

THE FIRST THING YOU SEE

By Allie Layos



photo by Alison Conklin

Winsdown Edgecliff, aka "Jasper," turned many heads this August with his World's Champion and World's Champion of Champion wins in the Western Pleasure division.

Cassi Wentz and trainer Tara Wentz-Goosley with Jasper after his World's Champion of Champions win. Jasper's personality comes through both in the show ring and out of it.

Last year Winsdown Edgecliff was the horse who snored when asleep, slept stretched out, flat on the ground, head under the stall door. He was the goofball who was always into something, finding toys or creating them, playing with his equine neighbors. The one who drove everyone nuts with his sucking noises, that sound amazingly like he is making raspberries. The horse who was aggravating to prepare for the show ring, because he would try his best to eat the flat iron that was used on his mane.

A year later, that's pretty much still him. But he now has a Western Pleasure World's Champion of Champions title attached to his name and an ever-growing fan club, both in and outside the Saddlebred industry. He's making a name for himself as an ambassador for the breed, and touching many lives in the process.

The 2005 grey gelding by Winsdown Hi Octane and out of Holiday Dazzle first came to Wentz Stables last spring when trainer Tara Wentz-Goosley was given the task of finding a new western pleasure prospect for customer Lynn Finelli. Before starting a large-scale search, she decided to check in with the man who had sold her one of her other favorite western pleasure horses, CH I'm Goin' Out Tonight. That was Bill Heizer.

He sent her a picture of a grey horse they called Deano, a horse they actually had intentions of trying out in the western division the following year. The flashy grey caught Tara's eye, and she decided to make the trip to Virginia to see him.

"I looked at him and thought he was just perfect for the division," Tara said. "He was big and stout enough to hold that western saddle. Sometimes those smaller petite horses get swallowed up in the tack."

She noticed also that he had a perfect spot for his neck, fluid, easy, gaits and was comfortable going at a slower pace.

"He had had the winter off, didn't neck rein, or wear a western curb, but I said we'd take him, and I never looked at another horse," Tara said.

She explained the decision to Lynn.

"I remember saying to Lynn, 'I know sometimes you don't want to buy

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Even after winning the qualifier, Cassi was surprised and thrilled when she and Jasper were named the Western Pleasure World's Champion of Champions.





Lynn Finelli purchased Jasper in March 2011. He was the first horse they looked at and they've never looked back.



Jasper and Tara Wentz-Goosley during the photo shoot for *Lehigh Valley Style* magazine. Tara believes Jasper is the perfect ambassador for the Saddlebred.

photo by Alison Conklin

the first thing you see, but when the first thing you see is absolutely perfect, you do.”

There was only one hitch in this perfect plan – she knew Lynn wasn’t ready for such an inexperienced western horse quite yet. But luckily she had an idea of someone who was – her younger sister, Cassi.

Cassi, too, had grown up in the family business. She won her first World’s Championship aboard the multi-titled Show Pleasure horse CH Lover’s Heir when she was 14, but she had spent the last six years or so away from the horses, pursuing a Master’s degree in physics. However when Jasper came along, she was just beginning a two-year break while she decided if she wanted to continue on in the PhD program. The timing was perfect.

“I said, ‘We’ll lease the horse, let Cassi show and finish him and do all that. When he’s ready for you then you’ll have the benefit of not only a great horse but a great horse who’s finished and shown in the western division,’” Tara said.

Lynn agreed to this arrangement and purchased him in March 2011. Along with a new home, Lynn also had the perfect name for her handsome new partner.

“I named him Jasper because it’s Greek for spotted stone and he’s a dappled grey,” Lynn said. “Also my hope was that he’d become ‘rock solid,’ and he has.”

But it wasn’t always that easy. Though he was a natural at the western division in many ways, they had some trials ahead of them. Two months after his arrival, he and Cassi headed to New York for their first show together. It was disastrous.

“He was horrible in the qualifier – I thought he was going to take out the whole class,” Tara said.

But the team didn’t give up – they knew they were onto something good.

Last August at Connecticut Summer Classic, they were proven right when Jasper won his first western class. Since then he’s won at every single show he’s attended.

As Tara said, “He just hit his stride.”

Riding him now is like riding a fully equitated horse.

“He’s very personable and smart and we don’t want him to get bored,” Tara said. “The creative ones get you in trouble if you don’t keep their minds active, so we do a lot of patterns, group rides, ride inside, outside, on the rail, off the rail ... you’re practically writing your name in cursive around the arena.”

All of this training paid off.

“It really was helpful when we went to Louisville in those big classes, because you could put him wherever you needed to go,” Tara said.

Tara, Cassi and Lynn all describe him as a dream to ride.

“He’s so smooth and it’s effortless to get him to go into each gait, and come down from each of them,” Cassi said. “It’s so enjoyable to come out and work with him now. Maybe not so much a year and a half ago...”

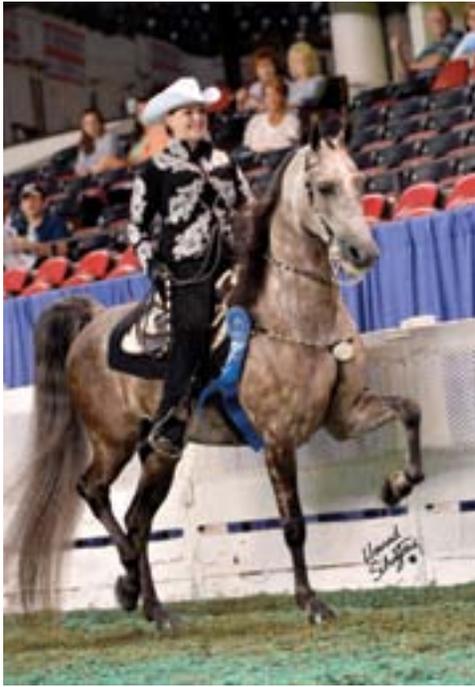
Tara and Cassi joke that when he has to halt and stand in the ring, he parks out, turns his head and looks at the judge as if he’s saying, “ta-da!”

This personality is evident in and out of the ring.

“He’s a ham, a clown, an entertainer,” Lynn said. “He’s unique. I don’t know how else to put it.”

Sometimes his antics can be aggravating; Tara recalls the time they were approached by trainer Sally Lindabury who had the “misfortune” of being stabled next to Jasper at a show. After a few days of listening to him she told them, “We’ve all taken up a pool and we bought your horse a jolly ball. He’s driving us nuts!”

Tara laughs at this memory, but she also believes that Jasper’s personality is part of what makes him such a great show horse.



Cassi and Tara said that riding Jasper is like riding a fully equitated horse.



Tara, Cassi and Jasper, all thrilled after his win in the qualifier.

“He has such a personality that just gives him that extra little edge and makes him really annoying at times, but also really likeable and expressive in the ring,” Tara said.

She also attributes his success to his conformation and true Saddlebred features.

“A horse that can win in the western division ... shouldn’t be there because it can’t do those other divisions. It should be a quality representation of a Saddlebred,” she said.

And, they believe, Jasper is.

“He’s got an incredible personality and a presence about him,” Lynn said. “He’s your ideal of a show horse. He just has an air about him that says, ‘look at me.’”

The Wentzes don’t attend Louisville every year, but knowing it was her student Loewe Kasprenski’s last junior exhibitor year, Tara had planned to make the trip in 2012. Jasper had such a winning season, and had qualified for the western division, so they decided to take him along, too.

“We just went there knowing we had two nice horses and that we’d have a nice time no matter what,” Tara said.

Though they all knew that Jasper wouldn’t be out of place there, they really didn’t enter the show with many expectations. So they were astounded

when he won not only the qualifier but the championship as well.

“I certainly thought he was quality enough,” Tara said. “Some of the other horses in the class we’ve competed against before and won, so I knew he had the potential. But anything can happen, and did I ever expect him to win both classes? No. I was blown away by that.”

Lynn was outright surprised.

“The level of competition there is incredible,” she said. “Every one of those horses is absolutely gorgeous. You just have no idea which way it’s going to go, but I was thrilled and happy that they thought our Jasper was the best.”

But if you look at Jasper’s track record, it’s not so shocking that a panel of judges found him exceptional – everyone else seems to, no matter where they go.

“He’s a great ambassador for the Saddlebred,” Tara said. “He is well-liked among Saddlebred exhibitors, other horse people and people who don’t know anything about horses. We probably get more compliments on him from other barns than any other horse.”

The line Tara hears most often is, “I just love your grey horse.”

“It’s nice to hear in an industry

that’s so competitive,” she said.

Something that particularly impressed her was the response he garnered at the Devon Horse Show this past spring.

“I have been going to Devon since I was a little girl and often times the other exhibitors don’t want anything to do with the Saddlebreds,” Tara said.

But it was a different story with Jasper, as she was approached by riders of every discipline, all wanting to pet him, to watch him, to know what kind of horse he was.

Tara has always taken any opportunity she can to promote the breed to outsiders, and when she heard last year that a local magazine, *Lehigh Valley Style*, was looking to run an equestrian feature, she knew from people’s responses to Jasper that he would be a great partner in this endeavor.

She began sending the editor pictures, captions and information about the Saddlebreds in hopes that they might be featured in the magazine.

Though the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania boasts many big hunter/jumper barns, the editors didn’t get much of a response for the western section.

“That’s how I got my foot in the door,” Tara said.

Three of their Saddlebreds were featured in the article but the photographer was, of course, particularly impressed with Jasper and he was featured in a full-bleed photo on the opening page of the story with a clearly written caption that labeled him as an American Saddlebred.

Tara is very proud of what he’s done for the breed, but what she appreciates the most about him is a little closer to home; she will always love him for what he’s done for her sister.

“This has been a great opportunity for Cassi to get back into things,” she said. “She needed a chance to refresh, mind, body and soul; she needed to come back to the horses ... to just be and just do and just ride. It was perfect timing having Jasper ... He’s done a great thing for her.”

Sometimes you don’t want to buy the first thing you see.

But sometimes, you do.