

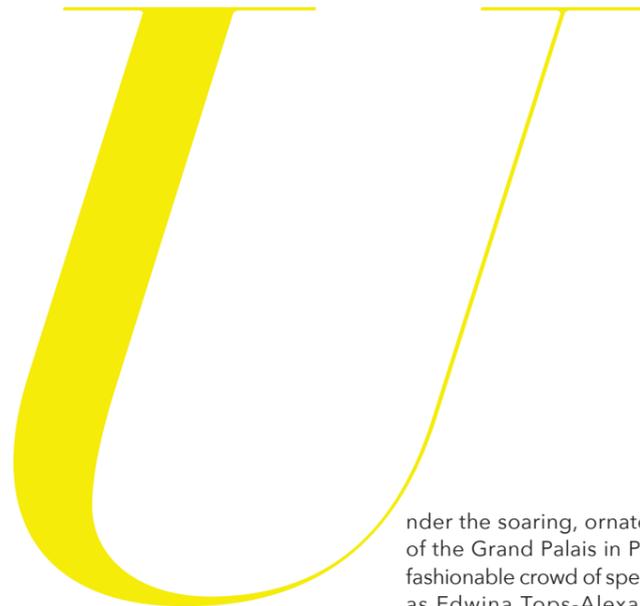


THE BEST of BOTH WORLDS

Edwina Tops-Alexander

Words by Caroline Culbertson | Photography by Pooya Nabei

*For the queen of show jumping,
becoming a mother doesn't
detract from her identity as a
top athlete – it completes it.*



Under the soaring, ornate glass ceiling of the Grand Palais in Paris, France, a fashionable crowd of spectators hushes as Edwina Tops-Alexander and her sleek bay mare dig into a razor-sharp turn. Horse and rider square up to a tall, airy vertical – the final fence of the jump-off at the 2017 Grand Prix Hermès. California, Edwina's seasoned five-star partner, raises her head to judge the height of the fence, and the pair surges off the ground, taking flight.

It's been a mind-bender of a course, with twists and turns like a shark's path through water. Many a tired horse and gloomy rider have already sauntered out of the arena, defeated.

So when Edwina and California polish off their clear round, the crowd cries out with joy. The Australian rider and her obedient mare pay no mind, marching out of the arena, coolly. With another rider left to go, Edwina is poker-faced as she exits the arena, not knowing if the win will be hers. >





Minutes later the standings are decided and Edwina reenters, valiant. She's not normally not one to get too carried away or make a big spectacle of herself, and the sight of her leading a victory gallop is not an unfamiliar one. Let's get one thing out of the way: this woman has won enough grands prix in her life to call it commonplace. But in the midst of the whirlwind ceremony of ribbons and coolers and trophies and anthems, there's a rare moment of emotion in her eyes. Her face goes cloudy with sentiment.

She knew what the world didn't know: she was 19 weeks pregnant, and this would be her last competition for a while.

"It wasn't only the fact that I was pregnant, but [the Grand Prix Hermès] was one of the toughest Grands Prix that I have ever jumped, and it was my last competition before the break," says Edwina, recalling that ceremony. "I finished on an amazing moment in my career and then to go on and have a baby - it was just an incredible moment in my life."

Today, in the sun of St. Tropez, those same hazel eyes sparkle with excitement of a different kind. She scoops up Chloë, barely a year old, and smiles as she pulls her rosy-cheeked daughter close to her chest.

"Jan thinks I'm too soft with her," she chuckles.

It's almost otherworldly to see this tender side of Edwina, who has been a fierce competitor in show jumping for decades. Edwina herself was born in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia, to parents who weren't involved in horses in any way. Persistent to ride from the age of eight onward, she caught rides on a variety of horses and eventually made it to the Australian Young Rider Championships in 1995, where she won. In 1998, she moved to Europe and rode for Ludo Philippaerts for three years before starting her own business.

She's now been to the Olympics three times and holds the record for most total prize money earned on the Global Champions Tour. The tour, which was founded in 2006, was the brainchild of her husband, Dutch Olympic gold medalist Jan Tops. Jan saw the opportunity to create a top-level global show jumping circuit that would bring the sport to spectacular and unique destinations, as well as introduce a team and playoffs concept that mirrors other global team sports. Together, the Monaco based pair owns and operates Tops International Arena in Valkenswaard, The Netherlands, and this year launched the Stal Tops Australian Young Rider Series to promote the sport of show jumping in Australia.

Since both Edwina and Jan are in the public eye, the news of her pregnancy - announced on social media only a couple of weeks after Edwina

scored the Grand Prix Hermès - reverberated around the equestrian sport world. The power couple of show jumping would be parents.

The collective mind flashed ahead: what would it mean for Edwina, a fixture at the top of the global leaderboard? How would it affect her as a businesswoman and change-maker for equestrian sports?

In short, would she return post-baby to her former glory?

"Everyone has the right to make their choice of how they decide to live. I have just as much respect for women who stop their careers as I do for those who continue [after having a child]."

It's a decision that many female high-performing equestrians have struggled with before her: Mary King (who won gold at the European Championships while secretly five-and-a-half months along), Georgina Bloomberg, and Laura Tomlinson to name a few. "I think everyone has the right to choose and you have to know your body and horses very well to make this decision. No one has the right to interfere with your personal decisions."

Edwina was back in the saddle schooling her horses only four weeks after the birth of her daughter, a fact that she attributes to her active lifestyle before and during pregnancy.

"I think because I stayed very fit throughout the pregnancy this helped me come back faster than I expected. I also did a lot of walking [starting] two weeks after the birth and then I started riding another two weeks later. At seven weeks [post-partum] I went to my first show which was the Lausanne CSI5*. I jumped the Grand Prix and had one rail down. So,

it didn't take me long to get back into the swing of things, but I really believe that this was due to the fact that I kept very busy and fit throughout the whole pregnancy."

In a perfect world, she says she would have taken another month off after Chloë's birth to recuperate, but as she watched her hard-earned FEI ranking drop with each passing day, the pressure to jump back in built up. The Longines FEI Ranking's policy for maternity leave states, "During the period which an Athlete has officially ceased to compete due to pregnancy or a medical condition, he/she will retain 50% of the Longines Rankings points earned from the corresponding month of the preceding year until he/she recommences competing internationally." Edwina believes it would be a positive step in the right direction if this particular policy were to be more closely examined.

When she won the Longines GCT Grand Prix of Miami Beach in April aboard California, she proved that her maternity break couldn't put a dent in the decades of skill she'd honed in her sport. In fact, it made her sharper.

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“I think it was the best thing for me. The break from riding did me a world of good. I’ve been competing at the top level for over ten years with an average of forty-five shows a year, so it’s a lot of traveling and stress. I kept very active and busy [during the break], and I really didn’t miss my riding at all. It felt like a break that I needed mentally.”

As long as Edwina was at the top of the sport, the ‘right time’ to have a baby was never going to be easy nor obvious. This is a struggle, she laments, that women face regardless of their line of work. But when she became pregnant at 42, she says she felt “really ready”.

“I feel that there are many women who miss out on having a family because of their career. I was always wanting to have a baby, but I’ve had so many fantastic horses in my career it was just hard for me to stop [competing]. Eventually, I became pregnant, which has been one of the best times of my life,” she says, smiling. “My only regret was that I didn’t have Chloé earlier.”

Chloé Cornelia Jennifer Tops, who was born in Monaco, where Edwina resides, has already had a wealth of international travel with her jet-setting parents. And today, she’s already experiencing her first photo-shoot with mom, fresh off Edwina’s weekend at LGCT St. Tropez. Wisps of Chloé’s dirty blonde hair, almost exactly the color of her mother’s, are pinned back with a light blue bow. Edwina props the infant on her hip, turning towards a window. Chloé’s light blue eyes open wide as she catches sight of something outside, transfixed. Edwina exhales, seeming at ease.

“She loves to watch the horses and pat them,” says Edwina, looking down at Chloé, bouncing the baby further up onto her hip. “She knows what she wants and is very strong-willed, but she has a very tender side to her. I think she knows exactly how to read people.”

Work ethic and independence are important to instill in Chloé as she gets older, Edwina explains. This was an important lesson that both Edwina and Jan were taught by their own parents from an early age.

“Environment is essential and [people] who’ve had to work hard are the ones that have the most success. That’s how both [Jan and I] were

brought up. Both our parents were very generous and supportive, and my parents gave me every opportunity, but they also made me work for it which has been the best way to understand life.”

She and Jan plan to instill the same lessons of resilience and strength in Chloé that Edwina embodies in her career, in her parenting, and in her daily life.

“I was given a lot of freedom but was also taught to respect people and learn from others. We want to show her that hard work goes a lot further than anything else. It’s very important to Jan and I that she has both feet on the ground and that she doesn’t get everything given to her without earning it.”

With the birth of Chloé, Edwina was born into motherhood, and the title of Mom was added to her lengthy list of accolades - as it is for so many multi-faceted women who have children in the midst of careers, goals, dreams, and priorities. It can become an identity crisis for women who feel pressured to immediately assume the full identity of a mother (to such extent that it has been the subject of psychological studies). For many women, the identity shift is challenging - they’ve focused on building a career, relationships, etc. for much longer than they’ve been a mother, and losing a sense of self is a common grievance.

But for Edwina, who says she’d wanted to become a mother for years, having Chloé didn’t take away her identity - it completed it.

“My life has changed, but only for the better. I feel a lot more at ease and relaxed, which enables me to focus both on my family and my career.”

Now that she’s firmly back in the saddle with a slightly larger cheering section, Edwina is rejuvenated and refocused.

“My goals are to enjoy the sport as much as possible, win the Global Champions Tour final again, and build up some of the younger horses for [the future].”

Having a child has not eclipsed the Queen of Show Jumping’s career. With Chloé by her side, she’s fortified.











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● **What's Edwina reading,
buying, watching and craving?**
NE insider gives you exclusive
access to Edwina and other top
riders around the globe.

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