

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

CH Don O'Neill

The People's Choice Overall Three-Gaited Horse Of The Year
The People's Choice Open Three-Gaited 15.2 & Under Horse Of The Year

By Sara Pizzuto

Eleven minutes. Eleven minutes was the amount of time it took for the judges to tabulate the results in the 2016 Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship. For those eleven minutes, a tense Cindy Chesler sat in the stands of the fabled Freedom Hall hoping the third time would be the charm for her horse CH Don O'Neill. Her nerves turned to sheer joy when Don and trainer Chris Reiser were announced as the champions, and rode away draped in a blanket of roses. CH Don O'Neill earned the vote of the judging panel that night, and has now earned your vote as the People's Choice Three-Gaited Horse of the Year.

CH Don O'Neill's journey to success began in an entirely different division. He was destined for greatness having been sired by Undulata's Nutcracker and out of the world's grand champion five-gaited mare CH Garland's Dream (BHF). After debuting as a three-year-old in 2012, Fox Grape Farm's Dr. Owen Weaver decided it was her turn to step in the irons. He was to be her country pleasure horse under the direction of Steve and Tiffany Wheeler beginning with the 2013 season. The team achieved much success together, finishing the year as the Adult Country Pleasure Reserve World's Champion of Champions.

That same year, Cindy was searching for a country pleasure horse of her own to show. She had taken a 20-year hiatus from riding, and was looking to ease back into showing. She and Chris made an appointment to look at Don shortly following the world's championships. She was instantly attracted to the then four-year-old horse.

"He's got that zsa zsa zsu," Cindy said. "He's got some magic. He was magic, and that was it."

She purchased CH Don O'Neill in September of 2013 under the ownership of World Calm LLC. Don was placed in training at Chris' Reiser Stables in Simpsonville, Ky. Chris was eager to begin working with the new horse.

"I thought he was so beautiful," he said. "I just loved the expression on his face, and I loved his motion. From the second I saw him I was just in awe of him."

CH Don O'Neill made his debut for Chris and Cindy at the 2014 River Ridge Charity Horse Show. Good friend Lili McCutchan



Tony Rivera, Cindy Chesler, Chris Reiser and Steve Chesler teamed up behind CH Don O'Neill for the 2016 World's Grand Champion Three-Gaited win.

showed Don in adult country pleasure to qualify him for Cindy, as she was not yet ready to show. However, it became readily apparent to Chris that there was more to the horse than what was being showcased. Chris took Cindy aside and suggested that they trim him and prepare him for the three-gaited division.

"He was ornery and was just too much horse for country pleasure," Chris said. "I started working him more because I was just trying to get him to relax, and instead of relaxing he just sort of got bigger and bigger and started really enjoying it. I just started thinking 'Wow maybe I can trim this horse.'"

However, CH Don O'Neill next made a pit stop at the 2014 Asheville Spring Classic in the park pleasure division. This time, Chris was in the irons aboard Don, who was still shod for country pleasure. They ended the week as the park pleasure champions to the delight of the crowd. Cindy said that one woman even approached their stall fronts to visit with Don, explaining that she spent the entire night before

laying in bed thinking about his performance. It was this growing fan base that gave Cindy the courage to transform Don into a walk trot horse.

The Indianapolis Charity set the stage for CH Don O'Neill's first three-gaited appearance. He tied reserve in his one and only class, and Chris made the decision to send the gelding to Rock Creek. Don and Chris entered the ring to compete in a class with stiff competition.

"We got there and I looked around and I saw two reigning world champions," Cindy said. "I thought to myself 'Oh my God. What have we done?'"

What they had done in fact was create a three-gaited winner, as CH Don O'Neill won the class over the field of past champions. This success carried him through the next two seasons, picking up impressive wins at Lexington, one world's championships, and two three-gaited reserve world's grand championship titles in Louisville. As each season passed, Chris was able to learn more about Don's quirky personality and work ethic.

"He's very busy in the stall," he said. "As soon as you open the stall door, he's ready to go. Sometimes Don gets out twice a day because he gets so built up in his stall. When I can tell he is getting a little stir crazy and has already worked that day, I'll take him out in the evening and let him lunge and let him stay relaxed."

Chris explained that Don is a horse that improves with longer work. It is not always fast work, but rather an occasional trail ride or walk. Don commonly performs better at home than in the show ring, so Chris has worked tirelessly on improving the horse's confidence at horse shows. With each workout, he has tried to keep Don happy and strong, which has resulted in the two forming a formidable partnership.

"In 2016, he became very consistent for the first time in his career with me," he said. "He just got stronger, and I think that was the biggest difference. When we go back and look at his pictures from 2014, it doesn't even look like the same horse. His body has developed so much since then."

Chris credited Tony Rivera, Chris' assistant trainer and Don's caretaker, as being a crucial part of Don's show ring achievements. It was their efforts that allowed Don to grow and improve.

"He has gotten better every year," Cindy said. "2014 was a great year, 2015 certainly wasn't bad, but 2016 was more than I ever dreamed possible. I mean I bought that horse for me to show and never in my life was I trying to win the Walk Trot stake. I have always admired those horses. It's my favorite division, but that was not my goal. But I figured if we are on this path, let's just see where it takes us."

That path led the team on a remarkable 2016 show season. CH Don O'Neill picked up his first blues of the year at the River Ridge Charity Horse Show, stopping at Devon and Lexington before arriving at the Kentucky State Fair. With Chris once again in the saddle, CH Don O'Neill marched onto the green shavings, showcasing his extreme motion and animation. The team left the ring as the Three-Gaited 15.2 and Under World's Champions, with their sights set on one of the Saddlebred world's biggest prizes. Chris and Don were to return under the lights on Saturday night to once again try for the Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship. Cindy remained cautiously optimistic at her horse's third attempt to win this class.



Although he had won the class three times before on a different horse, Chris was so proud of CH Don O'Neill and his accomplishment that night. They were the crowd favorite and he'll always be one of Chris' favorites.

"He had just continued to grow up and get stronger and be less silly," she said. "But I by no means thought we were a shoe-in. The water was too deep. There were too many nice horses. But when he hit the ring in 2016, I was like 'Ok you know what, I think we have a shot at this.'"

However, their shot at the roses took an interesting turn on the Saturday morning of the three gaited world's championship. Chris had decided to deviate from Don's normal work routine in an attempt to let him rest before his big class. Yet, Don's restless stall behavior was in full effect, as the horse tore his entire stall down during the night. Thankfully, Don emerged unscathed and the Reiser Stables team was able to borrow wood and rebuild his stall. The morning's happenings would prove to have no effect on Chris and his horse. They were well prepared for what was to come at night.

"I knew from the season I was having with him that he was going to pour it on Saturday night," Chris said. "I just felt like my bond had gotten so strong with him, and I knew that he was ready for that challenge."

As Steve Buttleman sounded the call, eight entries arrived in Freedom Hall to vie for the coveted three-gaited title. The crowd supported Don, encouraging him pass after pass on the rail, and as he modeled in the strip. Both Chris and Cindy were then forced to wait for the highly anticipated results.

It was a crowning moment for the Don O'Neill team as the small but mighty gelding was called out as the Three-Gaited World's Grand Champion. An elated Chris

Reiser enthusiastically tossed his hat in victory en route to the winner's circle, while Cindy and her husband cheered from the stands.

"I saw Chris take off and my husband and I squeezed each other so hard," she said. "It was just sheer joy. I cried. I think my husband cried. The people that sat around us should have been deaf by how we screamed so loud. I'm surprised either one of us had any lungs left."

For Chris, it was his fourth time reigning supreme in this championship, having previously won it three times with An Heir About Her. Yet, it was especially moving to have achieved this title with Don.

"It was probably one of the coolest feelings to get to do it again on a different horse," Chris said. "I was just so proud of him.

I think that's what all riders look for in a ride."

Now Chris and Don will have a chance to repeat their incredible achievements in Louisville, as the team will once again return to the open three-gaited division this year. Though Don was originally bought for Cindy to show, she is content with being the spectator rather than the rider.

"As long as Don's highest and best use is with Chris in the irons, that's how we will proceed," she said. "I want to do what's right by him. He has such God given talent, and if the very best thing is for Chris to be in the irons, then that's where I want him."

CH Don O'Neill's unwavering fan club will be happy to see him once again competing against the world's best. It is their support that has helped Don earn the title of the People Choice's Three-Gaited Horse of the Year - an honor for both Cindy and Chris. Cindy noted that Don's story has given others hope that they too can take a chance and have a top rated horse.

"It's the all American story, where the little guy works hard and makes it big," she said.

Chris echoed this statement, and summarized the joy of all that encompasses CH Don O'Neill.

"Buying a country pleasure horse and having him end up being the world's grand champion three gaited horse has been probably one of the most fantastic journeys an owner and trainer can have," he said. "We have people that come up and say 'Oh my God I just want to cry when I see him' because he excites them so much. It's a really cool feeling to have people admire a horse that much."