

# MR. METALLICA

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE  
*Overall Hackney Pony Of The Year*

BY SARA PIZZUTO

The call was made for the lineup on Wednesday evening at the 2022 World's Championship Horse Show following the performances in the Hackney Pony Stallion/Gelding Stake. Melissa Wahl ran into the hallowed grounds of Freedom Hall to meet Mr. Metallica and husband Mark and await the results of this qualifier.

"I will never forget when Mark pulled into the lineup after that class," Melissa said. "Mark asked, 'How do you think we did?' and I said, 'Let me put it this way, I think you did great and regardless of how the cards turned out, he will still be the pony that I want to take home.' When they announced his number, my knees gave out. There was nothing else I could do besides give him a hug. We said, 'Buddy you did that.' The little, tiny pony that was beautiful, that was the size of a Shetland, that went through all of this did it."

Mr. Metallica was crowned the Hackney Pony Stallion/Gelding World's Champion that night—a tremendous honor for a pony that was on the cusp of death three times in his life. He earned the approval of the judges and spectators alike in Louisville and now your vote as the People's Choice Overall Hackney Pony Of The Year.

Horse trainers Mark and Melissa Wahl first noticed Mr. Metallica as a yearling. The husband and wife duo had successfully trained Morgan Horses for two decades, culminating with Melissa's win in the 2003 Park Saddle World Championship aboard famed Morgan, Centerpiece. After a brief hiatus, they returned to the show ring with Hackney Ponies, and were immediately enamored by the X-Tremely Impressive sired, Mr. Metallica. Mark continuously talked about his love for the pony and was urged by his wife to finally add Mr. Metallica to their show string at their Michigan based Shelby Creek Farm. However,

Mark was hesitant about the pony's size and didn't think he would grow big enough to ever show.

"As a yearling he was the size of a Shetland," Mark said. "I was back and forth and finally they stood him up during his yearling year and I went 'Oh my word.' He was one of the more beautiful Hackneys I have ever seen stand up. He just is a handsome pony. His conformation was outstanding, so we bought him as a late yearling. We called him 'Bean' because he was so small when we got him and our daughter said, 'He is small and he's the color of a coffee bean.'"

"Bean" was brought into the training barn in September of his two-year-old year to begin working. He quickly developed a strong bond with Melissa, as she was the one that started to break him. The Wahls had high hopes for their new entry, until a freak accident marked the pony's first setback. Melissa was aboard an older Morgan Horse that she was preparing for her daughter to ride. She rode past Mr. Metallica who was standing on crossties in his stall. The pony reared up, causing the crosstie chain to wrap around his leg, which got caught.

"Mark screamed and ended up cutting him down, but he wouldn't stand on his leg, Melissa said. "We had the vet out and he said that his leg was too swollen and that we wouldn't be able to tell if it was broken until the swelling went down. The next day, we had gotten the swelling down enough to x-ray and they had said that though his leg was not broken, that we wouldn't know for a period of 5-6 months if he was going to be athletically sound."

Mr. Metallica was placed on stall rest for three months, followed by time hand walking and eventually

jogging. Once he got to the six-month mark of his recovery, the pony was allowed to begin a light training regime in order to determine whether or not he could go to the show ring. However, he wasn't yet broke to a jog cart, forcing Mark and Melissa to get creative.

"We ponied him on a gator," Mark said. "First it was one round, and then he got up to 20 minutes and then a half hour in the indoor arena."

Once sound, Mr. Metallica was given the green light to show—a miraculous recovery for the pony, given the severity of his injury. Mark and Melissa Wahl brought him to one horse show in 2019, simply to allow the then three-year-old to adjust to the show ring environment. He returned home to Shelby Creek Farm and suddenly became gravely ill—marking yet another struggle in the young pony's life.

"He was ready to die, and we hauled him to the vet clinic," Mark said. "We couldn't find out what was wrong with him. His temperature was 104 degrees and he refused to drink. It was terrible. He was in their isolation unit when he got diagnosed and tested with coronavirus before we even knew it was a thing."

Mr. Metallica battled coronavirus a year before the disease would sweep across the world in an unprecedented pandemic. Bean showcased his strength and heart once again by overcoming the illness and recovering. He had been home from the vet clinic for a

Mark and Melissa Wahl are the owners and trainers of this popular pony. They are credited not only with the pony's show ring success, but also with their efforts in his recovery.

Mr. Metallica showcased his heart and resilience, overcoming multiple setbacks en route to being named the People's Choice Hackney Pony Of The Year.







Mark Wahl drove the pony, nicknamed "Bean" to be crowned the 2022 Hackney Pony Stallion/Gelding World's Champion en route to the title of the Hackney Pony Reserve World's Grand Champion.



Mr. Metallica came back after near career ending injuries and illnesses to garner the roses as the 2020 Junior Harness Pony World's Champion of Champions.

mere 40 days before he made a show ring appearance in Louisville in 2019-placing third in the Three-Year-Old Harness Pony offering.

"Darrel Kolkman was a dear idol of ours as kids and we got reunited with him when we got back into ponies," Mark said. "Metallica was beat only by Heartland ponies that year in Louisville and Darrel called us at Louisville and said, 'Don't give up on that pony. I love that pony. He is going to be really great.' That was really special. We got home and set our sights on the next year."

However, Mr. Metallica faced additional challenges following his return home from Louisville. He became seriously ill yet again-struggling once more to survive. Though it wasn't coronavirus, the young pony refused to drink anything.

"Mark said to me, 'Your pony needs to drink water,'" Melissa explained. "He said, 'We can't keep constantly taking him back to the vet clinic to get him hydrated. He either needs to drink or this isn't going to be a good story.'"

Mark and Melissa Wahl once again were forced to get creative and began pondering different ways to keep the pony hydrated. Mark had remembered hearing of Quarter Horse trainers who gave their horses Gatorade.

"So off to the store I went and bought five jugs of Gatorade and brought it home and put it in a brand new bucket," Melissa said. "I put one bottle of Gatorade in, and he drank it. And so I put another bottle of Gatorade in, and he drank it. And he went through all five. So off to the store we went and bought these giant jugs of Gatorade and all of a sudden, we were going through between 36-45 bottles of Gatorade in one day. Since October of 2019, he still has not drank water. We tried. People think we are crazy. If he has run out of Gatorade, we have had to go to neighboring towns to get some. He only lives on Gatorade."

Mark and Melissa quickly established an Amazon subscription to service Mr. Metallica's continuous need for Gatorade. His three favorite flavors, frost, fruit punch, and orange, arrive at Shelby Creek Farm every two weeks in powder form. The pony continues to be doted on in order to keep him healthy and sound.

"Fruit punch is his absolute favorite, but we can't use it a horse show because his lips turn red because he has a white muzzle," Melissa said. "And his bucket has to be very clean, and it has to be the right mixture. If you put too little of the concoction in there, he won't touch it. It's a crazy thing."

"We pull up to a horse show and people say, 'Hey, did you bring Gatorade,'" Mark joked. "That's what they call him now. People call the pony, Gatorade."

With a proper nutrition and training regime established, Mr. Metallica traveled to Louisville-with

his Gatorade and special water bucket in tow-in 2020 to contend for the roses once again. Melissa drove Bean to his first world's title as the Four-Year-Old Harness Pony World's Champion before he was named the Junior Harness Pony World's Champion of Champions.

The popular pony returned to the show ring again at the 2022 Lexington Junior League with his health in good order. Mark and Melissa Wahl decided that a division change was needed right before Bean was set to show.

"He had grown quite a bit and this year we took him to Lexington Junior League and at that time, we hadn't measured him," Melissa said. "We weren't sure what we were going to do. He had this beautiful long tail that we cut off at Lexington. There he became a cob tail."

With Mark on the lines, Mr. Metallica left Lexington as the Limit Hackney Pony victor. The team set their sights on the stiff competition that would await them on the green shavings later in the season. Melissa was initially apprehensive about her pony showing against the world's best.

"Before the qualifying class, I almost pulled the plug," she said. "There was so much pressure. But Mark said, 'This is your pony. The only people that care about how he does are you and me. This is supposed to be fun.' I just didn't know because I had so much respect for this pony and so much care that I wanted him to come out in good light."

Mr. Metallica proved his resilience and talents on Wednesday evening in Louisville as the pony was crowned the 2022 Hackney Pony Stallion/Gelding World's Champion with Mark on the lines. Melissa headed up her beloved Bean as he earned his well-deserved victory pass on the green shavings.

"Truly it was a dream because to win at Louisville because it is really the epitome of the horse show world especially for the Hackney breed," Melissa said. "We had so much success over a number of years in the Morgans and it's really hard to come back in a different breed when you are not known, and you are putting forth your hard earned money as well to try and reach this goal."

Bean returned to Freedom Hall on Saturday's stake night for the second to last class of the horse show, the prestigious Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship. Mark was once again on the lines, driving the special pony to the title of the Hackney Pony Reserve World's Grand Champion. The announcement of Mr. Metallica's name came with a thunderous applause from spectators in Louisville.

"That was amazing," Melissa said. "The qualifier was amazing for so many reasons and we didn't have as good a go in the finals, but that was ok. But that was a really big final and we really needed to have our presence there because we hadn't before. We both contemplated doing it. Our go wasn't as good, but I was so proud that we did it."

However, what mattered most to the Wahls during that week in August in Louisville was not the accolades and ribbons bestowed upon their pony, but rather the heart and determination he showed in recovery from both injury and illness. The pony that had almost not survived had just succeeded on the breed's biggest stage.

"The reality is that he was on IVs and life support in our vet clinic's isolation unit," Mark said. "They thought he might die of coronavirus before they even knew he had it and then with his leg, we went to bed that night and thought that we were probably going to have to put him down, so twice we thought that he wasn't going to make it."

Mr. Metallica's growing fan base will look forward to the pony's appearance in the show ring yet again in 2023. Melissa explained that Bean adores his people, just as much as they love him.

"He is just a character," she said. "Every time I walk in the barn I say, 'Hey Bean' and he whinnies. He loves people and he is always in your pocket and in your face. He is super social with people."

Mark echoed that statement.

"He has been a real joy to have around and is a comeback kid," he said. "He has a huge motor like the energizer bunny and is always go forward, but he is always kind. Our daughter has sat on him bareback."

Mark and Melissa have also drawn similarities between Bean, their sensational Hackney Pony, and Centerpiece, the former Park Saddle World Champion Morgan Horse.

"They were both hot," Mark said. "Centerpiece also had a few issues. But they were both very personable. They wanted to be treated as an individual. They both had this huge personality. They wanted to please."

The horses and ponies under the Wahl's care have been able to thrive much in part to their dedication as both owners and trainers. They fought alongside Mr. Metallica throughout his struggles and aided in the pony's successful return to the show ring. They provided him with a chance at survival, catered to his specific needs, and even drove to multiple neighboring towns in Louisville when they ran out of his necessary Gatorade. Their efforts coupled with Bean's heart of a champion, strong fight, and will to live have allowed for his story to be one of success, rather than one of loss. Melissa explained that both she and Mark are so humbled by the public's response to Mr. Metallica in the show ring.

"We are just honored to be part of his story," she said. "We are so thankful that so many people love him as much as we do. When he was called off as reserve in Louisville, when you are in that center ring, that echoes a lot. The crowd support was heartwarming. It was like 'Bean you did it.'"