

Rachel Rodman
Alex Scott Assistant Trainers Scholarship winner 2015



In February of this year I set off on my travels to Florida, not in the least upset about leaving the British winter behind me! I was spending three months with Wesley Ward. The majority of his horses and all the yearlings are based in Florida over the winter. I started my experience at Palm Meadows Training Centre in Boynton Beach, about an hour north of Miami.

The day I arrived I spent the morning with Wesley's assistant Lauren Robson. She showed me around the barn and gave me the lowdown on the daily routine. Wesley had a horse running at Gulfstream Park that evening so I went with Lauren to get my first taste of

American racing. Gulfstream Park is just outside Miami and as well as being a racetrack it is also a shopping mall, a casino and has a huge assortment of restaurants. It was a beautiful, hot day with a very relaxed atmosphere with many people in shorts in flip flops. Very different to racing in February in the UK!

I spent my first week at Palm Meadows helping out in any way that I could, either mucking out, washing off or hot walking (walking the hot horses in hand after they have been washed off until they are cooled out and can go back in their stable). I did a lot of walking; I would have liked a pedometer to see how far I walked in 3 months.



After the first week of finding my feet I was riding every morning on the track. We would start around 6am, I would go round with Lauren checking legs and making sure they had eaten up. Any problems or concerns about the horses would be discussed between the foreman (barn manager) and the assistant. We would then set our tack for our first two horses.

The way they work is a bit different in America. The grooms are responsible for their own horses, most of them doing about five each. They look after them in every respect, they muck them out, tack them up, groom them etc. The hot walkers walk them and hold them while they get washed. The riders just ride and are responsible for making sure that the correct tack is set outside the stable for the next horse you are riding. The Wesley Ward barn is a bit different, it's all hand on deck and pretty manic most of the time.

On the days when the horses weren't working we would ride around 6 horses each, either trotting or steady cantering on the track. It took a bit of getting used to riding on the track; you have to have your wits about you at all times. You might be doing a steady canter on a baby and then someone will breeze past you on the inside, setting your baby alight.

When the riding at Palm Meadows was finished the riders would clean the tack and we would then

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jump in the car for 40 minutes and head to the farm, generally stopping for tacos on the way. Almost all of Wesley's staff are Mexican.

The farm is where all the yearlings go to be broken. By the time I arrived all of the breaking had been done. Wesley is normally the first person to sit on all of the yearlings when they are broken. I did see him riding a few unruly babies while I was there, in his recognizable slippers and no hat.

We would ride up to 8 horses at the farm, mostly two year olds but some older horses would go there for some R and R. After they had been ridden they would be washed and then they would swim. As soon as you finished the horse you were on, you would move to the next one and so on until we were finished. There would be around 50 horses to exercise. When we were finished we would head back to Palm Meadows and hand walk the horses there before heading home.

There is no special treatment for anyone. Everyone is expected to work until all the work is finished. One day at the farm we unloaded around 600 bags of feed by hand. The shavings delivery was a personal favourite. A large load of loose shavings would be delivered on the concrete, a JCB would dump a bucket at either end of the yard and we would make our way round until each box had been filled with clean shavings. Thankfully there was a cold beer or two waiting for us at the end of this task.

Part of the yearlings education involves them being moved around between the farm, Gulfstream, Calder and Palm Meadows. They get experience of breezing and leaving the starting stalls in each place and so by the time they come to run it is a walk in the park.

One of the first days I was at the farm I wasn't riding and so I was watching the two year olds on exercise. A dark bay really caught my eye. The juvenile just seemed to be effortlessly skipping over the dirt and gliding over the rather uneven turf. I kept my eye on this filly each day I was at the farm and I got to sit on her a few times, she was impressive.

Wesley kept telling that he hadn't broken her in but that she was picking up his way very quickly. She was one of the horses who made the trip from Florida to Keeneland at the end of March. She had worked very well in Florida and continued to impress at Keeneland. She went on to win her first start at Keeneland, setting a track record.

Her next start was the Queen Mary at Royal Ascot where she demolished the rest of the field by 7 lengths. The filly was Lady Aurelia.

Wesley was so impressed with her from the beginning. It was the most fantastic experience to see the filly from the steady canters at the beginning, her first piece of work, first race and then win at Royal Ascot. My main objective from my time spent with Wesley was to learn about his techniques with two year olds and I think I can safely say I achieved my main objective.



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I spent about 5 weeks in Florida and then headed north to Keeneland Racetrack in Lexington, Kentucky. It was a bit of a shock going from 30c to -2c. I was really starting to feel like I was back in the British winter. A week and a half later it was beautiful weather and the sun was splitting the sky. The Spring Meet at Keeneland ran for 16 days from the 8th to the 29th of April. Wesley had runners almost every day of the meet. From 12 2yo runners he had 5 winners and 5 seconds, winning \$199,970 in prize money. A winning percentage of 42% and a top 3 percentage of 83%.



I would ride about 8 – 10 horses most mornings. On the days that we worked horses I would help get the jocks legged up and then head to the grandstand to watch the work with Wesley. It was great to spend this time with him one on one, getting to hear his insight into how he felt the horses had performed and what the plan would be with them.

It was extremely busy at Keeneland as there were so many horses to exercise and so much racing but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I went racing most days and met all of Wesley's owners and some really fantastic industry contacts.

I met some truly amazing people while I was at Keeneland who really looked after me and really made my time there very special. Going to The Kentucky Derby was definitely one of the highlights.

Before my return to the UK, Wesley asked me if I would help him with the horses that he was sending over for Royal Ascot. Of course my answer was yes.

I had a few weeks at home and then I headed to Manton to meet the horses on their arrival from the states. Also arriving was Wesley's longtime friend and Assistant Blake Heap. Blake runs things for Wesley in California. There were already three fillies at Manton which included Create A Dream, who was 4th in The Albany. They arrived in March and were being looked after by Joe Herbert. We had about two weeks of training at Manton before we shipped in to Ascot. We had one or more runners every day. It was fantastic to be part of it and getting to exercise the horses on the track at Ascot in the mornings was a great feeling.



The ground at Royal Ascot was not great for the horses as they prefer it much faster. We had no success on the first day but the best was yet to come on Wednesday with Lady Aurelia winning the Queen Mary. I had been riding the filly since she landed in the UK and as I said previously it was great to be part of the team behind the fillies' success.

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After Ascot we headed back to Manton. Blake and the horses who shipped in for Ascot headed home and we were left with the original three fillies. I rode and trained the fillies for the next few weeks. It was a great feeling knowing that Wesley trusted me to look after his horses. We entered one of the fillies, Oh So Terrible at Newbury for the 30th of June but there was a lot of heavy rain and the ground was soft so she was a non-runner. She was then reentered for Newmarket on the 7th of July.

Everything was looking good. The ground was in our favour and the filly was in good form. Alas, it wasn't to be. The filly was spooked at the start by one of the drones. Frankie fell off and the filly went for a lovely backwards tour of The Town Plate course. I found her in The National Stud winding up the teaser. She was none the worse for wear and didn't have a scratch on her. I was slightly apprehensive to call and break the news to Wesley. He laughed and told me "these things happen". I definitely experienced some highs and lows of racing in a short few weeks. The filly returned to the states the week after.

I am heading off to Saratoga in August to experience a bit more of America. I can't wait.

Wesley has an absolutely incredible team of people behind him. They are seriously hard working and incredibly loyal. Most of them have been with him for over ten years. His guys who do all the traveling have been with him from the start. They were all so welcoming to me. And put up with the fact that my Spanish was non-existent.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the NTF and BHEST for awarding me the scholarship. I had an incredible experience that would not have been possible without the grant that I received from them. I have increased my knowledge and skill set and feel that I have brought back different training methods and techniques that I will be able to use when I begin my own training career.

Rachel Rodman
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