.

WHAT ARE THE BUSINESS LESSONS YOU HAVE FOUND MOST VALUABLE?

That success truly depends on the team that you have working with you. It is impossible to execute not only successfully but also with any level of precision without having the ability to confidently delegate tasks to a team that inherently knows how to then move forward.

In addition, I believe that it is equally important to build into the culture of your team the encouragement of open and honest discussion. There have been innumerable times that we have had “great ideas” that benefitted tremendously by not only suggestions but “constructive criticism” from the team.



Dress by Missoni

HOW DO YOU LEAD YOUR MARKETING TEAM (ALL GREAT WOMEN BY THE WAY)?

Initially I “was” the marketing team so it was of course all hands on deck!! As we grew I was able to work with Jennifer Wood who we would contract each year for the season and then begin to assemble a team internally based on more specific needs. While we continue to work with Jennifer on the sport reporting during the season we now have a staff of 15 that supports all the marketing and media operations across all of our properties. I have a truly talented team led by my Director of Marketing Michelle Yelton greatly assisted by my Assistant Director of Marketing, Carly Weilmminster as well as our Manager of Print and Graphic Design, Chrissy Crouteau who has been with me from almost the beginning. I rely heavily on these three unbelievably talented individuals on a daily basis to execute. They are supported by the rest of our incredibly energetic and creative team. I truly love working with this group. It is probably one of the most rewarding parts of my job. We begin our official week on Tuesday with a team meeting. We set an agenda by property and basically go through every aspect of our business whether it be sport, event, community or sponsorship related. They are also a group that truly enjoys working together and supports each other. A typical meeting would cover large segments of inspirational brainstorming interrupted by belly-aching laughter.....

I BELIEVE THAT ONE GREAT BENEFIT TO OUR ORGANIZATION IS THAT I HEAD NOT ONLY THE MARKETING AND MEDIA TEAM BUT ALSO THE SPONSORSHIP TEAM.

It has allowed us to provide to our sponsors an added value of a full-time marketing team that works to enhance basic sponsor benefits. We work to stay current with all trends in corporate marketing and brand promotion. Most of my team are connected to the equestrian world so they are able to translate the goals of corporate sponsors into effective communication and activations.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE BIGGEST JOYS AND BIGGEST CHALLENGES YOU FACE IN THIS BUSINESS?

The biggest joy is not always the most obvious achievement like running a

successful event or breaking ground on a new building. I always take pride in our major accomplishments but I think that for me personally I get great joy from being able to connect the passion I feel for this world to someone else not necessarily associated with it. I love taking our rescue minis out in public all dressed up in ridiculous outfits (#StarskyandHutch43) and having them interact with people. As far as the challenges it is continually finding balance not only personally but also for our team. We have to make sure that they remember it is ok to take a breath and to make sure they are having a life outside of work. It is imperative in order for this model to be sustainable.

WHY DO YOU THINK GIRLS AND WOMEN IN PARTICULAR AS AMATEURS ARE SO DRAWN TO THE SPORT?

If you look at countries where horse sport is more mainstream as in Europe you will see a more balanced representation between male and

females. Horses are more prevalent in daily life as it is not unusual to have one or more horses living at the family's country farm. Horse sport is broadcast on television regularly so there is constant exposure to the sport, and the entry level into the sport as well as cost to compete is far less expensive. In Europe the connection is through top sport thereby attracting both genders, whereas the connection in the United States would be related to a young girl falling in love with a pony with the sport to follow.

WHAT WOULD SURPRISE PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

I really, really love wearing pajamas. It is a bit embarrassing as I generally try to wear them out to dinner with friends. I call them "loungewear" so it is more socially acceptable but I have also found a way to encourage my friends to wear them at the same time. It has become a bit of a joke but is definitely trending. I feel a great sense of accomplishment when friends' spouses show up in their "loungewear" as well.



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