

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Alayna LoCascio

The People's Choice Junior Exhibitor of the Year

By Sara Pizzuto



Following a record-setting 2016 in the show ring, Alayna LoCascio earned your votes as the People's Choice Junior Exhibitor Of The Year.



Alayna enjoys a special bond with her horses as the mutual affection she and Hollybrook Domino GCH share is quite evident in this photo.



Alayna and her older sister Sydney cheer each other on and are completely proud of each other's success. Both enjoyed tricolor rides throughout the 2016 season including the Morgan Grand National.

It could be said that Alayna LoCascio was trotting before she could walk. She has virtually grown up at the barn, spending hours alongside her mother when she trained horses. All of this saddle time has allowed the talented 11-year-old to ride away into the history books twice. In 2016, Alayna became the first person to win the walk and trot equitation world championship in all three seats. This year, she became the youngest rider to earn your vote as the People's Choice Junior Exhibitor of the Year.

Dreamway South in Spring Valley, Ohio serves as the home base for this rising superstar. Head trainer Manya Smalley plays double duty as both Alayna's mother and instructor. It was evident to Manya that Alayna projected a passion for horses at a very young age.

"She has always taken any and every opportunity to ride or just spend time with the horses," she said. "It was impossible to keep her off a horse from the very beginning. Horses are a part of her and seem to have always been."

Alayna said that she couldn't remember a time when she wasn't on a horse.

"I feel like I've been riding forever," she said.

Alayna had her sights set on the 2016 show season after a successful 2015 year that included two reserve world championships. She began the season with Hollybrook Domino GCH and Dragonsmeade Onegin. "Domino" served as her western mount, while "Onegin" was her saddle seat teammate.

Hollybrook Domino GCH has been Alayna's partner since 2014. Their pairing was fate according to Manya, who instantly thought of Alayna when she watched Domino show. Though Alayna had never ridden western, Manya thought the two would be a perfect match. She made the bold decision to bring the gelding to Ohio without ever trying him out.

"Their partnership was magic from day one," she said. "They are totally meant to be a pair and are completely inseparable."

Alayna said that Domino is both fun in the ring, and sweet in the stall.

"Right away when I rode him I loved him," she said. "He has always been a good boy."

Alayna's other horse, Dragonsmeade Onegin, came into her life by chance in early 2016. Alayna, Manya, and instructor Kathy Boggs had arrived at The Morgan Horse Farm with Selvin and Gina Torrez in search of a hunt seat horse. They decided to try Onegin despite the fact that Alayna hadn't ridden saddle seat. Their connection was instant.

"We just knew from the moment that we put her on him," Kathy said. "We just went 'This is absolutely the one.' His stride, his temperament, and everything about him was just perfect for Alayna. He is the most agreeable horse and he is the same horse every day when he comes out to work."

With two solid partners, Alayna was primed to start her journey to equitation success. Both Manya and Kathy instructed Alayna during her lessons 3-4 times per week. Manya was in charge of Alayna's western and hunt seat equitation, while Kathy began to teach Alayna saddle seat equitation. Kathy said it was easy for Alayna to master each style of riding.

"Laney is a very talented athlete, and she can do anything that she puts her mind to,"

she said. "Riding is very easy for her, and she is a quick study."

In each ride, Alayna worked on the lunge line and without stirrups to perfect her form. She typically rode in lessons with her older sister Sydney, a standout rider in her own right. The two share a special bond.

"Her comradery with her sister Sydney at shows was also an amazing support system for her during the year," Manya said. "They cheer each other on and are completely proud of the other's success."

Alayna's incredible 2016 season included victory passes at River Ridge, Southern States, and Gold Cup. Her wins against Morgan riders gave her the confidence to compete against some of the best that the Saddlebred world had to offer. Alayna trotted down the infamous Red Mile at the 2016 Lexington Junior League Horse Show on Onegin, the only Morgan in the class. The team pinned reserve in the Walk-Trot Saddle Seat 10 & Under class. It was this stiff competition that Manya said helped Alayna become more ring savvy and build upon her show ring experience.

That experience helped propel the young rider to immense achievements at the 2016 New England Regional. The long trip from Ohio to Massachusetts was worth it for Alayna, who left the ring with the blue ribbon in five out of her six classes. The regional champion was now ready to contend to become a world champion. Manya said it was Alayna's attitude that helped her reach the winner's circle.

"She sets a goal and believes she can achieve it no matter how big it is," she said. "She works hard to attain it. She is a very natural rider with an excellent seat and quiet hands. Her connection with her horses is also very important to her success. She rides with joy, not nerves, because she genuinely loves every minute of it."

That passion for horses allowed Alayna to continue to dedicate much of her time and energy to gear up for the Morgan Grand National. Kathy said that they kept with their normal training routine at home, and didn't change anything in preparation to compete on the Morgan world's biggest stage.

However, a break in the routine came with the addition of a third horse to Alayna's show string. A hunter pleasure mare by the name of Meadowayne Groovy Girl had been in training with Manya for several years. Her owner decided to list her for sale right before the Morgan Grand National. The decision was made to have Alayna compete with "Sophie" in Oklahoma despite only a handful of practice rides. Alayna was thrilled to be able to ride the mare.

"She is really fun," she said. "I had

always wanted to show her, so when I got to I was really excited."

Domino, Onegin, and now Sophie would make the trek to Oklahoma City as Alayna's teammates for the 2016 show. With a successful season behind her, Alayna was looking forward to competing.

"I didn't know how I was going to do, but I was hoping I was going to do well," she said. "I don't get nervous that much, so I was excited. Oklahoma is my favorite show."

Manya shared that excitement, mixed with a worry of being both a trainer and a mother.

"I am fortunate that both my girls want to learn more and get better and appreciate that I can instruct them," she said. "It is definitely different for me to put my own children in the show ring. I do my best to play it cool, but I'm the nervous one."

She didn't have a reason to be nervous, as Alayna confidently made her mark in the performance arena at the Morgan Grand National. That confidence is something that Kathy said is customary of Alayna.

"She is always better at the horse show," she said. "She takes her lessons well, but she is a showgirl. She just comes alive when that gate opens."

The gate opened a total of seven times for Alayna and her horses, making her a busy rider in Oklahoma. Yet, she left the ring as the winner in six different classes. Alayna made history as she was crowned the Walk-Trot Western Seat Equitation Grand National and World Champion, the Walk-Trot Hunt Seat Equitation Grand National and World Champion, and the Walk-Trot Saddle Seat Equitation Grand National and World Champion. It was an incredible feat and a true testament to her talent and versatility as



In addition to a pair of walk-trot equitation world titles with her own horses Hollybrook Domino GCH and Dragonsmeade Onegin, Alayna scored the tricolor and roses with Meadowayne Groovy Girl with a only a few practice rides together.

a rider. The show was a dream come true for Alayna.

"It felt really great," she said. "I was really excited. I was shocked because I didn't know that was going to happen."

It was an equally thrilling moment for Manya.

"I can't even explain my reaction to her winning three world titles," she said. "The western one came first and I was so thrilled for her and Domino. To see them achieve their goal was incredible. Then came her world class in hunter seat equitation. I'm not sure how I even made it out of the ring safely. I was totally in super proud mom mode. To cap it off by winning the saddle seat with Onegin, oh my God, I was completely amazed, overwhelmed, and proud of my girl."

Not only did Alayna win three world titles in Oklahoma, but she was also able to reign supreme in three different equitation seats—something that Kathy said is challenging to accomplish.

"I don't usually like a rider to do saddle seat and hunt seat equitation," she said. "I think the position in which you're asking them to sit and the leg position is so contradictory. Western and saddle seat you can do. Hunt makes it a little bit difficult. But Laney was able to separate it and make it work."

Alayna's focus and ability to succeed in any division, with multiple horses was a quality that was recognized by the Morgan community. They selected her as the People's Choice Junior Exhibitor of the Year to the delight of the entire team at Dreamway South.

"It feels really good to be chosen," Alayna said. "When we got the award in the mail, I was really shocked. I didn't know that I was going to get it."

After an unbelievable walk-trot career, Alayna has chosen to forgo her last year of eligibility in the division and go out on top. 2017 will mark Alayna's first year of 13 & under, and she will enter the ring once again paired with Domino and Onegin. A new age group comes with the new challenges of cantering and pattern work. Alayna has already begun working on patterns, and Kathy is confident that Alayna's transition will be a smooth one.

"I anticipate that she and her horses will be really great," she said. "Alayna is such a sharp girl. She is so smart that the figure work should be really easy for her to comprehend. She certainly doesn't have stage fright, so I don't think that will be a problem."

Alayna has been an excellent example of the young riders emerging in the Morgan breed. With her commitment to horses and prior accomplishments across multiple divisions, there is no doubt that continued success is on the horizon.