



WINTER EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL WEEKLY WIRE

WEEK 1 • JANUARY 7, 2026



Wellington
International
Wellington
Florida

CATCH UP WITH LUIS FERNANDO
LARRAZABAL

INTRODUCING: SHOW & TELL

WINTER EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL
LIFTS PALM BEACH COUNTY
WITH \$536.2 MILLION IN
ECONOMIC IMPACT



A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

As we launch into the first week of FEI competition at Wellington International, there is a lot to look forward to. Throughout the coming months, we will host seven of the world's top-10 show jumping athletes, see 30 Olympians from Paris 2024 cross under the Rolex bridge and award more than \$16 million in prize money.

The moments that are born from the International Ring at WEF are iconic. They should be. But what happens when the lights of Saturday night are turned off? During Premiere Week, I made a purposeful effort to explore the showgrounds that I call home for the winter.

I watched a rider get emotional coming out of Ring 9. Not because she missed out on a ribbon, but because she felt she did not give her horse the ride he deserved. I watched the top four riders from the Don Little Masters in a group hug after they claimed their ribbons. I even made my way to South Ring where the future trainers, owners and maybe even a few more Olympians competed in the walk/trot.

WEF is like no other show in the world. There are very few places where you can see the sport's best compete week after week while children trot their first crossrail four rings away. I say it all the time—pitching to press, explaining to my non-horsey family what it is I do down here all winter. While it's difficult to explain, but so special to experience. I think my exploration of all corners of the grounds will continue weekly. Stay tuned....

The Wire is produced for, about and in celebration of YOU. If you have story ideas, want to share content with us from your Wellington International experience, or would like to submit a letter to the editor—please email press@wellingtoninternational.com.

You can find The Wire distributed weekly on Thursdays throughout the showgrounds and online at WellingtonInternational.com.

All the best,
Lindsay Brock
Editor



PARTNERSHIP PAYS

FOR MCKAYLA LANGMEIER AND JISELLE NS

in Dodd Technologies Grand Prix



PHOTOS © CASSIDY KLEIN & KATHERINE HAY

McKayla Langmeier of East Granby, CT, has been partnered with Jiselle NS since the 12-year-old Balou du Rouet daughter was six. That partnership was the key ingredient for winning the \$75,000 Dodd Technologies Grand Prix to close out opening week of WEF 2026.

Jiselle NS is bred by the Jacobs family's North Star Sport Horses (USA) and has campaigned up to the five-

star level with Langmeier in the tack. Together, Langmeier and Jiselle NS have pocketed 11 international podium finishes.

"It has taken a lot of patience, a lot of time, and a lot of work put into the horses, but I think that's what makes relationships and makes days like today possible," said 25-years-old Langmeier, who is still making a name for herself as an up-and-coming



athlete at the top level. "It's really rewarding when you have a horse that you bring up win a grand prix like this."

From a three-horse jump-off, fellow Americans Lillie Keenan and Jacqueline Ruyle both had rails, which inspired Langmeier to adjust her plan.

"I definitely went a little wider to the last jump once I knew I jumped the first part clear, then I could take a moment to the last," said Langmeier, who trains with six-time U.S. Olympian McLain Ward. "It's a great way to start the season. I've had Jiselle NS since she was six, so I know her well. We've worked up to this level

together, so for me, my family and North Star, it means a lot to see her perform this well."

Langmeier stopped the clock at 42.459 seconds. Ruyle—riding Cyramo Z—and Keenan—aboard Happy Time for owner 5 Roosters—both beat her on the clock but pulled one rail apiece to settle for second and third, respectively.

When asked about her goals for the 2026 WEF season, Langmeier said, "This year is a developing year for the horses because I have some young ones. We are going to take it day by day and see where they are."

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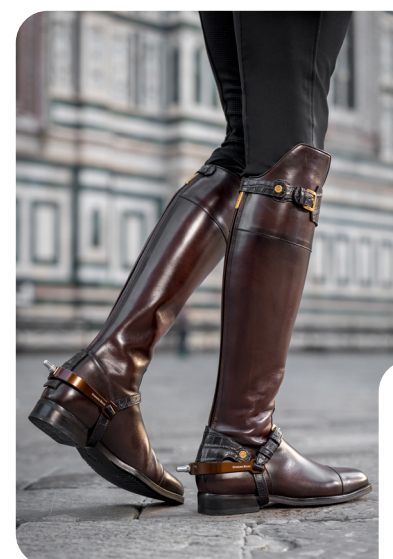
Step In, Lace Up & Kick Off the New Year in Style



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Stefano Ricci Jumping Riding Boot
in Calfskin Leather & Crocodile
Shop them at Stefano Ricci at The International Club



Alberto Fasciani Dress Boot
Shop them at The In Gate in Vendor Village



PALM BEACH COUNTY SPORTS COMMISSION WELCOMES THE BEST TO WELLINGTON

The Palm Beach County Sports Commission (PBCSC) is the official sports tourism marketing organization for Palm Beach County, FL, dedicated to attracting and supporting amateur, collegiate, professional and special sporting events that generate economic impact, community engagement and positive visibility for the

region. Established with the mission to leverage sports as a tool for economic development, quality of life enhancement and community pride, the Commission collaborates with local governments, businesses, sports organizations and volunteers to position Palm Beach County as a premier destination for sports events

of all sizes.

Palm Beach County's strategic location, consistently favorable climate and diverse portfolio of venues combined with its proximity to major metropolitan markets position the destination as an ideal host for events spanning numerous sports disciplines. The Sports Commission serves as a key catalyst in

this process by identifying and securing event opportunities, managing logistics, obtaining financial support and sponsorships, and working closely with venue partners to deliver seamless event operations. From grassroots youth tournaments to elite international competitions, these efforts generate meaningful economic impact through increased hotel occupancy, dining activity and related visitor spending, providing tangible benefits to the local community.

A signature aspect of Palm Beach County's identity is its deep connection to equestrian sports. The county is internationally recognized as a hub for horse enthusiasts and competitive equestrian disciplines, particularly during the winter months. The Wellington area hosts world-class equestrian venues and events, drawing competitors and spectators from around the globe. Equestrian disciplines such as show jumping, dressage, and hunter competitions are deeply ingrained in the cultural and sporting fabric of the region. Major events like WEF serve not only as elite athletic competitions but also as significant cultural and economic fixtures, contributing hundreds of millions in economic impact while reinforcing Palm Beach County's reputation as a global equestrian destination. Beyond equestrian pursuits, the Sports Commission actively promotes a wide array of other sports,



including but not limited to baseball, soccer, golf, tennis, running, cycling and watersports. The organization works to bring in events such as youth tournaments, collegiate showcases and professional exhibitions, cultivating opportunities for participants of all ages and skill levels.

By championing sports tourism and reinforcing the county's assets—natural, infrastructural, and cultural—the Commission contributes to sustained economic vitality while celebrating Palm Beach County's unique sporting identity, with equestrian sports standing as a cornerstone of that narrative.

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WINTER EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL LIFTS PALM BEACH COUNTY WITH \$536.2 MILLION IN ECONOMIC IMPACT

In a report conducted after the 2025 Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF), \$536.2 million in economic impact was cited for Palm Beach County as a result of the 13-week event running January through March. WEF attracts 31,000 competitors from over 42 countries and all 50 states to Palm Beach County each year.

The report was prepared for the Palm Beach County Sports Commission (PBCSC), a private, not-for-profit organization that is contracted by Palm Beach County to promote and market the area as a

sports tourism destination. The findings showed a 28.2% increase from the 2024 impact of \$403.6 million, reinforcing WEF as a marquee event in the equestrian realm, but also a major economic driver for Palm Beach County.

Looking Ahead to 2026

The Winter Equestrian Festival is not just one of the largest annual equestrian competitions in the world; it is a cornerstone of Florida's sports tourism economy. As participation continues to grow and economic impact reaches new heights,

Wellington International is committed to elevating the experience even further. Looking ahead to WEF 2026, running from December 31 through March 29, we are re-envisioning the future of the festival with major upgrades and higher-quality facilities designed to enhance every aspect of the competition.

From world-class amenities to improved experiences for riders, spectators, and sponsors alike, we're setting a new standard. We can't wait to welcome everyone back for an unforgettable season.

Total Economic Impact from the 2025 WEF Season



Increase in Total Economic Impact:

\$536.2 million brought to Palm Beach County's GDP, a 28.2% growth rate from the 2024 WEF Economic Impact Report. More than doubled last year's 14% growth from 2023.



Job Creation:

4,869 jobs were created across multiple industries, a 28.4% increase from 2024.



Labor Earnings:

A total of \$153.9 million in labor earnings was generated throughout the economy with employees earning an average wage of \$31,690, a 30.53% and 1.95% increase from the previous year, respectively.



Lodging Industry:

A total of 210,911 paid room nights were generated by WEF 2025, up from the 161,061 paid room nights from WEF 2024.

Primary Economic Drivers:



Total Horse Expenditures:

\$338.68 million growth in GDP (a 13.2% increase from WEF 2024). This accounts for 63% of the total GDP impact.



Participant Tourism Expenditures:

Equivalent to \$109.6 million growth in GDP.

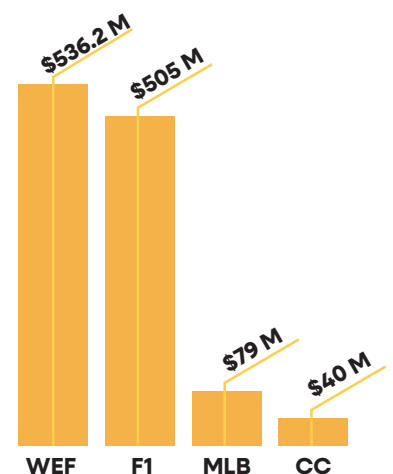


Spectator Impact:

Combined spectator expenditure generated \$88 million in local GDP, up dramatically from last year's \$8.2 million.

How the Winter Equestrian Festival Compares to Other Major Florida Sporting Events

SPORTING EVENT	ANNUAL ECONOMIC IMPACT	COUNTY
Winter Equestrian Festival	\$536.2M	Palm Beach
Miami Grand Prix (Formula 1)	\$505M	Miami-Dade
MLB Spring Training	\$79M	Palm Beach
Cognizant Classic	\$40M	Palm Beach



GIRLS TAKE IT TO THE WIRE

IN BATTLE OF THE SEXES, PRESENTED BY LEMIEUX

The opening “Saturday Night Lights” event of the 2026 played host to a redemption win for the girl’s team in the \$75,000 Battle of the Sexes, presented by LeMieux.

Breaking a three-year win streak for the boys, the girls pocketed their eleventh Battle of the Sexes title in the event’s 16-year history. In a tie-breaking match race between Jessica Mendoza and Luis Larrazabal, the girls emerged victorious. The team was led by captain Kelly Soleau and her roster that included Mia Bagnato, Alexis Bodo, Kyla Makhloghi, Samantha Mackenzie, Caroline Mawhinney, Mendoza and Kelly Taggart. The runner-up squad consisted of team captain

Charlie Jayne and included veterans Christian Coyle, Daniel Geaney, Alex Granato, Larrazabal, Tony Stormanns, Söhnke Theymann and Michael Tokaruk.

The Battle of the Sexes consists of three phases. The first is a Table C faults-converted speed, after which the score showed a dead heat with both teams tied on four points. In the second phase, each team had two relay groups, where a trio of riders faced a section of the course with five points up for grabs. Bagnato, Mendoza and Mawhinney led off with a win for the girls, but the boys answered with five more on the board. Coyle, Theymann



and Tokaruk kept the score tied with only one round remaining.

The final phase was a match race where riders competed head-to-head at the same time over a course that mirrored itself in the ring. Three points for each race were on the line, and the round ended with both teams tied once again. The fate of the evening was

decided in the extra match race where Mendoza bested Larrazabal, who pulled three rails to the ground. The final score stood at 24 to 21 in the girl’s favor.

“I’ve never seen the final round come down to the wire like that, but that made it even more fun,” said Mendoza. “Everyone comes together and there’s a little

bit of rivalry between the boys and the girls. This crowd is so fun, and it’s great for the horses to come out and have fun in a night class.” Jayne is already making plans for a 2027 comeback for the boys teaming and concluded by saying. “It was tense but fun, and that playoff at the end coming down to that final round was really exciting.”



PHOTOS © ASHLEY NEUHOF & RAELEEN BAKER



2026 WEF VENDORS

INTERNATIONAL CLUB

Lugano
Stefano Ricci
Ritz Carlton Residences,
West Palm Beach
Sean Rush
Wellington Lifestyle Partners
Human Touch

TIKI TERRACE

French Boutique (WEF P-2)
Flor de Campo (WEF 3-4)
Irene Neuwirth (WEF 5-6)
Zoe (WEF 7-11)
SR Blackinton (WEF 12)
WEF Store
Hermès
DandyLion
Karina Brez Jewelry
Serenella

BRIDGE DECK AT TIKI TERRACE

DADA Sport
Coastal Steel Structures (WEF 5-7)
US Equestrian Store (WEF 12)
Cara VL (WEF P-1)
Horsehair Jewellery (WEF 3-4)
Hangai Mountain Textiles (WEF 5-7)
The Calvert Collection (WEF 8-12)
Weatherly Stroh Studio (WEF 8-11)

HUNTER HILL

LeMieux
Gladiator Equine
Lash LaRue
VMJ for Horses (WEF P-10)
Coastal Steel Structures (WEF 11-12)

INTERNATIONAL RING WARM UP

Prestige Italia
Horcery
Bruno Delgrange Maître Sellier
Barnwalkers
IDA Development

RING 6

Antarès Sellier
Voltaire Design
Theault

FOOD VENDOR

RING 9

Arion Sellier
Forestier Sellier
Sportfot
Graceful Oaks
Nathalie's Café

RING 10

Ringside Health
McGuinn Farms
Magdalena's Mexican

VENDOR VILLAGE SOUTHSIDE

Danny & Ron's Dog Rescue
Equestrian Team Apparel
Optic Nirvana
Fab Finds by Sarah
JODS
Sofie's Boutique
Best Buds Florist
Odette Boutique (WEF P-4)
Respoke (WEF 5-8)
Flor de Campo (WEF 9-10)
Renrod Equestrian (WEF 11-12)

VENDOR VILLAGE NORTHSIDE

Loopy's Crepes
The In Gate
Ride EquiSafe
Miki Saddlery
Parlanti
Equ Lifestyle Boutique
EQUIS
Vogel NYC
Kelly's Lemonade

PONY ISLAND

Farm Stand
Hunters Landing
Silva's Tacos
Florida Snow
Best Pizza Heaven
Palm Beach
International Academy
House Call The App (WEF 1-2)
Fashion Farm Girl (WEF 3, 4, 6, 10, 11 & 12)

OASIS

Charles Ancona
La Enovesé Designs
Erica Wilson (WEF P-4)
J Wilder Imports (WEF 5-6)
Odette Boutique (WEF 7-8, WEF 11-12)
Ryde Equestrian (WEF 9-10)
Devoucoux
70 Degrees
CWD Sellier
Paulina Velez Designs
The Oasis Café

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Kelly Kocher Tack
Running Fox
Turner & Co.
Personalized Products
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Equine Tack & Nutritionals
Equiline
Tack N' Rider
Toasties Gourmet

THE BARNs

Paddock Paws Veterinary
Dandy Products
FarmVet
Josey's Laundry
Anonymous Coffee

SOUTH BARNs

Rider's Boutique
Zest
Blue Ribbon Carts
Tampico Hermoso

Rider Spotlight:

Luis Fernando Larrazabal

Venezuelan Olympian and proud Wellington local, Luis Fernando Larrazabal is a familiar face in the Wellington International winner's circle. True to form, he started another WEF season in winning fashion with a victory in the \$35,000 Adequan® WEF Challenge Cup Premier Round during opening week riding the promising young mare, Ribery.

With partner Baroness, Larrazabal holds a team silver medal from the 2025 Bolivarian Games in Lima, Peru, and finished 15th individually at the 2023 Pan American Games in Santiago, Chile.

Raised on a farm in Venezuela, he grew up on the back of a horse and has now found success as a professional. Luis—now 33—has garnered 40 international victories and made consistent appearances on the Wellington Nations Cup team from Venezuela.

Today, he operates San Francisco Stables in Wellington. We caught up with Luis at WEF to chat young horse development, his recent wins and what's next:

PHOTO © CASSIDY KLEIN



Q: How did you get your start in the saddle?

Horses have been a part of my family for a long time. My parents used to ride as a hobby back in Venezuela, and my grandfather on my dad's side used to breed thoroughbreds. I was raised on a farm in Venezuela for the first 10 years of my life. I used to come home from school, get on a horse and ride around the farm. It was so much fun.

When I was seven, I started getting into show jumping through lessons and learning on ponies or small horses.

Q: After developing numerous horses up to the five-star level (Condara, Baroness, Jon Snow), what qualities do you look for in your horses?

I'm very grateful to all the owners I've had the pleasure of working with throughout the years. I'm always looking for quality. I like to think I'm good at producing them and taking my time and understanding each horse.

When I train younger horses, they don't have all the experience, and you don't know what level they will end up competing at. So, I always try to find a willing horse. Their attitude and willingness to jump—that's what I look for. They need to like their job; when they get to a fence, they try their best in each jump.

The rest comes with time—working and connecting with them and trying to get them to their best.

Q: What's the best advice you can give young riders about preparing for milestone events?

I feel very young, but I'm grateful to have a lot of experience in this sport. You make mistakes, have hard moments and learn from them. I focus on trying to connect more with my horses and think less about the results—enjoying the process with my horses, the connection, riding them, and being there to support them. I really think that's a big part.

You can't be greedy in this sport. It doesn't work like that. We're working with animals that are big and strong, but so sensitive. I feel like I've changed that mindset, and thankfully this past year it's been coming together. I'm very happy and enjoying the good moments, because they don't last forever.

PHOTOS © CASSIDY KLEIN & SIERRA BUERKLEY

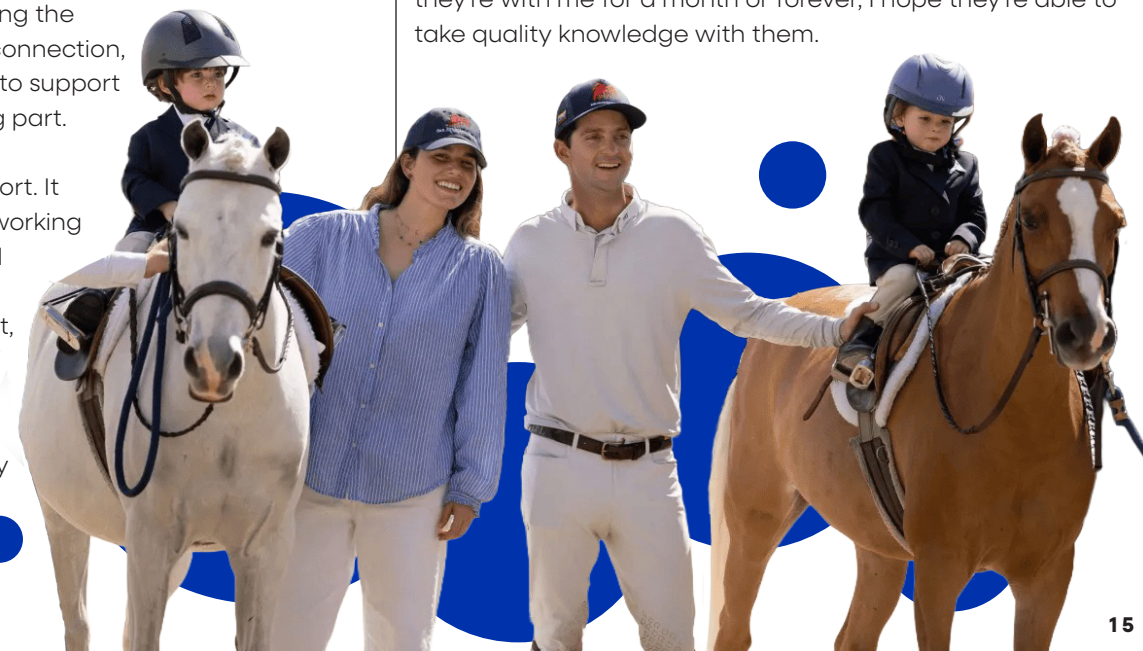


Q: As someone who calls Wellington home, what makes WEF special for you and your team?

I love to be here. We live five minutes from [Wellington International] and my family, my kids are here and my clients love to come WEF. This is my backyard, so I'm very fortunate to call this place my home and I'm very excited about the future here with the improvements on the showgrounds. They are doing a wonderful job.

Q: What's one thing that you always want your students to take away from a ride?

Teaching gives me a different perspective. My goal is for them to take something away from their time with me that they can put into practice once they're by themselves. Not only the basics but also the mindset; how the mind works, the connection with your horse. Sometimes I think people are leaving that out from their equation. Sometimes they just want to compete but forget about the mentality. Whether they're with me for a month or forever, I hope they're able to take quality knowledge with them.



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SHOW & TELL

We're Show & Tell, a horse show and travel blog guiding you around the show circuit. While we have a permanent winter base in south Florida, we'll be bringing you insider tips this winter on how to make the most of your time here.

First up: our long-time food favorites and what we're most looking forward to this winter!

Tried & True

1. Imoto | Buccan: we're sure you know these fantastic sister restaurants, but we couldn't exclude them. The menu varies during season, but certain staples are always there (the wagyu appetizer at Imoto, the corn agnolotti at Buccan). We never leave without the chocolate chip cookies—they're way better than what we make at home. *Pro-tip: you can order from the two restaurants interchangeably—simply ask for the menu you'd like.*

2. Oceano Kitchen: a bit out of the way, and the menu is consistently changing so make sure you check the website before booking! They recently moved to a larger spot recently and this is undoubtedly a favorite meal of ours. It's the closest thing to farm-to-table we've had in the area, and they take a lot of pride in serving fresh and local fare.

3. Aioli: a can't miss bakery & cafe, this spot on Dixie is always crowded and has some of our favorite lunch picks. Favs include their "iced matcha crack special," BEC on a biscuit, and artichoke pesto or roasted vegetables on ciabatta. Place an order ahead of time for pick up and don't skip a pastry or sourdough loaf for later.

4. La Sirena: an old world institutional Italian feel. It's a bit off the beaten path for a fancy-ish dinner (South Dixie) but the food is truly top notch. Think delicious pastas and other traditional Italian dishes—it's the closest we have to New York Italian in Palm Beach. Great for a date night or formal dinner, with an impressive wine selection and cozy wine room for larger parties.

5. PB Grill | Honor Bar: no surprises with these two. Very hard to get in but worth the wait! While both have a mean burger, the crispy chicken sandwich and tuna burger at Honor Bar live rent free in our minds. At PB grill, get the grilled artichokes (if it's available that night), and don't miss the ahi tuna stack, kale salad and fish selection.

New to the Scene:

1. Eataly: it's unfair to call Eataly a New York transplant, but that's where we're most familiar with it. Primed in the center of Rosemary Square, this is your spot for all Italian food specialties, from fresh pastas and meat or cheese selections to prepared foods and decadent desserts or gelato. There are also two restaurants within the market. (We would probably go for the market goods and take out items over dine-in.)

2. Sour Seed Bagels: we are thrilled about this fall 2025 addition to West Palm Beach, with all organic sourdough bagels. The best part is you order by the half bagel (they come open faced) so there's more room to try their flavor varieties. Of course they do all the classic bagel combos, but also offer many creative topping selections (think wild sockeye salmon, "the garden," etc.)

3. Swedie pop: Swedish candy is all the rage at the minute, so it's only sensible that this adorable shop popped up in 2025. The gourmet candy selection is excellent—a wonderful curation that you'll be happy to stock up on and bring home with you for the show week in Wellington. We'd go back for the grapefruit bottles (a classic), blueberry-vanilla stars and wrapped licorice options.



4. Estiatorio Milos: a classic Greek spot that's always reliably good at one of their outposts in major cities around the globe. We're so excited to add this staple to our list, and you must try the zucchini chips, dips + pita, branzino and a side of the tomato gigantes beans.

5. Malka: one of our favorite dinners out. If you haven't tried it, you must. This completely kosher restaurant is very chic with an open air aesthetic. The only other locations are Tel Aviv and NYC. The food is superb—the potato carpet and the green beans are surprise favorites you can't skip. The hummus is perfect and the schnitzel is always a big hit. We're still drooling over the cinnamon roll we got last time.

6. Garden Butcher: we've been discussing the need for more healthy food options for years in Wellington, and the Garden Butcher is a great first solve. They deliver healthy prepared foods—think salads, bowls, wraps—to Wellington. This will be clutch as the winter season comes into full swing. And stay tuned for their pending outposts in West Palm and Wellington (later 2026).

Check out **@weshowandtell** on Substack for more recommendations and subscribe to get S&T in your inbox!

- Adrienne, Alex & Lucy



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CHAMPIONS GALLERY



Lennon Bourke rode Winsom's Prada to champion in the Always Faithful Equestrian Club Younger Crossrail division.



Ellis Sadrian swept the Ritz-Carlton Residences, West Palm Beach Amateur-Owner 3'6" Hunter 18-35 division by taking champion with Incognito and reserve aboard Wonderous.



Golden Road, winner of the \$25,000 UHJA International Hunter Derby with Victoria Colvin in the tack, was named the Champion Equine Insurance Hunter Style Award winner, presented by Laura Fetterman (second from left). Golden Road is owned by John and Stephanie Ingram.



Vogue TW earned the Champion Equine Insurance Jumper Style Award presented by Laura Fetterman after winning the \$15,000 Carol Sollak, Engel & Völkers NAL 1.25m Junior Jumper Classic with owner Grace Lowe riding.

HERMÈS 1.50M CHAMPIONSHIP JUMPER SERIES

1	PABLO MEJIA VILLA COL	23
2	DIEGO PEREZ BILBAO ESP	20
3	LILLIE KEENAN USA	19
4	CAROLINE MAWHINNEY USA	18

Colombia's Pablo Mejia Villa won the first leg of the Hermès 1.50m Championship Jumper Series riding his own 9-year-old Caramia. Pictured with Ray Vega, Equestrian Account Executive for Hermès.

RUSHY MARSH FARM DON LITTLE MASTERS

1	ARIANNE DE KWIATKOWSKI & CHECKMOON ASK	14
2	KAREN ARRIGONI & IDEAL DE LA COUTURELLE	12
3	LAURIE SHARMA & EQUINE COUTURE'S JAMAICA	11
4	LORRAINE MONICK & JOLICOEUR	10
5	PATRICIA HURTER & PRIMO ALIBOO BLUE ABF	9

Arianne de Kwiatkowski and Checkmoon Ask topped the classic and took champion in the first Rushy Marsh Farm Don little Masters offering of WEF 2026.



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EXPERIENCE

Saturday Night Lights

JAN. 03	\$75,000 Battle of the Sexes presented by LeMieux	FEB. 21	\$500,000 Modan CSI5* Grand Prix
JAN. 10	Country Western Night \$140,000 Palm Beach County Sports Commission CSI3* Grand Prix	FEB. 28	\$150,000 Nations Cup CSIO4* presented by Florida Coast Equipment
JAN. 17	Family Night \$50,000 Palm Beach Equine Clinic Grand Prix	MAR. 07	\$500,000 Bainbridge Companies CSI5* Grand Prix
JAN. 24	Military & First Responder Appreciation Night Presented by Wellington Regional Medical Center \$215,000 NetJets CSI4* Grand Prix	MAR. 14	ABBA Night \$215,000 Horseware Ireland CSI4* Grand Prix
JAN. 31	Great Charity Challenge Sponsored by Fidelity Investments*	MAR. 21	Fan Appreciation Night Presented by Palm Beach County Sports Commission \$150,000 Hermès 1.50m Championship Series Jumper Final
FEB. 07	\$500,000 Fidelity Investments* CSI5* Grand Prix	MAR. 28	\$1,000,000 Rolex US Equestrian Open CSI5* Grand Prix, a Rolex Series Event
FEB. 14	\$150,000 Peter Wetherill WCHR/USHJA Hunter Spectacular		

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Hunter Groom Adrian Rodriguez

APPLIES PRECISION AND PASSION TO HIS WORK

Contributed by Sarah Eakin/Paper Horse Media
in collaboration with HorseGrooms

Adrian Rodriguez, 42, is at the pinnacle of his profession as a hunter groom, but it was a very different story when he arrived in the States 23 years ago. “I didn’t know anything about horses,” he said. “I literally came with no experience. I didn’t know how to use a pitchfork.”

Working for John and Stephanie Ingram, he is now entrusted with some of the best hunters in the country, including Golden Road, who won the \$25,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby with Victoria Colvin during WEF Premiere.

Lunging Is A Science

Rodriguez learned from his peers and acquired an appreciation for the nuances of the job. His attention to detail is apparent in his approach to one of the core components of preparing hunters for competition: lunging. He spends anywhere from eight to twenty minutes, depending on how the horse is feeling. It is a science if done right,

and it is reflected in the level of the horses’ performance in the ring.

Last week, preparation for Friday’s derby began in earnest on Tuesday. “You can’t just do the same thing every day,” Rodriguez explained. “You have to have a feel for the horse. On Tuesday in the warm-up he felt fresh, good. He was jumping super, with a little bit of energy,” he said of Golden Road, who he refers to as ‘Grant’ and also ‘my best friend.’ “The second day he showed in the High Performance, and I lunged him a little more that morning—he was super and perfect in the class.

“We started to get ‘a feeling,’” he said, referring to the team surrounding the horse, including Colvin and the trainer Tom Wright.

The morning of derby day saw temperatures drop, bringing a new set of challenges. “I knew it was a big class, and I knew it was important to get the lunging time right,” Rodriguez said.



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Twenty minutes proved to be the magic timeframe that day. “When the lunge line is loose, that means the horse is fresh. When the lunge line is heavy, it means the horse is getting quiet.”

Rodriguez can also read the many more subtle signs from years of experience. “I look at the eyes all the time,” he said. “He’s going to tell you what you have to do.”

Appearance Matters

As much as feeling good, a hunter needs to look good—appearance matters. “You have to like grooming and your grooming has to be perfect,” said Rodriguez. “Judges see everything, and your attention has to be perfect because one

little detail can cost you the class—especially when it’s a derby. When things don’t go well, the next day I know I have to do something different.”

I Want to Be Perfect for My Team

Rodriguez takes his role seriously. “There is a lot of time spent waiting at the ring, but when I get to the ring, I don’t chat with my friends,” he said. “I want to see everything. That is how you learn.”

His owners entrust him with decision-making based on what he feels from the horse. “When they trust you, the horse feels that too,” he said. “I want to be perfect for my team.”

About HorseGrooms

HorseGrooms is a global platform dedicated to supporting, educating, and connecting grooms across all disciplines of equestrian sport. Through educational resources, interviews, in-person events, and an international online community, HorseGrooms works to improve horse welfare while giving grooms the recognition, tools, and support they deserve.

HorseGrooms collaborates with events, brands, and professionals worldwide to share practical knowledge and real stories from the people who care for horses every day, from local barns to top-level competition venues.

Learn more at www.horsegrooms.com

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