



Winter Home of Champions since 1915

Gone To Carolina Is National Champion Standardbred Eventer

By Sue Smithson: Equestrian Correspondent

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It sounds like an oxymoron: Standardbred Eventer. Even more of a contradiction is the fact that Amy and Linwood Higgins' 6-year-old Standardbred mare Gone To Carolina is a born-and-bred pacer.

After Pinehurst trainer Polie Mallar started Carolina in harness here in 2000, she won three legs of the Maine Sires Stakes and ended the year ranked third best 2-year-old pacing filly in Maine.

Fast forward to present: Carolina was recently named the 2003 Standardbred Pleasure Horse Association National Champion Event Horse. She also earned the SPHA state championship in equitation, hunter and high mileage.

"Nothing was more thrilling than receiving the (SPHA Championships)," Amy Higgins said.

After unwinding from her racing career and some light pleasure driving, local trainer Melissa Andersen took over the reins in 2001. "I told Amy I had never driven a horse," Andersen said. "But cross training would be good to make her use her body better to reinforce the trot."

With the goal of developing a pleasure driving horse that would trot instead of pace, training under saddle began. Andersen broke the mare to ride, and taught her to trot by going over single poles on the ground. Over the course of two years, the poles became jumps, and the jumps became cross country courses.

Andersen and Carolina were undefeated at introductory level events, completed the Moore County Hounds Hunter Pace, and showed in some schooling shows.

"Her work ethic is phenomenal," Andersen said. "The biggest challenge is being able to break down simple things, like transitions, or switching posting diagonals, and figuring out a way to disassociate the pacing. She is so smart, I keep her attention by putting her in awkward situations and letting her rise to the occasion."

The jumping, Andersen explained, helped the mare use her back.

"She had her head tied up with an over check (during her racing career), and now we are showing her that lifting her head is not the correct response," she said. "The whole idea was to teach her to use her body so she could go back to pleasure driving, but (the jumping) took on a life of its own. I don't really know where her limitations are."

Neither owner nor trainer have a clear idea where this journey will take them, or what discipline

the mare will end up settling into. But one thing is certain, said Higgins, “Melissa and I can’t wipe the smiles off our faces!

“What started as a simple goal of having fun with my horse and exploring her potential has evolved into a wonderful adventure with a talented trainer who believes, as I do, that Carolina can do anything. Her future holds unlimited opportunities for her versatility and this year we plan to try carriage driving again and possibly fox hunting, among other things.”

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