

BOURBON SELECT

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Five-Gaited Horse Of The Year

ROBERT GARDINER

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Reserve Trainer Of The Year

BY SARA PIZZUTO

After a shocking start to their week in Louisville, Bourbon Select and Robert Gardiner prevailed with the industry's top prize as the Five-Gaited World's Grand Champions.



Divine intervention. That is how trainer Robert Gardiner described his journey to the 2021 Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship. What began as a week in Louisville filled with shocking defeat ended with the ultimate triumph, as Gardiner piloted Bourbon Select to the highest honor bestowed in the American Saddlebred breed. Gardiner and his equine teammate carved their names into the history books as the world's grand champions a mere three days after the entry was left out of the ribbons in his ladies qualifier. Robert Gardiner and Bourbon Select rose to the top of their breed last season and now to the top of your list as The People's Choice Five-Gaited Horse Of The Year and The People's Choice Reserve Trainer Of The Year.

Robert Gardiner's passion for horses began on his parents' Virginia based farm. The family's two-stall barn in their backyard eventually grew much larger, with Gardiner participating in local weekend horse shows.

"Every little town had a fire department benefit horse show," he said. "They would set up a ring on a baseball field and you would bring your horses and that's how I grew up showing. Then we would go to some bigger shows in Raleigh and Roanoke and that's kind of how I got started in it."

While in college, Gardiner contemplated a career in the music and production industry, but ultimately chose to pursue his interest in horses. He returned to his parents' farm upon graduation before accepting a job at a private barn in Chicago as a horse trainer. This eventually led to his role at the helm of his Robert Gardiner Stables.

Bourbon Select is one of the many multi-titled equine athletes that Gardiner is tasked with training at his farm. Gardiner saw the potential in the then three-year-old son of Leatherwood's Starlight and Callaway's Winning Ways in 2018 and advised Julia Tiller to make the purchase. The entry was quite green at first, but quickly began to mature and develop under the direction of Gardiner.

"When I got him home, I realized how much he didn't know, which was fine," he said. "I just didn't anticipate it. I spent a lot of time with that horse that winter and the spring. He has a very strong personality. He was a little pushy and is really a horse who you have to be flexible with. It can't just be one way. You have to meet him in the middle. I have always had horses like that in my life, so I was the right person for that horse and that horse was the right horse for me. It kind of works that way. Sometimes when you get a horse with a strong personality and you're not a little bit flexible as a horse trainer, it doesn't work."

The connections of Robert Gardiner and Julia Tiller were behind Bourbon Select's widely successful 2019 show season. The

entry wore the roses for the first time as the Junior Five-Gaited World's Champion of Champions with Gardiner in the saddle. Julia Tiller then took the reins in 2020, adding to Bourbon Select's resume with a reserve world's title from Louisville's ladies amateur five-gaited ranks. As the 2021 show season began, Gardiner was confident with Bourbon Select's chances at continued success in the show ring.

"He's a horse that has a great deal of charisma, not only from a presence standpoint but also in the way he moves," he said. "He's a very slick moving horse, has a striking color and always uses his ears. He is always present. There are a lot of horses out there that people get behind that do one thing really well. Maybe they rack super well or trot really high. But I think the interesting thing about this horse is that he has so many characteristics or attributes that are in line with the perfect saddle horse."

Bourbon Select arrived in Louisville last season with a nearly unblemished 2021 show record, with Gardiner and Tiller handling the presentation assignments. Julia Tiller was in the irons for Wednesday evening's Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding class in Freedom Hall. Despite a first place vote, Bourbon Select was left out of the ribbons.

"In mine and several of my peers' opinion, there is no way he could have been lower than third place in his qualifying class with the lady rider," Gardiner said. "It was the craziest thing. They just managed to miss him, I guess. I don't understand it. I will never understand it. This is a great horse, more than a nice horse. He's a great horse."

Though upset, Gardiner awoke the following morning with a new plan in mind. He explained that Bourbon Select would have shown back in the ladies championship had he even been eighth in the qualifier. However, that was no longer an option due to Louisville's qualification rules. The only option they had was to send Bourbon Select into the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship. Gardiner headed to the horse show office after realizing that Thursday was the final day to nominate an entry into the gaited championship. He then began prepping Bourbon Select after Julia Tiller agreed to their new plans.

"I know him well enough to know what to do to get him ready to show," Gardiner said. "The plan would have been the same whether Julia was going to show him back or I was going to show him back. He was going to show back on Saturday night regardless of who was showing him, so we didn't have to deviate from anything."

As Steve Buttleman sounded the call for Louisville's grand finale, the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship, Robert Gardiner and Bourbon Select were one of eight contenders attempting to cement their place among the legends. Gardiner and Tiller's mood soon shifted as their entry, Bourbon Select, was announced as the world's grand champion. In just three days, the entry had gone from an upsetting defeat to reaching the pinnacle of success in the American Saddlebred breed.

"I was really glad to get the win," Gardiner said. "I was watching the class from inside the ring and scanning it to see what was going on and I really felt like my horse was good. The whole thing was really shocking especially the way we got there. I went in the ring trying to win it and I knew I had a good enough horse so I guess when you have the right perspective and you have the right horse that's all you can really ask for."

Gardiner reiterated that Bourbon Select was deserving of this prestigious title. "A couple people came up to me after that class," he said. "They said, 'When we were coming up in judges school, one of the things the clinicians used to tell us was the five-gaited world's grand champion has to be the epitome of what a

Saddlebred should look like and go like. They should not only be able to be on the publications covers of our industry, but also be on Sports Illustrated or something as a representative of perfect conformation and perfect way of going.' I think this particular horse has the total package."

Bourbon Select wasn't the only successful gaited entry under the direction of Robert Gardiner in 2021. He also celebrated the success of reserve world's champion Arrowhead's Phenomenal, the UPHA Five-Gaited Classic Grand Champion owned by Melissa Moore and Covered Bridge Farm, as well as Danny Cummins' world's champion ride aboard Lady On The Move in the gentlemen's class and Dr. Margaret McNeese's gaited pony entry Nuttin' But Charm. Elyn Dorsey's My Crazy Ex-Girlfriend finished the season as Three-Gaited Park National Champion while I'm Lookin' Supreme excelled in the fine harness ranks for Kaye Bowles-Durnell, both with Gardiner. Jane Fickling Skinner successfully debuted with Smart Fortune in Ocala but not before celebrating her first homebred world's champion title with She's Delightful with assistant trainer Juve Turrubiarques on the lines. Turrubiarques also drove Tom Slick to a reserve world's title for longtime customer Deb Nathanson. From the junior exhibitor ranks Gracie Cearley, Alexis Holyfield and Emma Wittgraeffe had winning performances with their new teammates.

Success was found throughout the season for horses, riders and drivers under Gardiner's tutelage, but it was his wife Kristi's journey that possibly propelled him into The People's Choice Reserve Trainer Of The Year. A newbie to the sport, Kristi began riding just a handful of years ago. This season Robert paired her with Miles Of Style. The team came together quickly with Robert and Turrubiarques' coaching and also lessons from Desmar's Brooke Applegate. The pair debuted with a win at ARHPA leading to wins at Midwest and Blue Ridge before Kristi's first Louisville ribbon – top three in the first section of the amateur under two splits. They finished up their season as amateur reserve national champions. Kristi credits her success to "Robert and Juve expertly preparing Miles not only for my skills but also to be at the top of his game in the show ring."

The Gardiners now make their new home at the Kentucky based former Ventura Farm, having recently relocated.

"It's a new beginning," Gardiner said. "We have completely renovated the barn that was here, and we are building an arena. We are turning it into our own place."

While seasoned veterans like Bourbon Select will continue their successful campaigns in 2022, Gardiner is equally enthusiastic about developing his new youngsters in training.

"What I am most excited about for this year is our young horses," he said. "We have some outstanding three-year-olds and I don't say that lightly - they really are some good ones."

As Robert Gardiner prepares for the new show season, he does so with the notion that horse shows, much like horses, can be unpredictable. He will continue to prepare this special horse, meeting him halfway as he did their junior year when they swept the division at Lexington and then were crowned world's champion of champions a month later. He'll continue to prepare him for Tiller as he did when they were the 2020 Lexington amateur grand champions and qualifying winners to go with a reserve world's title in August and as they both did in '21 with championships at Asheville, Midwest and Blue Ridge before making history. Both Gardiner and Bourbon Select will debut in the new year after rising to the top of the historic Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion and cementing themselves as the best in their breed, having proven it over and over the past three seasons.



There was much to celebrate back at Robert Gardiner Stables on the final Saturday night at Louisville after Robert directed Bourbon Select to most coveted prize in the Saddlebred world, Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion, for Julia Tiller (second from left). They were joined by Tiller's sister Jane Fickling Skinner who enjoyed success during the week with her first homebred world title holder and Robert's wife, Kristi, who dropped in for her first career Louisville ribbons.