

BIGGER IS BETTER

Pavla and Erik Nygaard enjoy huge success at their Ocala Jockey Club

BY CYNTHIA McFARLAND
PHOTOS BY LOUISE REINAGEL



MUCH CAN BE SAID for valuing tradition and history, yet growth and change are inescapable in this life. At Ocala Jockey Club, owners Erik and Pavla Nygaard have found balance in appreciating the past while moving into the future. And with their operation’s graduates such as Battle of Midway, Klimt, and Rigoletta, they’re doing pretty well in the present as well.

Neither Erik nor Pavla grew up with horses, and their journey to becoming farm owners and Thoroughbred breeder/owners was not exactly straightforward.

Pavla has degrees in molecular biology, genetics, and law. In addition to practicing law, she has also done consulting and personal coaching. Erik studied electronic engineering at MIT and worked as an engineer before moving on to Wall Street as a quantitative analyst. He then co-founded a private equity firm.

Growing up in communist Czechoslovakia, Pavla was the daughter of a university professor who was a single mother.

“I was a horse-crazy girl with no ability to be around them,”



YVONNE SCHWABE

Ocala Jockey Club covers 954 acres; inset, Pavla and Erik Nygaard

she recalled. She nurtured her passion by studying and drawing horses, a hobby that allowed her to appreciate their beauty.

In 2005 the Nygaards were living in New York City, but

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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2019 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2019 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	ADIOS CHARLIE (08, Indian Charlie), Ocala Stud	\$3,000	51/12	0/0	0/0	(Patternrecognition, \$200,000)	\$558,219	193	7	1.56	1.26
2	FIELD COMMISSION (05, Service Stripe), Solera Farm	\$2,500	22/9	1/1	0/1	(Drafted, \$160,000)	\$285,454	135	1	0.86	0.95
3	SONGANDAPRAYER (98, Unbridled's Song)	Pnsd	59/14	0/0	0/0	(Kinlee's Song, \$31,950)	\$268,882	*1028	36	1.10	1.41
4	FIRST DUDE (07, Stephen Got Even), Double Diamond Farm	\$10,000	55/7	0/0	0/0	(Starr of Quality, \$44,460)	\$217,098	339	10	1.23	1.24
5	BIG DRAMA (06, Montbrook), Stonewall's Prestige Stallions	\$5,000	35/9	0/0	0/0	(Who's Your Drama, \$34,596)	\$189,603	215	4	0.90	1.29
6	GONE ASTRAY (06, Dixie Union), Northwest Stud	\$4,500	33/5	0/0	0/0	(Jay's Way, \$38,800)	\$159,497	*220	9	1.00	1.13
7	SOLDAT (08, War Front), Woodford Thoroughbreds	\$1,500	42/8	0/0	0/0	(B's Ten, \$25,200)	\$154,336	171	1	0.72	1.26
8	BRETHREN (08, Distorted Humor), Arindel Farm	\$7,500	35/7	1/1	0/1	(Mrs. Crews, \$26,400)	\$152,133	135	3	1.51	1.67
9	UNCAPTURED (10, Lion Heart), Ocala Stud	\$6,000	17/3	0/0	0/0	(Yes I Am Free, \$30,700)	\$149,660	96	3	0.99	1.20
10	TREASURE BEACH (GB) (08, Galileo), Pleasant Acres Stallions	\$7,500	47/4	0/0	0/0	(Ambassador Jim, \$31,300)	\$147,835	*267	1	1.01	1.40
11	OVERDRIVEN (09, Tale of the Cat)	Pnsd	31/5	0/0	0/0	(Arms Runner, \$35,751)	\$125,286	147	1	0.86	1.15
12	WILDCAT HEIR (00, Forest Wildcat)	Died, 2015	58/5	0/0	0/0	(Vilaro, \$12,000)	\$115,473	*687	34	1.34	1.32
13	WITH DISTINCTION (01, Storm Cat)	N/A	41/5	0/0	0/0	(Luz Estrella, \$15,400)	\$109,009	*552	13	1.05	1.15
14	EXCLUSIVE QUALITY (03, Elusive Quality), Journeyman Stallions	\$1,500	30/7	0/0	0/0	(Malandrina, \$14,400)	\$107,951	344	7	0.91	1.06
15	RATTLESNAKE BRIDGE (08, Tapit), Hartley/De Renzo Thoroughbreds	\$7,500	27/5	0/0	0/0	(Celebrate, \$17,300)	\$102,354	103	0	0.49	1.07
16	J P'S GUSTO (08, Successful Appeal), Bridlewood Farm	\$2,000	18/3	0/0	0/0	(La Key, \$33,370)	\$99,742	89	2	0.97	1.08
17	PROSPECTIVE (09, Malibu Moon), Ocala Stud	\$3,000	28/6	0/0	0/0	(Regal Romance, \$15,300)	\$84,191	102	3	1.03	1.15
18	AWESOME OF COURSE (00, Awesome Again), Ocala Stud	\$4,000	29/1	0/0	0/0	(Day by Day, \$20,300)	\$81,046	*245	10	1.38	1.32
19	HIGH COTTON (03, Dixie Union)	Pnsd	46/6	0/0	0/0	(Little United, \$9,270)	\$80,338	*398	11	0.96	1.24
20	HE'S HAD ENOUGH (10, Tapit), Woodford Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	25/3	0/0	0/0	(He's Smokin Hot, \$23,300)	\$78,820	107	0	0.55	1.45
21	GREATNESS (99, Mr. Prospector), Stonewall's Prestige Stallions, LLC	\$1,750	12/5	0/0	0/0	(I'm Cardinal, \$26,400)	\$69,285	*261	7	1.30	1.00
22	DRILL (09, Lawyer Ron), Get Away Farm	\$4,500	19/3	0/0	0/0	(Homedrill, \$15,300)	\$61,628	63	1	0.92	1.09
23	HANDSOME MIKE (09, Scat Daddy), Pleasant Acres Stallions	\$4,000	18/2	0/0	0/0	(Here Comes Jackie, \$25,800)	\$61,124	76	0	0.62	0.83
24	WROTE (IRE) (09, High Chaparral)	N/A	13/1	0/0	0/0	(Brenda's G L P, \$18,300)	\$84,751	*54	0	0.54	0.89
25	IN SUMMATION (03, Put It Back), Ocala Stud	\$2,500	18/3	0/0	0/0	(Tearless, \$15,670)	\$44,490	*226	5	0.92	1.32
26	WINSLOW HOMER (07, Unbridled's Song), Journeyman Stallions	\$2,500	17/2	0/0	0/0	(Hallucogenic, \$15,300)	\$36,944	58	0	0.76	1.06
27	HEAR NO EVIL (00, Carson City), Ocala Stud	\$2,500	11/2	0/0	0/0	(Maranatha, \$13,750)	\$30,880	131	8	1.47	1.44
28	FLASHSTORM (04, Storm Cat), Northwest Stud	\$2,500	11/1	0/0	0/0	(Flashndynamite, \$19,200)	\$30,003	102	3	0.95	0.98
29	THOREAU (08, Gone West), Ocala Jockey Club	\$1,500	4/1	0/0	0/0	(Music Babe, \$24,480)	\$28,309	22	0	0.43	1.23
30	DOCTOR PEACH (07, Tiznow)	N/A	2/1	0/0	0/0	(Precocious Peach, \$26,400)	\$28,200	6	0	0.83	1.11

had a home in the Catskills where Pavla's mare was stabled. Convinced there must be a better place to spend winters and hoping to find a location where Erik could pursue his passion for golf, they began looking at Florida. They visited Wellington, but while they appreciated the golf and sport horse opportunities there, they were not interested in buying property in south Florida.

"We'd seen ads for golden Ocala when we were in New York, so we drove up to Ocala," said Pavla. "The amenities weren't anything like Wellington, but the land was so much more beautiful."

Although they didn't feel they needed a large property, they agreed to Marion County-based realtor George DeBenedicty's suggestion to tour Ocala Jockey Club, which was on the market at the time.

HISTORIC LOCATION

The late Joseph and Barbara LaCroix were influential members of Ocala's early Thoroughbred industry. Their original Meadowbrook Farm was initially located near some of the county's first Thoroughbred operations, such as Bonnie Heath Farm and Tartan Farms.

After Joseph LaCroix died in 1982,



Top: Benny Betts runs the training operation while Pete Cox (above) is head of the stallions

Barbara and their son David, a trainer based in California, continued to run the farm, which produced Prized, winner of the 1989 Breeders' Cup Turf (G1T), and Brocco, winner of the 1993 Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1). As the farmland was in high demand for commercial purposes, the LaCroix family sold it and moved its operation to Meadowbrook Farms at the Ocala Jockey Club, which featured a training facility, multiple barns, clubhouse restaurant, and even a townhome community. In 1990 they built a state-of-the-art stallion barn, which tragically burned to the ground in 2003, killing five of nine stallions.

The Nygaards appreciated the farm's history and scenic setting. Admittedly, they didn't need a 954-acre operation but closed on the property in November 2005.

"There's something special about that land," said Pavla. "The beautiful oaks and the rolling hills that Ocala is known for really come together there. It's like the land speaks to you."

The Nygaards have since been directly involved in managing the property themselves, despite not living there full time. One or both of them are at the farm about one week per month, traveling from their



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home in Southern California.

“We have a great team of people on the farm, including farm trainer Benny Betts, who runs the training operation and oversees the farm in general,” said Pavla. “Pete Cox is a superb stallion man, who has been with the farm since its Meadowbrook days. He handles the stallions and is also very valuable in maintaining the track and other maintenance issues. Sarah Doran is the office manager and handles the administrative duties for both the farm, the three-day event, and renting the clubhouse for events, and Cindy Oatman is our sponsorship manager.”

A 35-unit townhome village remains part of the unique property, with units available for seasonal and year-round rental.

HORSE ACTIVITY

Except for Pavla’s riding horse (an off-the-track Thoroughbred mare she bought 22 years ago), the Nygaards owned no horses when they bought the farm. That changed as they began buying and breeding. They currently maintain a small broodmare band, most of which are kept at Chesapeake Farm in Lexington, and a racing stable of anywhere from five to a dozen horses.

The Nygaards breed and race under the



Grade 3 winner Irish Surf, a son of Giant’s Causeway, stands at Ocala Jockey Club for \$5,000

name Thor-Bred Stables while the training and commercial farm operates as Ocala Jockey Club. The facility is home to the Nygaards’ training horses, as well as some owned by clients, and Pavla notes that new clients are welcome.

Among graded stakes winners bred, raised, and/or raced by the Nygaards’ Thor-Bred Stables are Battle of Midway, a millionaire, 2017 Las Vegas Breeders’ Cup Dirt Mile (G1) winner, and recent winner of the San Pasqual Stakes (G2); grade 1 winners Klimt and Rigoletta (the dam of Battle of Midway); and graded stakes winners Ocean Knight and Irish Surf.

Pavla takes a serious approach to breeding Thoroughbreds, considering it both a responsibility and a sacred opportunity to

make new life.

“I don’t take it lightly. Whatever we say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to will have the opportunity to be on this earth for 25 years or so. Just the first few years of that animal’s life will be spent on the racetrack, but there will be many years after that,” she observed. “As a breeder, I feel my job is to give them a good shot at making it both at the racetrack and afterward.

“I would put breeding perspectives into three broad categories: the volume method of breeding many in hopes of getting a few good ones; the big-pocket luxury of breeding the best to the best and hoping for the best; and what

I call the Tesio perspective,” observed Pavla, noting that she aspires to the third method.

Federico Tesio, of course, was the Italian breeder born in 1869 whose deep study, selection, and improvement of genetics in breeding Thoroughbreds gave the world such breed-shaping horses as Nearco, Ribot, and Donatello.

“We work to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our own stock, their pedigree lines, family affinities, conformation, personality, soundness, and styles of running,” said Pavla. “This depth helps to make good matches, accentuate what works, and overcome what doesn’t. Having spent a lot of time poring over pedigrees, stallions are more highly rated than the mares, but I think the female side of the family has a huge bearing on what happens to the match. It’s easier to look at sire lines because you have so much to work with statistically while taking the female family into account takes more time and imagination. In our program we focus on the matches and how they grow up.”

The Nygaards worked with the late pedigree consultant Les Brinsfield to help identify sire lines that would match well with their stallion Thoreau. Developing success is a team sport—including such people as bloodstock agent Murette Farrell (see page 30), who identified Rigoletta as a racing prospect, and Brian Graves from Gainesway, which consigns the Nygaards’ stock at auctions—and computer tools,



One of the fences for the CCI 3 division Ocala Jockey Club International 3-Day Event

Ocala Jockey Club



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including a database Erik himself developed with his engineering background.

The first foals they bred commercially were born in 2012. Pavla notes that while they have purchased mares for breeding, so far they've had better luck breeding the mares they raced.

"I think it goes back to knowing more about the individuals," she said. "I believe the mare has to have a certain level of quality; bloodlines, performance, and nicks are a start, but there are many aspects to quality."

FEATURED STALLIONS

Their stallion facility is home to two stallions, both owned by the Nygaards.

Irish Surf, the only son of European Horse of the Year Giant's Causeway standing in Florida, is out of multiple grade 1 winner and Eclipse champion Surfside. Bred by Gainesway Farm, Irish Surf was co-raced by Gainesway and Thor-Bred Stables. He compiled a 3-2-4 record in 25 starts and earned \$278,945 before being retired and entering stud for the 2018 season.

Irish Surf set a track record when winning the Cougar II Handicap (G3) by 8¼ lengths (12 furlongs in 2:29.01). He stands for \$5,000.

Thoreau, a 10-year-old son by Gone West, out of the Deputy Minister mare Madame Thor, was relocated from California to Florida and is standing for \$1,500. From limited breedings while at stud privately, Thoreau has sired juvenile stakes winner Fairfaithhills and multiple winners Belle de France, Music Babe, Mighty Thor, and Theorem.

For the past three years the farm has been the site of the Ocala Jockey Club International 3-Day Event each fall. Although the competition itself spans only a handful of days, it requires months of planning, in which Pavla is intensely involved along with event organizer Shelley Page.

The 2018 event was one of just five in the United States and the only one in the Southeast to have the prestigious CCI3 division. This attracts top-level riders because it's one of the few places where they can qualify for events such as the Olympics or the World Equestrian Games. A total of 135 starters entered the event last November.



The stallion barn at Ocala Jockey Club

The course was designed by Olympic silver medalist Clayton Fredericks, assisted by Mike Etherington-Smith, who designed the courses for the Sydney and Beijing Olympic Games.

"The course designer thinks the footing here is the best in the world for cross country," noted Erik. "The elevation changes make it unique, and riders love the hills. We have four different cross country courses for a total of 11 miles. We built a pond on the course for a water jump and added water jumps to the existing pond in front of the clubhouse."

Another unique aspect of the OCJ Event is the extra \$15,000 prize fund for competing off-track Thoroughbred racehorses.

Several eventing trainers lease barns for months at a time, taking advantage of training and conditioning on the property's great variety of terrain, permanent jumps, and hacking trails.

FUTURE POTENTIAL

Pavla finds her favorite times on the farm are not during the bustle of the three-day event, but rather after hours when she can just hang out with her horses and walk the land.

"When everyone else is gone for the day, I walk the undeveloped portion of the farm, which is a little over 300 acres," she said. "It's just magical to walk there at sunrise or sunset. We share the farm with so much wildlife, from deer, turkey, and fox squirrels to bald eagles, osprey, hawks, wood storks, herons, and many other birds."

Their immense appreciation for this aspect of the farm has caused the Nygaards to consider making it a destination venue, which they admit could take many different forms. They've taken steps to explore future possibilities, such as a building a boutique hotel, retail village, and renewal of the clubhouse (which once functioned as a full-time restaurant) for special occasion events.

"We're not breaking ground on any of this soon, but we believe this would be an excellent use of the property," Pavla said. "It would retain the farm character and allow people from out of town to experience it and take it with them, something like Ocala's version of a 'horse safari.'"

"I'm quite grateful for our foundation and team to breed a good horse, but that's not dependent on owning a 954-acre farm. I'm also confident in our ability to bring together a team to run a big three-day event, but I'm also cognizant that we can only split ourselves so many ways," Pavla noted. "It's too big for what we really need for our operation, which has us looking for ways to allow the property to achieve what it could be. That would mean either selling it and handing the reins to someone who can take it to the next level, or finding investors who would want to do that together."

Regardless of what happens next, the Nygaards look to create excellence and to honor the horse and the land. **EH**

Cynthia McFarland is a freelance writer based in Ocala, Fla.