

Polishing Sapphire's sparkle

A conversation with horse groom Jenny Wood

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Sapphire is U.S. show jumper [McLain Ward](#)'s horse, and together, they won gold in Athens. Four years later, they will return to the Olympic stage. But it is 25-year-old Jenny Wood, Sapphire's groom, who spends the most time with the elite mare. Wood came from Great Britain to work for Ward at his farm in Brewster, New York just after the 2004 Games, and has spent six days a week with Sapphire ever since. She spoke with NBCOlympics.com about her responsibilities as a groom and her relationship with one of the most elite horses in the world.

When you arrived in New York in the fall of 2004, what were your first impressions of the team?

Amazing. I mean, I have to say I had no idea what I was coming into. I thought I knew a lot before I came here, but it's just like a whole different ballgame. It's like starting from new, like learning everything over, especially with horses like Sapphire. Sometimes it's a lot of pressure to work at that standard. It was kind of overwhelming at the start, but once I started taking care of Sapphire and got into a routine, it's just been great.

What was it like when you first started at Castle Hill Farm?

Well, I started about a month after the 2004 Games. I have to say, and this sounds really stupid, but I didn't really know that Sapphire was Sapphire when I first came. She was on her vacation; she went in the field everyday and I was like, 'wow, who's this?' They told me she was Sapphire and I thought she looked so different! She looked happy and relaxed.

Was it hard getting to know Sapphire?

When I first started taking care of her I was like, 'Oh my God, this is Sapphire, oh my God.' And she knew that was exactly how I was feeling so she had the attitude of "I can do whatever I want." She really is so smart. But after I took care of her in Florida that winter we were happy with each other.

What is your relationship like now?

Good. She's not a very cuddly horse, but she likes her one person. If she doesn't know you, she'll walk all over you. She's a bit of a diva; she knows how important she is. At the same time you've got to respect her. She's a big horse, a chestnut mare, so you've got to know her boundaries.

If Sapphire were a person, who would she be?

I would say someone like JLo. And she deserves to be. She can do whatever she wants.

What about you? Did you always envision yourself in this role?

I always knew it would be something equestrian. I obviously don't want to be a groom forever. But to be a groom, I think I'm in the best yard I can be in. The opportunities - we get to ride, Barney (McLain's father) is an amazing instructor, he really encourages us to ride a lot. I get to travel a lot and the horses we take care of are some of the best in the world. As far as grooms go, there isn't a better place to be.

So tell me about your responsibilities as a groom.

We always feed at 7:30 am and then the horses are sort of left to their own devices for a little while. Sapphire will go on the treadmill normally in the morning for a half hour and then go back to a stall. She'll get ridden for probably 45 min every day on the flat. She's got to be washed and groomed and always looking beautiful in case we go anywhere, so I keep her all trimmed up, looking her best. It is important as well that after she has had a long season, we let her hair grow, she gets whiskers, she goes in the field - she gets to be a real horse, which I think is sometimes more important than having her look beautiful at the horse show.

How often does Sapphire jump?

Not very often. She doesn't jump much at all.

That's surprising.

Well Barney, McLain, Erica and Lee - they're a team and they all have input as to what she should work on, and what they should leave alone completely. Obviously she will jump occasionally at home to make sure there are no little problems. But she's 13 now and she's seen and done so much that she's a fairly wise woman. She knows her stuff.

What is the most gratifying part of your job?

The bigger the competition the more pressure: You really want everything to go right and a lot of the time it doesn't, but you've just got to keep going and do the best you can. It's really gratifying when it all pays off in the end. Even if you don't win, if they hit a rail or whatever, they'll jump their heart out. And if McLain's happy then you know the horse did well. Then on the smaller scale, we've got some really, really nice young horses here at the minute and when you seem them go in, they might make mistakes, but they might be less spooky or easier to ride and you think, 'Oh wow they're getting so much better.' We all have our own group of horses we take care of, so if it's one of the ones I've been working with and it gets better, it's really gratifying.

What do you think the next step will be for you?

It depends. When you're somewhere like this, it's easy to stay. In other barns I think a groom is mostly just a groom: You take care of a horse, you groom it, you take it to the show, whereas here all of us pretty much can do a bit of everything. Most of us can ride. I drive the horses, we fly with them, we take them to shows. A lot of the veterinary work I can do, with the