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CHRONICLING MONEY AND POWER IN SOUTH FLORIDA

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\$1 million barns

Wellington's horsy set pampers its high-priced animals and creates a real estate niche with luxury, state-of-the-art stables

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When Arnold Blauweiss, retired chief financial officer of LIN Broadcasting, now owned by AT&T, decided to move to Florida three years ago, he and his wife, Heather, encountered a problem.

They didn't like the idea of putting their jumper show horses in the tents that are available and which rent for about \$450 a month per horse. Then, while out looking at houses for sale one rainy day, Blauweiss noticed a half-dozen barns going up in western Palm Beach County's Wellington community. With their graceful arches, barrel-tile roofs, mahogany doors and cedar paneling, the barns resembled high-end houses.

"We thought, why not build a barn for our own horses and lease the rest?" recalls Blauweiss.

The Blauweiss family is among those drawn to Wellington each year from all over the world for equestrian competitions, such as the Winter Equestrian Festival and the U.S. Open Polo. As more and more of the horse set winters here, demand for rental quarters for horses has exceeded the supply. The result has been a boom in barn construction and the creation of a real estate niche.

But these aren't typical barns. They are state-of-the-art facilities costing upwards of \$1 million and come complete with courtyards, water fountains and tree-lined driveways.

"The barns are more of a showplace than people's homes are right now," says James Windham, a builder of luxury barns.

It's easy to see where the money comes from. In the '70s, polo players with oil money were moving to Wellington. Then in the '80s and '90s it was the Wall Street crowd. These days, it's technology wealth. Meanwhile, the list of Wellington residents who participate in hunter-jumper, polo and other equestrian events, reads like a roster of Fortune 500 companies.



BARN RAISING: This summer Greg Isbell, owner of Wellington-based 5 Star Builders, is building 13 barns for wealthy owners of polo ponies and jumper show horses.

To name just a few of the area's barn owners: Netscape Communications Corp. chairman James Clark has an equestrian estate and barn in Wellington. So do Coca-Cola Enterprises' Summerfield K. "Skee" Johnston Jr. and Outback Steakhouse founder Tim Gannon. Steve Van Andel, chairman of the board and CEO of Amway Corp., has a barn in Wellington and so does Isaac Arguety, CEO of Sunrise-based Jan Bell Marketing, which owns Mayor's Jewelers. Entrepreneur/investor Peter Brant's barn is nearby.

Interworld's founder, Michael Donahue, is having a 56-stall barn built for his polo ponies. A horse facility is also under construction for Robert Johnson, chief executive officer of BET Holdings Inc., which owns the Black Entertainment Network.

Luxury barns are becoming a large part of Wellington's 300- to 400-barn inventory, with about 100 of them dotting the landscape. The larger ones — complete with center courtyards and fountains,

and ranging up to 40,000 square feet — look more like small shopping centers or office complexes.

Barn owners say it's just nicer to house their horses in their own private facilities where everything is state-of-the-art. Most often, the barns and polo fields or riding rings are on three to 50 acres or more in one location, and the "people" residences are elsewhere, whether in Wellington or on Palm Beach. Nonetheless, the horse owners can control its management and have the convenience of riding their horses whenever they want, rather than having to schedule time at a commercial facility.

They also believe they've made a solid long-term real estate investment. Undeveloped land zoned for horse facilities in Wellington has sold recently for \$25,000 to more than \$100,000 per acre, brokers say.

"Hunter-jumper horses can cost up to \$1 million each. An owner might have seven or eight horses. It's secondary to spend \$1 million on a barn," says Brad Scherer, a polo player and president of Atlantic Western Realty, which handles many equestrian-related real estate properties.

With more than half of Wellington's 22,000 acres dedicated to equestrian use, Scherer estimates the area holds at least 3 million square feet of barns and other similar facilities.

Elayne Adams, immediate past president of the Palm Beach County Equestrian Commission, says the demand for stall space has increased as the importance of the events in Wellington has grown, and agrees the hunter-jumper set is fueling much of the barn construction.

"The hunter-jumper people pay more attention to barns. It's a different crowd than the polo people," says Adams. In polo, the condition of the 10-acre field is foremost in the horse owners' minds.

Adds Atlantic's Mark Egloff, "What's unique about Wellington is the numbers, volume and concentration of the barns. Even in a place like Lexington, Ky., there are a lot of barns and farms but they are spread out over a [much] bigger area. A number of specialty builders have capitalized on the robust hunter-jumper market."

Among them is Greg Isbell, owner of Wellington-based 5 Star Builders. Isbell says the upscale barn market has really taken off in the last two or three years. In 1997, he built three barns, and in 1998 he built 12. Last year, his firm constructed 21 barns, plus accessory buildings. And he sees no slack in the demand. This summer alone he's building 13 barns, all of which must be ready by November.

James Windham, owner of James Windham Builders Inc., who's been in the business for 23 years, said the luxury barn business in Wellington has soared in the last five years. About 10 percent of the market is "basic barns," with upscale barns from \$250,000 to \$600,000 accounting for 60 percent to 70 percent of the market, and 20 percent falling into the \$1 million and up category.

Windham is now designing two barns that will have bell towers with stained-glass windows in their transoms. A barn he built for developer Murray Goodman has a trophy room and tack room "that looks like the inside of someone's library." He points out that the barns are now places where people invite their friends and socialize.

The barns can range from a mere six stalls to facilities with room for 50 to 60 horses. They have managers' and groomsmen's apartments, laundry rooms, storage rooms and more. The rooms not used by horses, such as the tack room, are not just utilitarian. They

often have Mexican tile floors and cedar walls and ceilings.

The barns have lounges or viewing rooms decorated with plush leather chairs, imported area rugs and custom-built bars. Most important, they have huge windows where friends or family can sit in cool comfort and watch the owner's horses being exercised out in the heat.

Blauweiss' facility cost \$850,000. He says he chose Isbell as the builder not just because of the price, but because "he understands the horses' needs."

Isbell explains that the stalls must be built without sharp-edged columns or other obstructions that a horse could roll into and be injured. The doors have to be solid wood and one-and-a-half-inch thick to withstand the horses' hooves. The doors also have to be hung in such a way that a horse's foot cannot become caught beneath them.

"You've got a barn with a 1,000-pound to 1,200-pound animal. A horse doesn't think for itself. There's a safety factor," Isbell says.

Isbell built his first barn six years ago at a boarding stable he owned. Others noticed his barn, and he soon built a barn for polo player Vicki Armour. He has one under construction now for hunter-jumper champion Alison Firestone, which features a second-floor viewing room, brick pavers and barrel-tile roof.

Isbell says most of the designs are taken from bits and pieces of his other barns, as clients pick out their favorite features when they walk through some of the existing luxury barns.

Which goes to show that even when it comes to one's pets, it's important to keep up with the Joneses.

Says barn owner Blauweiss, "When people see other people's barns, they say, 'I want one too.'"