

HEARTLAND MAJESTIC

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

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Prior to the start of the Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship, Heartland Majestic and Kathleen Ververeli awaited their gate call with beloved Majestic Oaks caretaker "Lopez." Ververeli turned to Lopez and proclaimed, "This has been a long week for you guys. I bet all you are looking forward to is going home and relaxing." He replied with, "What I am looking forward to is putting those roses on you." Ververeli looked at him prior to entering the fabled grounds of Freedom Hall and said, "I am going to win this for you."

Ververeli fulfilled that promise made to Lopez as the caretaker ultimately draped the blanket of roses across the back of Heartland Majestic—the newly crowned Hackney Pony World's Grand Champion. The Majestic Oaks trained Heartland Majestic earned the approval of the judging panel in Louisville on stake night and now your approval as the People's Choice Hackney Pony Of The Year.

Kathleen Ververeli became involved in the equine industry after her children Elizabeth and Alex began riding and driving at the Pennsylvania based Wentz Stables. However, it wasn't until her son moved his equine teammate to the Bluegrass State at Majestic Oaks that Ververeli had her turn on the lines of a Hackney Pony. She had her first ever driving lesson paired with none other than the multi-titled CH Free Willy.

"Maureen said, 'Get in the cart,' and I said I've never driven and she said, 'You'll be fine,'" Ververeli said. "We went outside and as soon as Free Willy saw other ponies, he started getting a lot stronger and I was having the time of my life. I got out of the cart and thought it was so much fun and I decided that I wanted to start driving. If she hadn't done that, I probably would have never gone down that road but it was such an amazing experience and that pony is just incredible. So I credit Free Willy with my passion for ponies."

Ververeli eventually entered the show ring with a starter pony that she then traded for Heartland Rough And Ready. This new team consisting of Rough And Ready and Ververeli made three appearances together before Grace Arnold expressed an interest in purchasing the pony. Ververeli agreed to sell her new teammate and tasked the team at Majestic Oaks with finding her an equally special pony to show. They presented her with Heartland Majestic.

"Two ponies came up for sale and one was Heartland Majestic," Ververeli said. "I looked at both ponies and I knew they were both super nice ponies but there was something about Majestic. He was just really bold and strong and he just gave me chills whenever I looked at his pictures and whenever I saw him show. I ended up getting him."

Heartland Majestic and Kathleen Ververeli began their storied career together in the fall of 2015. Their time together has included Louisville victory passes, national championship titles, and additional top honors from horse shows across the country. Ververeli explained that their lengthy partnership together has strengthened

her skills as a driver.

"I have learned to listen to the pony," she said. "He is a pony that knows his job. Don't get in his way. The one big thing that I have to steer clear of is over correcting him. Everything is done in very small measures. He has made me a much better driver because I have had to rise to the occasion to drive him."

Ververeli recognized the team at Majestic Oaks for their expert training, care, and instruction in helping both her and Heartland Majestic throughout their time together.

"Rich definitely has a unique way of looking at ponies and training ponies," she said. "The caretakers are also incredible. Lopez has done a phenomenal job. He absolutely adores this pony. I credit Maureen a lot with actually teaching me. She is incredibly good at watching me drive and correcting what I am doing, which I think is a huge talent. Whenever I would get down on myself and think, 'I am messing this pony up' she would say, 'No you're not. You're going to learn how to do this.'"

Ververeli explained that Heartland Majestic is game with a tendency to be bold in the ring. She worked tirelessly in lessons with Maureen Campbell to gain skills in order to properly pilot her teammate.

"That made the difference of why I was so confident in that class in Louisville," she said.

That class, the Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship, is a highly prestigious offering, with the top award only given to the breed's best. Kathleen Ververeli and Heartland Majestic were named the victors on the green shavings—with Majestic topping this championship for the second time in his career. Their win was even more emotional for Ververeli who wasn't able to compete in this championship for the last two seasons. She fell ill in 2019 and failed to show back and didn't travel to Louisville in 2020 due to the covid pandemic.

"It was incredible," Ververeli said. "I said this had been on my bucket list since I have been coming to Louisville. It was the ultimate dream and I never thought I would have a good enough pony or that I would be good enough to do that because you look at these people that have been doing this their whole lives and I have not, especially with ponies. I only started give or take 10 years ago."

Ververeli added that her lessons learned with Maureen Campbell proved valuable even in her victory pass. Heartland Majestic spooked under the winner's spotlight and gave an enthusiastic performance.

"He tried to bite that bit and go and if it wasn't for what Maureen had taught me, I would have been in with the judges," Ververeli joked. "So I give a lot of credit to her because she gave me the confidence to know that I could drive better."

Ververeli additionally appreciated the support from other Saddlebred and Hackney Pony enthusiasts including Elisabeth Goth. Ververeli purchased Heartland Majestic from Goth in 2015 and Goth has remained a consistent supporter of this

team. She was on hand to present the winning award to Heartland Majestic in the winner's enclosure following the announcement of his world's grand championship title.

"Elisabeth has always been cheering for me," Ververeli said. "She texts me after I win and she has been a very big advocate so having her present that award made it that more special."

Ververeli's family was equally excited for her remarkable victory on the lines of Heartland Majestic. She was quick to mention that sharing her passion for horses with both her son Alex and daughter Elizabeth is one of her most beloved aspects of the industry.

"I do this to have my friends and family there," she said. "The ribbon is all well and good but getting that ribbon in front of your friends and family, that is what is important to me. You see a lot of equestrian families and it has made a big difference. When the kids were younger it bonded us together."

Ververeli's family will be thrilled to cheer as she and Heartland Majestic return for the 2022 season, poised to defend their world's grand championship title. They will once again take on the open Hackney Pony division, showcasing their talents on the biggest stages.

"I just want to show him more this year," she said. "This year my hope is to really enjoy him and get out there and show more. I am definitely planning on going to more shows this year than I did last year and we will see."

As they enter their eighth year in the show ring together, Kathleen Ververeli and Heartland Majestic will continue to dazzle crowds with the pony's athleticism, effervescence, and trotting abilities. With Ververeli's seasoned skills, they set their sights on continued success and yet another blanket of roses draped across the back of Heartland Majestic.

Kathleen Ververeli purchased Heartland Majestic in the fall of 2015. Their storied career together has spanned many seasons under the direction of the team at Majestic Oaks.



Heartland Majestic wore the blanket of roses as the 2021 Hackney Pony World's Grand Champion with Ververeli on the lines. It was the second time in his career to have achieved this honor.

