Bubble Bath

People's Choice Champion Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 13 and Under

By Jenny Grey

Bubble Bath and Grace McDonell have come a long way in a very short time. In recognition of their accomplishments, Bubble Bath has been named the 2014 People's Choice Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 13 and Under Champion. To say that Grace was thrilled to have received this award is a major understatement. Her reaction is a testament to how much she loves this horse and how much they accomplished during the 2014 show season. They have come together in a spectacular fashion, forging a very special bond that will launch them successfully into the future.

Grace McDonell has enjoyed a highly successful show career since 2008, riding many outstanding horses including CH Keeper of the Stars who won, among other top awards, Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited Show Pleasure 13 and Under at Lexington Junior League and the Junior Exhibitor Division 1 Three-Gaited Reserve World's Championship in 2012. Gentle and mannerly, he is the perfect 13 and under horse. The McDonell family knew Grace would need a more challenging mount, along with a trainer who would take her to the next level in order to make a successful transition to the 14-17 age group. Grace's mother, Noel, looked at several different options, and in doing so became impressed with not only show results, but also with the camaraderie that existed among the students at High Caliber Farm. Noel began to follow Mary Orr's blog and became even more convinced that High Caliber would be the right solution.

Grace had shown great commitment and discipline, not only to her riding, but to school and community. With the Orrs' guidance, she will be participating in the Ribbons of Service program, as she currently supports the Metropolitan Ministries in Tampa, an organization devoted to ending hunger and homelessness in the community. Grace proved to her parents that she had the dedication and talent to take the next step. The family began traveling from Florida to North Carolina so that Grace could ride with Mary and Evan Orr at High Caliber.

The McDonells looked for a new mount both in the barn and further afield. They had a strong sense that Bubble Bath, who was already at High Caliber, was 'the one' so they purchased him in late spring of 2014 from Laura Plant. Noel McDonell credits Mary Orr with having a sixth sense about what will work when selecting a horse for a rider. "She can look into the future with an uncanny foresight; almost a crystal ball. She has vision and great timing."

"Grace came to us with a strong set of goals," said Mary Orr, who could see that Grace and Bubbles were a good match the first time she rode him. "I knew that a challenging horse like Bubbles would teach her more and take her further. Grace would learn to believe 'if I can do this, I can do anything' Grace is game, determined and focused. She is falling in love with the process. When that happens, the end result is always good. I am really enjoying being part of her career and helping her realize her dreams."

Grace McDonell's favorite memory of the 2014 show season was of winning a breakthrough championship at Lexington Junior League in Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited 13 and Under with her new horse, Bubble Bath. "Bubbles and I just clicked", said Grace. "I was so excited!" photo courtesy of Marion Bryan

Grace quickly developed a relationship with Mary and Evan, building an essential level of trust that would be key to riding a horse like Bubble Bath. It was a great advantage that his trainers knew Bubbles so well. They were the best people to help Grace understand how to work with him in a process they call 'Bubbleology!' "He doesn't speak like any other horse", said Noel. "He is so game and powerful."

Grace and Bubble Bath were successful the first time out at Asheville last year, winning the Amateur/Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited Stake. However, it was not until the Lexington Junior League show last year that Grace felt they had their first, true breakthrough. One can still hear the excitement in her voice when she describes that experience. She admits to being a little nervous before the championship after placing reserve in the qualifying class against very tough competition.

Grace McDonell had plenty to celebrate with her parents, Mark and Noel McDonell, and trainers, Mary and Evan Orr, after she and Bubble Bath won the 2014 Junior Exhibitor 13 and Under Three-Gaited Reserve World's Champion of Champions title at Louisville.

The level of trust that had grown between Mary Orr and Grace was crucial to what happened next. Mary pulled Grace over for a pep talk during the warm up period then sent her to the corner of the track saying, "You need to look at me or I will have to jump over the rail!" It was all Grace needed to hear. Everything came together in a super performance. "Bubbles and I just clicked," Grace remembered. "Mary gave me a 'thumbs up' from the rail. I was so excited!" They won the championship but gained so much more, taking a huge stride towards forging a partnership that would carry them into the future. This ride was Grace's favorite memory of the 2014 show season and one of Noel's favorite moments. Mary and Grace were hugging after the class and Noel was feeling so proud. "Those moments are so rare and precious. It's not about the ribbon, it's about the ride. Grace gained the gift of confidence." "That was where I belonged," Grace observed. "I had some trepidation but now I knew that Mary's vision was right. I trusted Bubbles way more. He was becoming a partner."

Another big breakthrough happened at Louisville last year. Bubbles, who was well-known for being aloof and sometimes even grouchy when he was not working, started coming to the front of his stall when he saw Grace. She went in and put her arms around him; then Bubbles put his head down and wrapped himself around her. It was another of those special moments to be treasured and the beginning of not just a working relationship but also an affectionate bond with a horse that did not usually show affection. Bubble Bath and Grace achieved the proverbial 'icing on the cake' when they were called as the 2014 Junior Exhibitor 13 and Under Reserve World's Champions at the Kentucky State Fair.

Grace knows there is a lot of work ahead as she moves into the 14-17 division this year. She has worked with Mary Orr to establish new goals for herself and Bubble Bath. One objective is to gain the independence and confidence to know what she and her horse need to do in order to be successful. Bubble Bath has all the right qualities to take her to the top. "In 14 through 17 I can go all out", Grace declared. "I can really let him go and step up. He loves it and he loves to show off!"

Grace is looking forward to a fresh set of challenges with Bubble Bath this year. She will also be showing her new five-gaited horse, I'm Wonderfully Wicked. She has the talent, intelligence and discipline needed to succeed in a highly competitive environment. Her career with Bubble Bath has just begun but the right ingredients are in place to take this pair to the top – the right rider, the right trainers, supportive parents and the right horse. We wish Grace and Bubble Bath a wonderful 2015 show season!