

# Bristol teen wins national horsemanship award

- CAROLYN R. WILSON | SPECIAL TO THE BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
- Dec 7, 2020 Updated Dec 8, 2020

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Mattie DeBord with donated quarter horse she named "Charis."

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Mattie DeBord teaching Charis how to bow.

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Mattie DeBord stands Charis in a water box to desensitize her to objects she may not be used to.  
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BRISTOL, Va. — A horse and its teenage owner have spent the past year becoming the best of friends — and a winning pair in the eyes of judges.

Mattie DeBord, 16, who took on the challenge of training her own weanling horse last September, credits hard work and dedication for helping her reap rewards as a national winner in a horsemanship competition.

The Bristol, Virginia teen won first place in the 2020 American Quarter Horse Ranching Heritage Young Horse Development Program, an educational program created in 2011 that offers hands-on horse training and scholarship opportunities.

As a member of the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, Mattie is among only 43 equestrian youths in the United States and one in British Columbia to be selected to participate in the 2020 young horse development program. There were a total of 168 applicants to the program.

Second-, third- and fourth-place winners in the 2020 competition live in locations as far away as Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa.

As first-place winner, Mattie is the recipient of a \$2,000 scholarship and custom belt buckle.

Mattie's mother, Samatha DeBord, video-recorded her daughter opening the recent email that announced her first-place win.

"I was speechless," said the teen. "I put a lot of hours, hard work and time into this program. I'm really happy my work paid off."

Probably the best part of the competition is a weanling horse Mattie received to participate in the competition. She is learning to raise and train the filly donated to her in 2019 by a Nebraska cattle ranch involved in the AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeders program. Through the horse program, the horses become the property of the participants.

Her parents, Lance and Samatha DeBord, also can be credited for going above and beyond to help their daughter succeed.

Hauling a horse trailer, the family left Bristol in November 2019 en route to the Nebraska Panhandle, a one-way 21-hour trip to pick up Mattie's donated horse.

"Not everyone would be able to commit to a long trip like this, but we turned it into a vacation for us and enjoyed the scenery along the way," said the mother.

Mattie's accomplishment is no big surprise to those who know the horse-loving girl.

She's been riding horses since she was 4, growing up on her family's beef cattle farm. She often uses her mare Pepper to help round up the cattle.

A member of the Washington County 4-H Saddle Club, she was inducted as horse ambassador at the Virginia State 4-H Horse Show in Lexington, Virginia, a year ago.

Just recently, the teen placed third out of 19 entries in the 2020 Virginia State Horse Show Photography Contest.

### **More than capable**

Mattie's father remembers that day well when his young daughter — who was 15 at the time — asked to participate in a competition hosted by the educational program.

“I told her to not get her hopes up,” said the father. “At first, it didn't cross my mind that she would win, but as time went on, I realized my daughter had a shot at it.

“I wasn't surprised by the kind of work she put into the competition. I knew she was capable.”

Mattie's mother saw her daughter's motivation shine through from the beginning.

“I am proud of the hard work and perseverance that Mattie has shown throughout the competition. She was determined to win from the outset of the program and poured her heart into it,” she said.

During the nine-month competition, Mattie and other participants were required to document her monthly progress; participate in webinars; complete monthly management assignments; track goals; and engage in mentoring sessions with local AQHA Professional Horsemen. They also had to compile videos of themselves with their horses completing assignments, including trailering, an in-hand trail pattern and more.

The first thing on her list was to write a thank-you note to Roger and Joan Timmerman in Nebraska, who donated the quarter horse to the program.

### **Setting goals**

Mattie received the donated horse when it was only 8 months old and not even halter-broken.

During their trip home, the family often stopped the farm truck to feed and water the trailered horse.

“Every time we stopped, I put the halter on and off of her. During those three days on the road, she began to calm down. I think that’s how our bond started,” said the teen.

After arriving home, she spent the next few weeks building trust and introducing skills to her new horse.

From November to this September, the teen logged 157 hours working with her sorrel horse she named Charis, a Greek word meaning grace, kindness and life.

“It’s much easier to pronounce than the foal’s registered name “SJQC Arual Blanton,” she said with laughter.

Among Mattie’s numerous goals was to teach the young horse to bow and lie down on cue.

“It was very hard, but I accomplished it,” she said.

One of her most difficult tasks was to train the horse to ground drive — an “in-hand” technique where the handler walks behind the horse and drives him forward with reins.

The technique helps prepare the young horse for when a saddle will be used.

“Ground driving was completely new to my horse and to me, too,” said Mattie, who eventually got her horse used to pulling a sulky, a light two-wheeled horse-drawn vehicle.

### **‘It takes a team’**

Mattie’s advice to others who want to participate in the program is simple and direct.

“You need the support of a team to make this work. I could never have done this program by myself,” she said.

“I can’t drive a horse trailer, so my dad took us to the vet, to clinics and whatever else we needed to go.

“I couldn’t video myself for documentation, so that’s where my mom came in handy.

“My mentor and horse trainer is Jim Frazier. I learned a lot about training a yearling with Jim’s advice.

“Crystal Peek with the Washington County 4-H helped me review reports and edit videos.”

According to Mattie, it’s not the fancy arenas at home that will help you win the competition.

“It’s keeping at it and not giving up. Anyone can do this if they work hard and show dedication,” she said. “But, remember, it takes a team.”

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