



Mary McClean and CH Mr. Center Stage won their first world's title in the 2012 ladies under two stake. (Photo by Howard Schatzberg)

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER

"All of that neck sitting in my lap, that's what I remember. I've never ridden a horse that gave you that feeling," explained Mary McClean when looking back on what stood out about the four-time Ladies Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions CH Mr. Center Stage, who recently passed away. "He felt powerful but safe. You could ride him and have fun. What you asked for is what you got."

An exceptional headset and a very balanced, four-cornered trot with a world of expression became the trademark for this Fox Grape Farms bred son of Deep Blue and Daphne Dearest. He was bred to be a center stage performer as his sire was by World's Champion Callaway's Blue Norther out of the great Broodmare Hall of Fame matron, World's Champion Yorkshire Pudding. Mr. Center Stage's dam, Daphne Dearest, was a daughter of World's Champion CH Caramac and another great Broodmare Hall of Fame producer, Callaway's Agatha Christie.

Mr. Center Stage was put in the capable hands of Tre' Lee as a late yearling. He slowly developed the athletic youngster and brought him out to win the Junior Three-Gaited Stake at Indy Charity.

"The Vias were raising a bunch of foals and he came in with a group," said Tre' Lee. "He was really beautiful and athletic. He was also a wild son of a buck to break. He was very immature and really couldn't carry what he needed to do for a long period of time. He would be great for about two trips and then couldn't hold it. We tried everything but he was just so slow to put on any weight or muscle. It was amazing the longevity he had after he finally did mature.

"He was always showy. He had a different feel about him, especially the way he would hang his head back in your lap. He had a million dollar look to him."

Shortly after Tre' brought the gelding out at Indy, Don and Phyllis Brookshire became the new owners. This was a brief stint and he was selected by Bob Brison and Theresa Vonderschmitt for B & T Vonderschmitt LLC.

The next year, 2008, he came out with Brison to win the novice class at UPHA Chapter 5 and the Novice Three-Gaited class at Midwest, really lighting up the ring. They would win again at All-American Classic before putting Theresa on him at St. Louis where she won the Amateur Ladies Three-Gaited class.

"We looked at him and both liked him," said Brison regarding Vonderschmitt's purchase of Mr. Center Stage. "He had that look up through his head and neck that said walk-trot horse, the

He Fit His Name CH Mr. Center Stage

look I guess only the really good ones have.

"When we got him home he was neat to be around but he was a little thin skinned, you had to take your time and not be in a rush with anything. He was still a little immature so we let him grow up mentally and physically.

"I brought him to Chapter 5 and he was okay. He backed off a little. Then at Midwest he was really good. He liked that ring. He got his confidence there and I thought it was where he turned the corner."

A string of victory passes in 2009 led Vonderschmitt and "Tre'," as the gelding became known, to the World's Champion Amateur Three-Gaited 15.2 & Under title and a fourth place finish in the amateur championship. The championship was a deep field of walk-trot stars as CH Marching Orders and Barbara Goodman Manilow won it, followed by Liberty's Magic and David Rudder and Misdee Miller with Hillcroft's Claret.

In 2011, Vonderschmitt made another victory pass at the Kentucky Spring Premier before trainer Sarah Byers took over and swept the ladies division at Asheville Lions, won the Three-Gaited Jackpot at Rock Creek and went two for two in the ladies division at Lexington. Other responsibilities were keeping Vonderschmitt from getting to show so Tre' became available for sale. Wanting to keep him in the barn, Byers called longtime client Mary McClean and had dinner with her, asking if she would at least try him even though she hadn't had a three-gaited horse in a decade.

"She begged me to try him," chuckled McClean. "I went the next day and I loved him."

This was just a few weeks from Louisville so there was a lot of work to be done to team McClean with her new contender. Then a strange twist of fate stepped in. With McClean now on the injured reserve list Byers kept her ride and kept her undefeated season alive as she took Tre' to the ladies under two title and the World's Champion of Champions Ladies Three-Gaited roses. CH His Supreme Reflection and Jacqueline Manzo, Callaway's Clemency with Elisabeth Goth, Betsy Thomas aboard Brookhill's Glam Slam and Kelly Lockhart with Liberty's Magic provided the strongest competition to complete the top five. McClean did get to make her debut with a win at the Kentucky Fall Classic a little over a month later.

Mr. Center Stage and McClean found their groove the next season, winning at Kentucky Spring Premier, Rock Creek and Lexington before making the victory pass as the Ladies Three-Gaited 15.2 & Under World's Champion. That was a ride that was memorable for more than the color of the ribbon. Earlier that night she had taken a fall with Zombie Stomp but was determined to show Tre' as she had been sidelined the previous year.

"I guess it was the adrenaline that got me through it," remembered McClean. "I had a broken tail bone and two broken ribs."

Come Saturday night the determined but bruised jockey was again on the sideline as Byers and Tre' won their second consecutive World's Champion of Champions title.

"Despite the rumors, I didn't sabotage Mary [McClean] that first year so I could ride him," chuckled Byers. "I didn't trip her or anything."

"He was the first horse of that caliber that I could call 'my horse.' I was pretty much the only one who rode him. He wasn't a man's horse. He would hardly stand for Rob to get on him and he would stand all day for me. I did get to show Page [My Front Page Lady] but I was only borrowing her. Tre' was most special to me, my once in a lifetime horse because I was his primary trainer. It gave my mom so much joy to get to watch me show him. He's the only horse I've been undefeated with. I showed him 12 times and we won 12 times.

"I still have a hard time when I leave the barn at night. Every evening after I'm done with lessons I vacuum my office. His stall was right behind the office and he would nicker at me while I was vacuuming because he knew he was going to get a treat when I was done. I gave him a treat every night before I went home."

In 2013, Byers and McClean traded rides winning eight out of eight classes at Kentucky Spring Premier, Rock Creek, Lexington, Kentucky Fall Classic and Louisville. This time it was McClean riding Tré to what was his third World's Champion of Champions tricolor.

In what would be his final season Mr. Center Stage and McClean shook off a third place finish out of the starting gate in the Three-Gaited Jackpot at Rock Creek to finish the year without a blemish on their record. Once again they swept the ladies under two and championship at both Lexington Junior League and the World's Championship Horse Show.

The horse with the million-dollar expression was a star for three different trainers and two different amateur owners. And like most horses Tre' did have his quirks. For as bright and expressive as he was in the ring, he was a big grump in the stall, especially when it came to men.

"He liked Katy Hannah who took care of him and he was okay with Heather [DiGiannantonio] but she got a few bruises along the way. He hated men, just hated them.

"He was at his best when you were riding him. Tre' was so much fun and I also had fun watching others ride him. Ryan Visser got to ride him one time and Ashley Biggins had purchased a ride on him from the UPHA Auction. I loved watching them as much as I did riding him myself.

"The greatest thing about him is you could trust him. I enjoyed that a lot."

Sarah Byers won two World's Champion of Champions Ladies Three-Gaited titles with the son of Deep Blue.



Under the direction of Bob Brison, Theresa Vonderschmitt won the World's Champion Amateur Three-Gaited 15.2 & Under blue in 2009.



Bob Brison credited this 2008 Midwest Charity performance as the turning point for Mr. Center Stage's career.



For the past two years Mary McClean and "Tre'" wore the roses as the Ladies Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions.

