

# Living the Dream

BY MARY JANE HOWELL



Brent Cline

**PADDOCKS FILLED WITH POLO PONIES.** Dogs in various sizes and suspicious ancestry. Chickens galore. The requisite barn cat. Even a miniature pot bellied pig. It's a cast of characters worthy of an E. B. White story. And it's all part of a real-life dream come true for Theresa King.

King grew up in Warrenton, Va., the daughter of an opera singer and a self-proclaimed computer nerd. Like many young girls, she was obsessed with horses. Unlike most of them she was lucky enough to have her own pony. "My parents were very indulgent—and my brother Christopher and I had a wide variety of pets when we were little, not only dogs but ponies, ducks and rabbits as well. My father even built us a barn," she says.

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King doesn't remember a time when she didn't love horses and everything that encompasses: feeding, cleaning stalls, grooming. Although her father bought her first horse (she quickly outgrew the ponies), an old sweet mare named Gypsy, she was soon ready for a bit more energetic mount. In what was perhaps a foreshadowing of the independent, enterprising adult she would become, she decided to breed the family's Doberman and sell the puppies rather than ask her parents for the money to purchase her next horse.

Though she had very little formal training and had to stand on a stack of cinderblocks to mount her first horse, horses have remained a lifelong passion. To the extent that when she was in her 20s she married an Argentine polo player who had relocated to the U.S. "We moved three times a year for seven years," she says. "I saw a lot of the United

States.”

Although she never imagined her equestrian pursuits would include playing polo, the attraction of the sport eventually took hold. She started out just hitting the ball (stick and ball) as she exercised the polo ponies, but it wasn't long before she was playing full-on matches with the other polo wives. “I joined the United States Polo Association in 1991,” she says. “I really wanted to play professionally, but that was next to impossible as a wife and a new mother.”

As it turned out, just a year later King was on her own with a young daughter to support. Living in Wellington, Fla., at the time, she found a job videotaping polo games. And while it kept food on the table, it was not the career she envisioned for herself.



"I ended up in Washington, D.C., working for a real estate company heading up their relocation section," she says. Through that job she met various bankers, which led to a job with an investment firm where she raised early stage venture capital. Meeting that challenge head on, she was determined to gain an understanding of the inner-workings of her clients, whose businesses ran the gamut from telecommunications to restaurants. "It was challenging work, but I loved it. But then 9/11 came and the world changed. The stock market ground to a halt and very few companies were being funded, especially the start-ups."

Throughout her tenure in Washington, King continued to play polo and was a regular at both the Capitol Polo Club and Great Meadows Polo Club. One of the highlights of her polo career came in 2001 when Pippa Grace, founder of the International Women's Polo Association, asked her to play on a team that was being put together to compete in India. "An invitation had been issued by the Maharani of Jaipur, who was an avid equestrian and a polo player as well," explains King. "I remember telling Pippa, 'Are you joking? I'm in—totally!'"

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That trip to India, the birthplace of polo, ignited a serious case of wanderlust. Although she was still working in Washington, she knew that with the nation's poor economy, the timing was right for a career change. So in 2002 she traded in her high heels and business suits for boots and riding pants and headed south to Florida, where she played polo in both Sarasota and Palm Beach. Taking advantage of the fact that she no longer had the demands of a nine-to-five job, over the next few years King racked up the miles and the passport stamps—Chile, Singapore, Argentina, Barbados, England and South Africa—and filled her walls with photos of her international competition—12 countries in all.

King first traveled to Aiken for the Ladies Invitational Polo Tournament in 1998 and continued—along with many of her fellow competitors—to make the trip each fall. And like the throngs of equestrians who came before her, King fell under the spell of the little town in South Carolina where horses have the right of way. During each visit, she marveled at the affordability of the land and the casual sophistication of the community. After years of globetrotting, she was ready to put down roots and realized Aiken had truly captured her heart. Along with two like-minded friends, King began searching for property, and in 2005 they found the perfect spot—a cornfield just off New Holland Road. "I lived downtown and boarded my horses while I was working on developing my part of the land," King says. She admittedly didn't have much of an idea about how to turn a cornfield into a horse farm, but loved the fact of having her own land and being directly involved in developing it. "There was no book titled Land for Dummies 101," she laughs. Once again relying on her trademark self-sufficiency and determination, she tackled the job head on, clearing the perimeter, fencing pastures and putting in a well. And like any true horsewoman, building a barn came next. Completed in the spring of 2006, the eight-stall structure now shelters her polo ponies—five mares named Jasmine, Petunia, Daisy, Buttercup and Aster—plus a pot bellied pig named Flower.



Three years later she began constructing her dream home—a barn apartment. "I had it all in my head, the rooms, the details, everything. I found a wonderful builder in town—John Brown (who has since passed away)—and we got my

ideas down on paper and went to work,” she says. To save money she acted as contractor on the job and within 12 weeks the comfortable apartment was finished—complete with screened-in side porch, overlooking the paddocks. “Sipping your morning coffee while watching your horses is just about the best way to start the day,” King says.

Next on the list was a chicken house, which is now home to more than 30 chickens of various exotic sounding breeds—Silkies, Frizzles, Araucanas and Rhode Island Reds—whose eggs are more beautiful than anything found in an Easter basket. And to complete the picture she installed two vegetable gardens and several flower and herb gardens.

## With fall in the air and the polo season in full swing, she turns her thoughts from the farm back to polo.

When King isn't playing polo and taking care of her menagerie of animals, she manages a successful sideline business called Upcycled Sacks. What began as a hobby recycling feed bags—for dogs, cats, goats, horses—into usable totes and purses for herself and friends has now grown into a burgeoning business. No longer utilizing the humble feedbags of the past, feed companies today hire illustrators, photographers and designers to create beautiful whimsical packaging that helps distinguish their brands from the competition. King focuses on the plastic varieties (she doesn't have to go too far to find them) and transforms them into fashionable one-of-a-kind carryalls—adding coordinating fabric lining and handles.

“Once the word got out that I was recycling feed bags, people started to drop them over my fence instead of taking them to the recycling center down the road,” King says. “Many brands of feed are unique to various parts of the country and I have friends who bring me empty feed bags when—for instance—they come back to Aiken after summers spent in New York.”

Though the dream might seem complete, King has several other projects in the works. “I put a pool in over the summer and the pool house (two stories and multi-functional with a guest apartment and office space) is nearly done. I need to divide some of my paddocks and add run-in sheds...” And the list goes on. But with fall in the air and the polo season moving into full swing, she turns her attention from the farm back to polo—the speed, the competition, the smell of horses—the so-called sport of kings. After all, that's what led her to her dream in the first place.

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