

# GR CH THE GENERAL LEE

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

*Amateur Roadster To Bike | Amateur Roadster Under Saddle*

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Rose Marie Wheeler was highly determined to add GR CH The General Lee to her show string. She first took note of the striking chestnut following his victories at the 2017 Lexington Junior League. Their partnership officially began four years later in 2021-reaching great heights in Louisville last year. It was on the green shavings, when GR CH The General Lee and Wheeler won two world's titles in the same day—a mere five months after the speedster survived a terrifying bout with colic. GR CH The General Lee added his name to the history books in Freedom Hall and now onto your list, as the People's Choice Amateur Roadster To Bike and Amateur Roadster Under Saddle Horse Of The Year.

Rose Marie Wheeler was immediately drawn to GR CH The General Lee after his roadster to wagon success with trainer Steven Yoder in 2017. The son of Dondersteen W was bred by Devon Yoder and was immediately a roadster success.

"He got everyone's attention when he won that wagon class in Lexington," Wheeler said. "Steven later walked up behind me in the aisle in Louisville and I looked at him and I said, 'I am going to buy a road horse from you some day.'"

However, Wheeler was forced to wait to purchase the roadster, as The General Lee collected world's and national titles first under the ownership of Brittany McGinnis and then Lauren Osborne. Wheeler's desire to have a road horse stemmed from her family's history with the speedsters as her mother's father grew up with trotters and pacers and her uncle Kenny Wheeler, was an accomplished roadster to bike exhibitor. She was desperate to continue her family's legacy teamed with The General Lee.

"I had always wanted him," Wheeler said. "But it just didn't work with the horses that I had at the time. But then Steven and I talked about buying him for Steven to have him again and for me to have him. We made it work and that time I didn't really need another horse, but the time was right. There was no more waiting. It was just time."

GR CH The General Lee joined Wheeler's impressive show ring in 2021 and once again returned under the training assignment of Steven Yoder, Wheeler's now boyfriend. They capped their first season together with a myriad of impressive wins including the title of the Roadster Under Saddle National Champions. Both Wheeler and Yoder had high hopes for The General Lee's 2022 campaign until Wheeler received a concerning phone call on March 22, 2022—one that all horse owners dread. The General Lee was presenting colic symptoms. Both Yoder, along with the expert assistance of Dr. John Cummins, made the decision to send "General" to Michigan State University. Within an hour of arriving to MSU, General was whisked into colic surgery. Doctors told Wheeler to not expect to hear from them until 6:00am if all was going according to plan. However, she received another dreaded call a mere hour and a half later.

"We got a phone call saying that it is way worse than we could have ever imagined," Wheeler said. "MSU said that they needed our consent to put him down. Steven was like, 'You are not putting this horse down. I know this horse.' His brother raised him. Steven has been a part of this horse's career since day



GR CH The General Lee was first shown by Steven Yoder in 2017. The multi-titled entry then returned under the direction of Yoder, who has been one of the horse's biggest proponents.

one. He was like, 'That horse will go down fighting. He has to say enough is enough, not us.' So we convinced them. We had to try."

The General Lee's team put their faith in their beloved horse as well as the expert staff at MSU. However, he was fighting a rare form of colic—one where the small intestine telescopes into the large. The MSU staff had only heard of five other cases of this form. They explained that General would have died had Wheeler and Yoder waited a mere hour more to bring him to their facility and he was now up against a less than 5% survival rate. However, just as Yoder anticipated, General had a true will to live. Finally, Wheeler received a positive phone call—General's surgery had been successful.

Rose Marie Wheeler immediately drove from Kentucky to Michigan to visit General once out of surgery.

"On the way, I called John Cummins, and I was like, 'Thank you for saving this horse with Steven,'" Wheeler said. "He was like, 'Do not thank me yet.' Part of the issue with this colic is that if they make it out of surgery, that's great, but sometimes they don't make it out of the next 72 hours. The chances were so slim to make it out of surgery and then to make it out of the recovery for 72 hours."

Wheeler arrived at MSU and was quickly met by a concerned group of veterinarians. What should have been a normal greeting was just the opposite. They informed her that General was colicing again.

"Luckily, he didn't end up colicing," she said. "He was just showing the signs again. That first time I saw him. There was no life in that horse. I shook his head. I screamed at him. But there was no emotion—nothing towards me. And I was like, 'Wow this is really it.'"



The General Lee was fortunate to have a team of professionals in his corner throughout his struggles including Wheeler and Yoder, along with Lavon Hochstetler, Dr. John Cummins, and the staff at Michigan State University.

Still, General's team refused to lose hope. Wheeler wanted to ensure that her horse knew he had support from those who loved him most and chose to travel to Michigan to visit him every single day for the next two weeks that he was under the care of the MSU staff. She explained that something similar had been done with her former five-gaited teammate, CH Bono. When the Saddlebred broke his ankle, trainer Bret Day had his groom go and see Bono daily to brush him.

"We always felt like that was a big reason for why Bono was able to get back into the show ring after breaking his ankle and from having screws in his ankle to winning two more titles," Wheeler said. "I followed that kind of mentality with this. Let's go see him every day. Let's let him know that he's not fighting this alone. Let's be there."

Unfortunately for The General Lee, complications continued to arise. He faced a long journey ahead. Once home, he had a strict recovery regime that would last over three months. He was on stall rest for his first month with occasional hand walks. He could then progress to being turned out but wasn't allowed to buck, kick, or jump. However, both Wheeler and Yoder knew that that program wasn't going to work for General.

"We talked to the vet," Wheeler said. "We were like listen. This is not this horse. His normal work week during show season is getting turned out. Two-four days a week he will just get turned out and he works himself out and that's how he can do it. He bucks, he kicks, he runs. We tried hand walking with the vet. The first day went great. The second day General said, 'No thank you.'"

The vet worked with General's team to develop a program that allowed General to gain strength yet contain his energy. They agreed that General could be longlined with additional work on a treadmill that Wheeler and Yoder rented to aid in General's recovery, paying close attention any time he tried to buck or kick. However, the horse that was once in prime condition was now quite weak.

"It was so hard to see the horse that was so game and would never stop to be so worn out after two minutes of walking," Wheeler said. "He dropped so much weight. He lost all of his muscle. He would literally hand walk, and it would be tiring for him and that was hard to see just knowing him."

Rose Marie Wheeler was adamant against General showing in 2022. She wanted to wait a full year before the horse re-entered the show ring. However, Yoder knew what General was capable of.

"Steven said, 'If he is ready to come back, he will come back. We will do it on his time, not anyone else's time but his,'" Wheeler said. "I was so against it."

A plan was made to send General to the 2022 Lexington Junior League simply to reacclimate him to a horse show setting. Wheeler trail rode him throughout

the show grounds in order to help her horse mentally calm down.

"We would go up and down through the trees," she said. "We would chill out. We figured out that Twinkle Twinkle Little Star is a calming song. He was so excited to come back. That horse loves to show but it was like how we can just get him to mentally allow his body to get back to the same place that his mind was. So we sang Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. I started singing that and all of a sudden his head dropped and he flat foot walked."

After months of rehabilitation, The General Lee was primed and ready to return to the show ring. He made one appearance in Shelbyville to be named the Amateur Roadster To Bike victor with Wheeler on the lines, en route to Louisville for the World's Championship Horse Show.

Freedom Hall set the scene for General's busy schedule on the green shavings. The campaigner was entered to show twice during Wednesday's schedule—typically unheard of with most show horses. However, both Wheeler and Yoder were not remotely concerned about their horses' ability to show twice in one day.

"As long as he looks bright in his eye, I would show him ten times in a day," Yoder said. "There is never a question, not with how much heart he has got. He worked at midnight the night before he showed. He worked in the afternoon and then we turned him loose for about a half hour in Freedom Hall before he showed. He bucked, he kicked, he ran and then he showed twice."

Wheeler echoed this statement.

"We were actually more excited that it was two in one day," she said. "People think we show the horse a lot just to show him but it's really to make him calm. That's why we do four classes at so many shows because his third and fourth classes are his best classes."

Not only did General have enough strength and stamina to complete both classes on that Wednesday, but he did so in victorious fashion, winning two world's titles. Wheeler presented General to be named the Amateur Ladies Roadster To Bike Section Two World's Champion and the Amateur Roadster Under Saddle World's Champion. It was an emotional achievement for all those associated with General. Not only did the beloved horse recover from a near fatal colic, but he bounded back to earn two world's championship honors on the same day.

"It meant the world to me," Yoder said. "It is cool to see a horse who tries that hard. When Rose Marie first said we were probably out for this year, I was like if we know him right, he is not going to want to sit on the sidelines. It would have been much worse to keep him in the stall."

Yoder explained that not only is General talented, but he is also intelligent, which aided in his success both

in recovery and in the show ring.

"On top of having the biggest heart in any horse I have ever had, he is so intelligent," he said. "He is not easy. It's hard to tell what you are going to have that day but it's never because he is trying to be bad. It's just because he tries so hard. Sometimes you just have to stop. As a trainer it is tough to do sometimes. Sometimes you just have to stop and make him stand somewhere for a little bit because he is always trying something. But I love that about him—that he makes you work."

Rose Marie Wheeler and The General Lee made four victory passes at the 2022 All American Horse Classic following their success in Louisville. Yoder was then in the saddle for a round of honor in Ocala. General capped his miraculous season with Wheeler at the UPHA/American Royal where he was crowned the Roadster Under Saddle Reserve National Champion. Lavon Hochstetler is another member of General's team. He works the horse daily and has been an integral part of his success in the show ring.

"I really love him because he puts a lot of energy into our barn and into our workers," Hochstetler said. "He is energetic and ready to go every day. He is smart and just all around fun to be around."

GR CH The General Lee will return to the show ring yet again in 2023, much to the delight of his growing fan club. Yoder explained that he will compete with the entry in the county fair offerings, while Wheeler will once again don her silks for the roadster to bike and roadster under saddle classes. Though Wheeler loves her time in the show ring with her loving partner, she explained that back at the barn, he is a different horse.

"When that tack is not on that horse, he will do anything," she said. "He will let any kid run underneath him or feed him. It doesn't matter. You can give him a kid and say, 'Here you go. Walk him up and down the street' and he will say ok. He is so different with tack on, and I love that he can be that chill horse and then turn into the best show horse."

Whether under saddle, in the bike, or enjoying visitors in his stall, GR CH The General Lee has proven his heart both in the show ring and while fighting against all odds. Throughout his career, he has been backed by a team, those that know him best, that have advocated for him and guided him through a harrowing odyssey with his best interest at the forefront. He excelled not only by winning two world's titles in 2022, but in the fight of life. Rose Marie Wheeler's strong desire to own General those many years ago resulted in a remarkable partnership—one that will continue permanently.

"Since I was seven, I wanted a road horse, so I was just fortunate that General was the first one and it's been great," she said. "Now he has a home for life."



"General" suffered a near death bout of colic in March of 2022 that resulted in surgery and months of recovery. He beat the odds to excel at the 2022 World's Championship Horse Show, adding the title of the Amateur Ladies Roadster To Bike Section Two World's Champion with Rose Marie Wheeler to his list of world's and national titles.



Rose Marie Wheeler and her beloved partner won not one but two world's titles on Wednesday in Louisville. They also were crowned the Amateur Roadster Under Saddle World's Champions.