

Ali DeGray

People's Choice Amateur of the Year and Eight People's Choice Horse and Pony Champions

By Jenny Grey



Ali DeGray, the People's Choice Amateur of the Year, made history on Saturday night at Louisville winning three consecutive classes – the Road Pony World's Grand Championship with Twin Willow's McDreamy (above); the Amateur Five-Gaited Champion of Champion's title with Memories of Cabo and the Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship with Craycroft Matador.

Ali DeGray, a force of nature in the Saddlebred and Hackney pony worlds has much to be proud of, but no-one could have anticipated what happened in Louisville last year. In a magical series of events she earned four World's Championships and four World's Champion of Champions titles with Heartland High Tech, Twin Willow's McDreamy, Craycroft Matador and Memories of Cabo, all undefeated during the 2015 show season. To the best of our knowledge, Ali is the only person to have ever won three World's Championships in the same session. For her history-making achievements in 2015, she has earned your vote as the People's Choice Amateur of the Year.

Adamant in making this story about the horses and ponies they love and not about themselves, Ali DeGray and her mother, Helen Rich, clearly demonstrate their priorities as the best of owners, a fact wholeheartedly endorsed by Rich and Maureen Campbell of Majestic Oaks Farm and Tammy DeVore of DeVore Stables; with whom they have trained since 2014. "They are the best!" declared Helen of these

wonderful people. An important part of the extended team, Nicole Jansen trains and takes care of Helen's horses and ponies at her farm in Odessa, Florida.

The horses featured here are People's Choice champions, but there are a host of others in Helen and Ali's charge. Helen owns over 80 horses and ponies including Saddlebreds, Hackneys, Friesians, Fell ponies, a Morgan horse and several rescue animals. In this story we emphasize not only what their top-performing Saddlebreds and ponies have achieved, but also give clues about their personalities. With owners who care deeply about what motivates each individual, there is an added dimension that can make the difference between a good performance and a great performance.

Eight of Helen and Ali's outstanding horses and ponies earned People's Choice awards last year. They are the four World's Grand Champions noted above Heartland High Tech (People's Choice Amateur Hackney Pony and People's Choice Overall Reserve Hackney Pony of the Year); Twin Willow's McDreamy (People's Overall Road Pony of the Year and People's Choice Open Road Pony 50' Inches and Under); Craycroft Matador (People's Choice Overall Hackney Pony of the Year and People's Choice Open Hackney Pony); (SA) Kalarama's Ultimate Choice (People's Choice Reserve Champion Five-Gaited Stallion); Happy Boy (People's Choice Reserve Ladies Fine Harness); Jolly Mon Sing (People's Choice Reserve Hunter Country Pleasure) and CB Party Girl (People's Choice Reserve Amateur Hackney Pleasure Driving).

While Ali does the bulk of the showing, Helen is an accomplished horsewoman in her own right. Winning countless titles over the years, she ended the 2015 show season as the Morgan Park Harness Amateur Masters World Champion driving CBMF Victory Pass, an occasion on which Maureen Campbell declared, "She rocked it!" A big morale booster after a serious driving accident in 2014, this win sent Helen's confidence soaring.

The transition to Kentucky-based trainers was difficult at first. Ali, who rode or drove in Florida almost every day prior to the move, can now work her horses and ponies only once or twice a month. "My horses are my buddies; I'm emotionally attached to them," she emphasized. "It's hard to be so far away but it is SO worth it!"

Being a member of two big, successful teams where people cheer for and support each other has been pure pleasure. Ali, who is inspired by having team-mates the caliber of Sandra Surber and Toni Nastali, who won all five world's championship classes in which she drove, loves this aspect of the Kentucky move. Helen and Ali are both enthusiastic cheerleaders for their team mates. Tammy DeVore remembers Helen sitting in the stands with her son, Ethan at the first horse show "You have to be there to watch me in the morning!" he told her. Even though she had no horses in the ring, she was there early to watch him. When Tammy asked her why, she replied "Because Ethan told me I had to!" "She tries to be there for everyone," Tammy told us. Helen, enjoying the team aspect of showing as much as Ali



Ali DeGray and Helen Rich are as close as a mother and daughter can be, firmly united by a great love for the horses and ponies in their care.

Tammy DeVore enjoyed a moment of celebration with Helen and Ali after winning her first open World's Championship title with (SA) Kalarama's Ultimate Choice.



commented, "We are part of a family now. We only had each other before." As close as a mother and daughter can be, sharing every precious moment with horses is a wonderful gift. In fact, when Ali lived 45 minutes away, Helen said it was 44 minutes too far, buying her the house next door to the farm.

Wildly successful in 2015, Ali and Helen's show string accomplished a record that will go down in history. Undefeated with four horses and ponies prior to Louisville, the fireworks began early in the week when Ali showed the fabulous Heartland High Tech. A favorite of Rich Campbell who worked with him as a young pony, High Tech has been in training at Majestic Oaks three times now, winning the Hackney Pony World's Champion of Champions title in 2009 with Maureen on the lines.

Showing under the Majestic Oaks banner once more in 2015, Heartland High Tech was undefeated all season, ending Louisville on Friday night as the Amateur Hackney Pony World's Champion of Champions with Ali at whip after winning the Amateur Ladies Hackney Pony World's Championship earlier in the week. For most of us, this would have been a lifetime achievement but Ali and her show string were just getting started.

A key to Ali's success is in knowing she has fabulous horses and ponies to show. "High Tech is the consummate gentleman", Ali shared. "He's bright, confident and positive. I love him!" "He's a wonderful pony," added Maureen. "You would never know he's a stud." Chosen as a Breyer pony five years ago, Helen presented him at the induction ceremony with a cheering crowd jumping to their feet as she drove him around the ring. While she signed autographs afterwards, this sweet animal stood patiently for four hours while he met his fans.

Twin Willow's McDreamy, rarely beaten in his show career, was purchased from Dr. Alan Raun late in 2014. Not missing a beat, he and Ali were undefeated all season winning, among many other titles, the Road Pony 50 inches and Under World's Championship. This multi-titled World's Grand Champion, the first of three shown by Ali, marching into the ring to Saturday night applause at Louisville, claimed a third consecutive World's Grand Championship title. Rich Campbell is especially proud of this pony who rose to the occasion brilliantly.

Ali and Maureen Campbell had plenty to say about the mischievous nature of McDreamy. "He doesn't make it easy...he thinks naughty thoughts!" Ali told us. "You have to stay ahead of him in the bridle and drive every step of the way! He's the happiest, smartest little pony; sometimes he stresses Maureen out. He's very opinionated!" Maureen agreed. "He needs to think it's his idea but he's fun to be around and he loves to play. If he were a person he would be a prankster." Describing McDreamy as if he were a sports hero Helen added, "How can you not admire him? He's a super star!" He is also

one of those rare ponies who needs no warm up. Once hitched, he goes straight to the ring to do his job. Ali feels privileged to show this exceptional animal, continuing the legacy begun by Dr. Raun. With absolutely no time to reflect on her victory with McDreamy, Ali made a quick change to ride Memories of Cabo, trained by Tammy DeVore. Accustomed to back-to-back classes, she doesn't waste time getting nervous. After her big win with McDreamy, it was necessary to 'leave it at the gate' and move on. Having the mental discipline and focus to go from one world class performance to the next separates the good riders from the exceptional riders and we can all agree Ali is exceptional. "She's so cool, calm and collected," Maureen Campbell told us. "We could all learn from her. Ali's the only person I know who can eat a big, Chinese dinner then go out and show in five back-to-back classes." "She's a cool customer," Tammy agreed. "She handles stress way better than I do!"

Paired with Memories of Cabo beginning in 2015, she came out of the gate at undefeated at River Ridge, following up with an undefeated winning season. Well-positioned to take the title after winning the Amateur Five-Gaited World's Championship, Cabo and Ali were judged the best of the best again, earning a second, triumphant victory pass as the Amateur Five-Gaited World's Champion of Champions.

All who love Cabo describe him in superlative terms – 'perfect in every way; never thinking a bad thought; an all-star jock; intelligent; the epitome of beauty and talent'. When other horses bucked and played when being hand walked after Louisville, Cabo restrained himself, holding his head close to Tammy and expressing his frustration by making little grunting noises. "I never had a horse who wants to please you so much," Tammy said, delighted to have him in her care. "He's so happy and very game – he goes like a freight train but he's patient and kind – he's everything all in one package."

With one more world's championship to go after another quick change, Ali hopped into the buggy behind Craycroft Matador, a pony she had only driven twice before. With magic in the air for Ali that night, the victory was hers again with Matador as the Hackney Pony World's Grand Champion at his first Louisville after winning his qualifying championship earlier in the week. Matador gave an incredible performance that night, succeeding in part because Ali used her intuition and natural 'feel' to give him confidence. "She just loves these animals," Maureen emphasized, reflecting on Ali's desire to understand what each horse and pony needs from her. These were superb performances, made even more significant because Ali, an amateur, won two open world's grand championships.

For Majestic Oaks, who had a fabulous Louisville across the board, it was the third consecutive year in which they won the cob-tail World's Grand Championship title with three different owner/



Proud trainer, Rich Campbell, prepared Ali for a third, triumphant victory pass on the green shavings at Louisville last year.

Ali and Maureen Campbell were all smiles after Heartland High Tech won the Amateur Ladies Hackney Pony World's Championship with a unanimous vote of the judges.



driver combinations. Rich Campbell, who was running from class to class that night with no time to take it all in told us, "I didn't realize what happened until it was all over and the wheels on the cart stopped!" Recognizing Matador's potential, Rich bought him for Helen and Ali because he was 'new and cool', a fresh face in the ring. Juan Rios, who made Matador a special project, took great pride in his favorite pony's triumph.

Looking back on that amazing night, Ali remembered, "It was pretty unreal. It still hasn't sunk in all the way...When I was little I wanted to win 50 titles but I don't think I can top this!" In Ali's victory pass pictures from 2015, you see a young woman with the biggest smile of joy on her face. The thrill of winning never goes away but she will tell you with total sincerity that she finds the same satisfaction in a good ride or drive, regardless of outcome. "Ali's a natural," said Rich. "You have to laugh when you look at her pictures. They are really her – full of fun."

For Helen and Ali, it is never about the ribbon. "If I just wanted ribbons I would have bought a ribbon factory," Helen emphasized. Her elation on that magical Saturday night in Louisville was driven by the joy of seeing her beloved Ali make history. "I was stunned," she remembered. "I couldn't take it in. I could only cry with joy, I was so thankful and grateful. These beasts are central to our being." Making a lifetime commitment to the animals they care for, the show horses are rarely sold; they can look forward to a happy retirement at the Florida farm.

Four World's Grand Championships were not the only cause for celebration. (SA) Kalarama's Ultimate Choice, CB Party Girl, Jolly Mon Sing and Happy Boy all excelled in the show ring last year, meriting People's Choice awards. (SA) Kalarama's Ultimate Choice earned the Five-Gaited Stallions World Championship with Tammy DeVore in the saddle. Showing Ultimate Choice was a dream come true for Tammy who said "He's the coolest! I'm very privileged to have him. There are horses in life that are born for you and he's everything I love in a horse. If he were a man I would marry him!" On hearing this Helen declared, "She's going to have to get in line! He's very special. I never dreamed I could own him. When it happened I thought, OMG... I own Ultimate Choice!" Ali, a perfectionist, chose to have Tammy show him, feeling she wasn't quite ready to do him justice. "They are the most patient owners who love their horses so much!" Tammy emphasized. "They are really good for our business."

CB Party Girl, a lovely mare who won the 2015 Adult Hackney Pleasure Driving World's Championship with Maureen Quackenbush at whip, was purchased for Helen right before the American Royal last year. Rich Campbell knew she was perfectly safe and a great choice for Helen who was rapidly gaining confidence and, equally important, having fun. Having never driven Party Girl

prior to the Royal, Helen ended a wonderful season season taking reserve in the qualifier and third in the Hackney Pleasure Driving Pony Championship. "What a sweet mare", Maureen reflected. "She absolutely loves what she does." "I'm tickled to death," Helen added. "We only had her for two weeks."

Passionate about bringing hunters to the forefront in the Saddlebred world, Ali is justifiably proud of Jolly Mon Sing, selected as the People's Choice Reserve Hunter Country Pleasure Horse for 2015. A beautiful performer, kind and gentle enough for a toddler to ride, he is described by Tammy DeVore as 'everyone's joy'. "He's at the core of my daughter's being," Helen affirmed. "When anything rocks her world he's the one she turns to."

Five-year-old Happy Boy, the People's Choice Reserve Champion Ladies Fine Harness horse, won the Ladies Fine Harness Reserve World's Championship at Louisville with Tammy on the lines. "The name says it all," said Tammy, laughing. "He's Mr. Personality and so funny. He likes to walk on his hind legs like a trick horse when we turn him out in the bull pen on his winter break. He's a love bug in his stall. I first saw him at Asheville and I think he's going to be one of the next, great harness horses."

Already showing his outgoing personality, wrapping his neck around Ali's body when she stands next to him, Northern Asset, the People's Choice Amateur Three-Gaited Champion joined the show string recently. When Helen first saw Ali ride him, the effect was 'absolutely magical'. Ali and Northern Asset together proved the maxim that the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Also a new acquisition, the wonderful, multi-titled Cherished King, who was voted the People's Choice Champion Park Stallion/Gelding, will be the perfect new fine harness horse for Helen.

Ali DeGray and Helen Rich are the best of owners who put the health and welfare of their animals first. A brilliantly intuitive horsewoman, Ali has the mental toughness to focus on the job at hand, always looking for ways to improve and gain that extra edge. Helen, an inspirational thinker who appreciates the time spent making the journey as much as the end result, captured this idea to perfection saying, "It is the 'underpinnings', not the winnings that got us there."

An unbeaten, history making record earned Ali DeGray your vote as the People's Choice Amateur of the Year. Superb performances by the top eight horses in Helen Rich's show string have earned each of them well-deserved People's Choice awards. It was a thrilling, unprecedented year they will never forget but they are in this for the long term, enjoying their animals with all of their diverse personalities for the right reasons. Helen Rich describes their philosophy best. "At the end of the day, the greatest thing we have is our love for each other, the sport, the animals and the