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Best of the best

Local boy a horse show champ

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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SOUTHAMPTON - Thirteen-year-old Matthew Labrie has won awards for showing horses since he was 3, but he is most proud of the championships he received last month at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in Ohio, the world's largest single-breed horse show.

Labrie, of Southampton, took first place in the American Quarter Horse Association, and in the National Snaffle Bit Association, in the "novice youth western pleasure 13 and under" division, besting 96 competitors. Described by Labrie as the "best of the best," the three-week show received more than 17,000 horse show entries and housed more than 8,500 registered American Quarter Horses.

"Every time I bring it up I get the chills," said Labrie, an eighth-grade student at Hampshire Regional Middle School.

"It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience," added Labrie's mother, Kerry Labrie, who also grew up showing horses. She was one of 10 people in Ohio rooting for her son.

He also won the reserve championship in NSBA and came in third place in AQHA in the "youth western pleasure 12 to 14" division, which included 73 competitors.

In an interview last week at the Tough-E-Nuf Stables on Brickyard Road, Labrie talked about his experience showing horses. After he lunged his horse Mona, also known as "princess," in the family's indoor horse ring he calmed her in the barn. Four-year-old Mona was wearing a sheet and cooler, which helps keep her coat just right.



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Her presence was crucial at the competition, where she was judged on her movement, headset, posture, ears, tail, saddle and more. Matthew's image was also part of the judging.

"You can't just put a cheap cowboy hat and go out there," said Eugene Labrie, Matthew's father. "You've got to look the part."

Following the family's 13-hour drive to Ohio, Labrie worked long days to prepare for the event. To practice Friday, he rode Mona from noon to 9:30 p.m. and then went back out from 1:30 to 3 a.m. Saturday. He woke up on the big day at 9:30 a.m.

It wasn't a smooth ride before the competition. Labrie was just getting out of school when his brother sent him a text message informing him that his trainer, Geno Spagnola, was hit by a truck just two days before the Labries left for Ohio.

"I was shocked and worried," Labrie said.

Spagnola did make it to Ohio but his injuries prevented him from attending the event. He matched Labrie with a new trainer from Texas, who used different techniques than what Labrie was used to. It worked out.

Labrie said he was focused on the business at hand during the competition, and that it wasn't until the judges started announcing their results that he felt nervous. Back in his hotel room, Spagnola watched the results on his laptop. When the announcer got to the top three placings, Spagnola hid under the blankets.

"He couldn't watch the final results," Labrie said.

It didn't take long for friends back home to congratulate Labrie on Facebook. He said he uses the social networking Web site to keep in contact with the "horse people" he met in Ohio. They come from Canada, Texas, South Carolina, Alaska, California and Arizona, among other places. Labrie said he enjoyed meeting people from different places, hearing their accents and sharing a common bond in the appreciation and admiration of horses.

After spending some time with Mona last week, Labrie walked into his Brickyard Road home. He took his shoes off and pointed to the walls, where pictures hung of Labrie with trophies and medals. In one photo, Labrie was age 4, and he commented "the trophy was bigger than me."

He talked about the six or seven trips he and his family made to Congress as onlookers. They would ride the golf carts, watch the horses and browse the clothes, hoes, trucks, horses and trailers for sale. "It's better than Disney for horse lovers," Kerry Labrie said.

Matthew Labrie and his father, Eugene, said they remembered thinking Matthew would come out to compete "some year."

Now, with trophies, cash prizes and gift certificates in hand, Labrie said he intends to continue to compete.

When asked how long he wants to show horses, Labrie replied, "forever. I love it."

Catherine Baum can be reached at cbaum@gazettenet.com.

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