

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Jessica and Richmond DeHart - The People's Choice Reserve Trainers Of The Year
Kiss My Cuervo - The People's Choice Horse Of The Year
The People's Choice Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding Of The Year

By Erica Rae Faulkner

The year 2016 saw the realization of a dream come true for Jessica and Richmond DeHart. Assistant trainers at Moctezuma Stables in Woodstock Illinois, their teamwork and talent came through loud and clear at the World's Championship Horse Show this past year. The picture of Jessica DeHart (at the time, Moctezuma) crying tears of joy aboard her famed friend Kiss My Cuervo, as they were called out the champions of both the Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding qualifier and the Ladies Five-Gaited Grand Championship, will be etched in the minds of many for years to come. The impression these two made amongst the show horse community was a big one. As the votes were tallied at the end of the year for the Horse World's People's Choice winners, Jessica and Richmond DeHart earned the reserve vote for trainer of the year, while Kiss My Cuervo, also known as Tito, won The People's Choice Horse Of The Year as well as The People's Choice Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding Horse Of The Year.

If you were to only look at their age, you might assume that Jessica and Richmond were simply young trainers in their late twenties who were learning the ropes of the industry. And although it has only been a few years that this team has been working together on the professional front, their talents and expertise far outnumbers their years in age. Both grew up in the show horse industry, each having parents that had a long-standing history in the show horse community. Nealia McCracken and Mayo Moctezuma, the parents of Jessica, have long been involved with Saddlebreds, and passed on the passion for horses to their daughter. Richmond was born to Wyatt and Dawn DeHart, however, his path was not always so focused on horses. "I rode when I was a little kid," says Richmond, "But, I got thrown off a pony when I was just four years old." Although not an uncommon experience for horseback riders, it temporarily steered Richmond in a direction that did not include horses. "I just remember that I really did not want anything to do with horses for a while after that." It was not until his young teenage years that Richmond started riding again. His father soon recognized the raw talent that Richmond had, and started to put him on top of the show horses.

Throughout his teenage and adult years, Richmond showed such noted horses as



An emotional Jessica DeHart hugs Richmond DeHart after her world's championship win aboard this year's People's Choice Horse Of The Year, Kiss My Cuervo.

First Shot, Heirs Bells and Whistles, Rebel Rooster, Turquoise, Highland Tango, Nubiana, Callaway's When The Stars Go Blue, Dos Equis, among others. Hackney Ponies were also a part of Richmond's early years, as he had many victory passes with Boxford Courageous Spirit, Seamair's Nobility and Meet Joe Black, to name a few. A smart young man with a drive unlike any other, Richmond finished high school a semester early and went off to work horses for some of the most respected trainers in the industry. Tre' Lee, Peter Palmer, and Brian Chappell are just some of the trainers who influenced Richmond and his way with horses.

Jessica DeHart was born and raised in Greenwood, Illinois, and at age ten she moved to Blairstown, New Jersey. Her mother Nealia McCracken runs the well respected and successful North Wind Stables, and as Jessica says, "growing up around the barn, I would ride anything and everything I could." Not only did she

want to ride any horse that came her way, often she had to. "We did not have a lot of money. I couldn't just go out and buy expensive horses," she says. "I am blessed that I have always been able to be around horses. However, my horses were often the ones that had challenges that no one else was willing to deal with."

It was because of these challenging horses that Jessica is the rider she is today. "I learned to appreciate what I had, and I also learned to work with every horse to the best of my ability. There is not just one type of horse for me. I can do my best to adapt to whatever comes my way." Outside of the show ring, she also volunteered as many hours as she could to her mother's Saddlebred Rescue program. "I helped break and evaluate over 200 horses that came through that program," says Jessica. Saddlebred Rescue is still thriving today and helping hundreds of Saddlebreds find useful loving homes.



Jessica and Richmond DeHart are surrounded by family and friends at their wedding on December 9th, 2016.

Finding much success in New England in the performance and equitation divisions, eventually Jessica felt she simply needed a change, and in 2010 she left the Northeast to work for her father Mayo at Moctezuma Stables. This move also enabled Jessica and Richmond to get to know one another better as they frequently attended the same shows on the same circuit. "I actually remember having a crush on Richmond when I was just ten years old!" exclaims Jessica. "As I got older, I saw him at more shows. And I remember one time I saw him up on a ladder fixing curtains at a horse show, and for some reason I just knew he was the one for me."

Richmond and Jessica went on a couple of dates, however something happened that made them go their separate ways for a couple of years. As Jessica says, "I actually avoided him for a while! I went from having a crush on him, to not wanting much to do with him." However, as fate would have it, the two would meet again at the American Royal some years down the road, and "everything just clicked," said Jessica. They married this past December, and according to Jessica, nothing has changed between them besides her last name.

With help from Mayo and the rest of the team at Moctezuma Stables, these two have put good horse after good horse into the show ring over the past couple of years. The first horse that really helped to put them on the map was the bay gaited horse, The Hathaway Man. "He was a fresh face," Richmond says about the big moving

gelding. The first time this horse hit the show ring he left the ring a winner, coming away with the blue from the Junior Five-Gaited class at Midwest Charity in 2014. From there they went on to win at ASAW Summerfun, and Mid-America Mane Event. This team also earned good ribbons at Louisville that year. "I owe a lot of that to Jessica. She really did a great job at promoting me and that horse. That is one reason we are so good together. She is great at the handling the publicity, me, I still have a flip phone. What does that tell you!"

Jessica and Richmond both comment on how their training operation is unique, as each of them bring a different set of skills to work every day. "Jessica is great with the people," comments Richmond. "She is excellent at critiquing people and helping people become better riders. That is something that I am not as strong with." He may not excel at riding instruction, but Richmond for sure has the ability and patience to work with the young horses. "At the farm, we all try to do what we are best at," says Richmond, "the young horses are my favorite. I always enjoy watching them grow and change month to month." A young horse that has heart is what Richmond looks for when he is selecting a young prospect. The prospect that Lisa Balcerak entrusted them with, had just that, the heart of a champion.

Lisa Balcerak is a fresh face on the horse show scene. Always wanting to own a horse when she was younger, she simply never had the opportunity until her adult years. In 2000 she started taking lessons at Arabian Knights Stables in Chicago, Illinois. Eventually Lisa was exposed to the American Saddlebred, and she says, "I just knew this was the breed I wanted. They are just so beautiful and graceful." Lisa's husband, Rick, also new to horses, encouraged her to pursue her dreams of owning a horse, and together they set out on an incredible journey. Most Saddlebred owners dream of someday owning a world's champion contender, with winning a blue ribbon on the green shavings being icing on the cake. Not only did Lisa get to watch her horse Kiss My Cuervo fulfill this dream for her, she also got to experience a feeling that many will never know; what it is like to breed and raise a world's champion.

"I was in complete disbelief," says Lisa, in regards to Tito's qualifying win at Louisville. "It was a dream come true!" A dream come true for her, Richmond and Jessica, as well as Mayo and the entire Moctezuma Stables team. This was Jessica's first personal World's Championship win as well. "Going into Saturday night, I was still so much in shock from earlier in the



Jessica DeHart and Kiss My Cuervo make their victory pass at Louisville in the Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding class. They went on to win the championship later in the week. Shiflet photo by Sandra



Kiss My Cuervo had the look of a champion from the day he was born.

week that I'm not even sure what I expected. The whole experience was just so surreal." When Saturday night came, one thing was for certain, "I was not going to cry!" Lisa, having cried tears of joy during Tito's qualifying victory pass, felt that her cry was "ugly" and vowed not to expose that side of her again. However, on Saturday night, there was no holding back the happy that was going to stream down her face. "When the announcer said, it was unanimous, I was unsure if they won it. I was proud of their class, but that division is competitive and full of many talented horses and riders. I just was not sure that if they won they were going to do it in unanimous fashion." But, it was unanimous, and it was Tito and Jessica who were crowned the World's Champion of Champions for 2016.

Lisa began her career with horses with the mare Miss Cuervo, who was purchased from Brian Chappell for Lisa to ride. Lisa's horsemanship skills were improving with each ride aboard the mare, however she knew that she was not riding Miss Cuervo to her full potential. "I just couldn't ride her to her ability at the time. She was so good with me; she took care of me." It was the kind heart of this sweet mare that spurred Lisa to venture into the breeding side of the industry. "This mare had such a good temperament. It made me realize that what I wanted to do was breed and pass on that heart and caring mindset." With the full support of her husband and everyone at Moctezuma Stables, Lisa bred Miss Cuervo to Callaway's Northern Kiss, and Kiss My Cuervo was born.

"Tito just has to be the center of attention," Lisa points out, "he was always chasing my other horses at home, anything to get attention." Jessica recalls what Tito was like as a young colt. "He has been very special from the beginning. Even looking at his baby photos, you can see it. It's like he knows when people are looking at him, and is thrilled to pose for the camera." Lisa had Tito in her backyard when he was a baby, she and her husband learning all they could on their own. Eventually, Lisa turned Tito over to Moctezuma Stables. "I always have had my horses at Moctezuma Stables," said Lisa. "Jessica was the first one to ride Tito. And they hit it off right away."

Tito was placed in training full time when he was a three-year-old. "He always seemed to really understand what we were looking for," said Jessica. "He is very smart." Their first show together was

in the park pleasure division. "It was 2012 at the Madison Classic Horse Show," Jessica recalls, "I remember when we went to reverse, we cut through the middle of the ring and he just turned into a different horse. I knew right then that he was going to be a great one."

They went on to win six classes that year, and then the decision was made to give it a go and see if the game gelding would take to racking. Richmond took over the reins for 2013, and put Tito through the paces learning how to slow-gait and rack. They made many good showings in 2013, and once again Jessica was back in the irons for the 2014 season. "We didn't win everything we went in, and that was ok. I knew it was just a matter of time before he really hit his stride," said Jessica. Well, it didn't take long. In 2015, Tito garnered a following of supporters as he amped up for the World's Championship Horse Show that year. He earned an impressive seventh place out of a huge class of 14 top horses. But he just was not at the top of his game quite yet. With a little more time at home fine-tuning his performances, Jessica was ready to rock with him for 2016.

"I felt there were so many signs at the start of the year that were giving me hope that this may be the year for something extraordinary," said Jessica. "I really believe in faith, and I have so much faith in Tito. He is the whole reason we won. All the credit goes to him." And what's to come for this great horse? "Another dream of mine would be for me to show him," says Lisa. With Kiss My Cuervo as one of your People's Choice winners, Lisa says "Thank you to all those who voted and to all those who cheer for us from the rail! Tito loves that! And a huge thank you to Mayo Moctezuma, Jessica and Richmond DeHart, and all those who have been involved in his care! Also, I would like to thank Joe and Bette Russell, for all their help and support no matter the time of day or night. They were there in the middle of night to help with Tito's birth!" Jessica and Richmond are looking forward to a bright future with Moctezuma Stables, and truly are humbled by the support of their peers in naming them the reserve champions for The People's Choice Trainers Of The Year.



Richmond DeHart and Kiss My Cuervo took home the blue from the Junior Five Gaited class at Mane Event in 2013.