

SYDNEY LOCASCIO

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE *Junior Exhibitor Of The Year*

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Sydney LoCascio had a vision at the start of the 2022 show season. As her final year of junior exhibitor eligibility was about to unfold, she went into the ring with two distinct goals. LoCascio was determined to ultimately win a hunt seat equitation world championship aboard her equine teammate Feel That Fire GCH as well as the western medal finals with Zeppelynn GCH.

"Something that has really helped me in the ring is that I always set goals," LoCascio said. "I wouldn't say manifesting, but I always set goals at the beginning of the year and say, 'I want to accomplish these things.' I just kept telling myself that I could win and even if the goals felt big, I knew that if I worked hard I could do it. It is important to set goals and never give up on yourself or your horse."

LoCascio followed this belief en route to the 2022 Morgan Grand National. While in Oklahoma City, her goals came to fruition as the talented exhibitor was crowned both the Hunt Seat Equitation 16-17 World Champion as well as the AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal Finals victor. Sydney LoCascio successfully mastered the intricacies of two equitation seats—a remarkable achievement that helped her own your vote as the People's Choice Junior Exhibitor Of The Year.

Sydney LoCascio grew up on the back of a Morgan Horse. Her childhood was spent alongside her horse trainer mother, Manya Smalley, and younger sister, Alayna LoCascio, who both had a strong passion for all things equine.

"I have seen pictures now where my mom was giving lessons and I would be old enough where I could sit up and I would be sitting on the horse in the middle with her," LoCascio said. "I have loved horses forever because I was born into to but doing it with my mom and sister makes it the ultimate fun thing to do, because you are doing something you love with the people you love every day. It's been pretty amazing."

Sydney LoCascio entered her final season of junior exhibitor competition with her mom, Manya Smalley, as her trainer and instructor, and her sister, Alayna right beside her at their Ohio based Dreamway South. She also had two familiar faces in her equine partners, Feel That Fire GCH and Zeppelynn GCH, who she tackled the season with. LoCascio has been teamed with "Oliver" and "Kate" since 2015 and has formed a strong bond with these two horses over the past eight years.

Feel That Fire GCH has been LoCascio's teammate since her walk/trot days. The decision was made in 2019 to transition Oliver from the saddle seat equitation division to the hunt seat ranks—one that paid off as this pair earned the roses as the 2019 AMHA Hunt Seat Gold Medal Finals Champions.

"Oliver is my heart horse for sure," LoCascio said. "He had no idea how to do hunt, but he learned a whole new division and is so much happier that way and he is so loving. When he does something bad it's only because he is trying to be fun."

LoCascio additionally explained that her western horse, Zeppelynn GCH, has a tendency to act up, yet her quirks are what makes their wins together so gratifying for LoCascio. They entered the 2022 show season as the defending 2021 Western Seat Equitation 14-17 World Champions.

"Kate has her moments where she isn't always acting her best, but I think that's what makes our successes so great," she said. "I feel like a lot of people know how difficult she can be, but she knows when it's time to tune in and I love that about her."

LoCascio's mother and trainer, Manya Smalley, explained that her daughter remains calm with her mounts when showing in equitation.

"I feel that her ability to remain patient with her horses is extraordinary and has been a really important part of her success with pattern work," Smalley said. "Sydney is also extremely athletic which is a definite asset to her riding."

LoCascio and Smalley worked together to strengthen LoCascio's skills for the 2022 show season. Smalley explained that they prepared as they



Sydney LoCascio cemented herself as one of the country's best junior exhibitor riders—excelling in multiple divisions including in the hunt seat ranks with her beloved Feel That Fire GCH.



LoCascio grew up around Morgan Horses as her mother, Manya Smalley, is a trainer and instructor in the industry. She was delighted to receive PKW Personality, her first show horse, at just seven years of age.

have in all previous years and tried not to focus on it being LoCascio's final junior exhibitor season in order to not add unnecessary pressure. They set goals together and put in the necessary work and training in order to achieve them. Much of that work involved riding without irons.

"I'm a big believer in no stirrup work, so I'm pretty sure Sydney didn't get much use of her stirrups in preparation for the season," Smalley said. "I also had her ride her show horses consistently, which made her very in tune with every detail of them. We also spent a lot of time dissecting patterns in order to perfect details."

Sydney LoCascio took on the season with domination, including leaving New England Morgan with four victories and an undefeated show in equitation. She continued to blaze a trail of equitation success as she journeyed towards Oklahoma City. LoCascio explained that she had a set routine before she showed that allowed her to be mentally ready when the gate opened.

"I always listened to music," she said. "I also think the biggest thing that has become part of a routine for me is I always walked my patterns and I visualized what I wanted from the ride-what I wanted to do better this time or what I wanted to fix this time and I feel like that helped me a lot."

The efforts of LoCascio and her team at Dreamway South paid off at the 2022 Morgan Grand National. The first of LoCascio's two goals that she set months prior was achieved as she and Zeppelynn GCH were named the AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal Finals Champions, making this LoCascio's second medal victory during her equitation career. The win was made even more meaningful as younger sister Alayna earned the reserve streamers- a history-making moment for the sisters and their proud mom.

"It was a dream come true for all of us," Smalley said. "Sydney and Alayna worked so hard and remained so focused to get to that point. I can't even describe the emotions I had when the results were being read and it was down to just those two. I am incredibly proud and will forever be grateful that we shared that success together."

In addition to her medal victory, Sydney LoCascio and Feel That Fire GCH earned the round of honor as the Hunt Seat Equitation 16-17 World Champions-a

fairytale final equitation class for LoCascio. She left the ring in her last junior exhibitor equitation appearance with the accolades given to the breed's best.

"Honestly I couldn't have imagined a better way to end," LoCascio said. "I think all the hard work that not only I have done but my horses and my mom have done as well showed. I wish it could never end. It feels like it went so fast, but I wouldn't have wanted it to end any other way."

A new chapter will begin for LoCascio and her horses in 2023 as takes on the challenges of the amateur division. She said that she along with both Feel That Fire GCH and Zeppelynn GCH are looking forward to the youth and ladies amateur performance divisions with Oliver set to show in hunter pleasure and Kate being primed for the western pleasure ranks. LoCascio explained that her lengthy career in equitation has set her up for continued success in the performance division.

"I think that when you grow up doing equitation, you learn not only correct form and how to look on a horse, but you can also ride more effectively," she said. "I think it helps in pleasure too because it helps the overall picture and allows you to more effectively push your horse to be their best."

LoCascio will use the skills learned throughout her junior exhibitor career as she leaves her junior years behind and enters the amateur division. Her talents, mindset, drive, and focus in the saddle have made her one of the nation's best and most celebrated junior exhibitor riders, with an impressive and accomplished show record regardless of what horse she is showing. Those qualities will carry into the next show season as she looks to continue the dominance that the Morgan community has grown accustomed to seeing from her. Though the division will be new, LoCascio will continue to have her mom, sister, and the Dreamway South team continuously in her corner.

"As her instructor, I know everything she has put into her success," Smalley said. "The hours in the saddle and the commitment to achieving her goals is inspiring to me and everyone at Dreamway South. As her mom, I couldn't have dreamed of a better last junior exhibitor season for her. She set big goals and worked hard to achieve them. I'm absolutely thrilled for her and can't wait to see what she does next in the show arena."



Sydney LoCascio was crowned the 2022 AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal Finals Champion aboard Zeppelynn GCH-making it her second gold medal victory in Oklahoma City. The win was made even more meaningful as younger sister Alayna claimed the reserve honors.



Zeppelynn GCH has been LoCascio's western mount since 2015. They won an equitation world title together in 2021 and made it their goal to continue that success in 2022.



Mother and trainer Manya Smalley celebrated with Sydney LoCascio and Feel That Fire GCH after they were named the 2022 Hunt Seat Equitation 16-17 World Champions in what was LoCascio's final junior exhibitor appearance.