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## From GOOD to 'GREAT'

Nicole Donahoo and Very Smart Pearl win 2024 NRCHA World's Greatest Youth Horseman

Primo\*

Primo Morales photo

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# From **GOOD** to **“GREAT”**

## Nicole Donahoo brings home NRCHA `World's Greatest Youth' title

BY HORSETRADER STAFF

The packed Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas, was a loud pressure-cooker when Nicole Donahoo and Very Smart Pearl stepped into the arena for her final go in the NRCHA World's Greatest Youth Horseman finals in February.

Then, she nailed it.

Her championship crowned a 10-year youth show path from junior rodeo to cow horse, along the way putting tools into her toolbox that she continues to build as a freshman at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

Which tool did she rely on as she entered the final? Start with her mindset.

"I remember thinking when I was trotting around in the little warm-up area before the final that my entire goal when I was driving out with my dad was to just make clean runs and make the finals," says Nicole, from La Cresta in south Riverside County. "Since I already had accomplished that, I decided I'd just go work my cow and try my best -- and whatever happens, happens."

"I really wanted to win," she adds. "But the pressure was a little bit less."

Of the different events in reined cow horse, fence work is the most challenging -- and most exhilarating. Nicole has been attracted to challenges on horseback since her parents, Richard and Natalie Donahoo, introduced her to horses at age 7.

Nicole has appreciated each step in her ladder of horsemanship, one which has reached for higher degree of difficulty along the way. From Western riding, things speeded up with gymkhana, which introduced her to new challenges like pole bending and roping. Then high school rodeo opened up a new world -- performance horses -- when cutting and reined cow horse were introduced



Danger Dingo photo

Nicole Donahoo and Very Smart Pearl, aka "Captain Jack", show at a 2023 SCRCHA event.



Nicole aboard her first horse.

Courtesy photo



Support team: Nicole's father, Richard, rodeod at Cal Poly SLO and briefly in PRCA, and her mother, Natalie.

Courtesy photo



At the 2024 NRCHA World's Greatest Youth event, Nicole took third in steer-stopping.

to the teams.

"We really got going with horses with her," says Richard, once a Cal Poly SLO steer wrestler and bull rider who vied in two College National Finals Rodeo before launching a successful law career. "We were involved in rodeo events which we were familiar with, but then she said she wanted to get into cutting. We hadn't done the western performance world -- that was her pushing the envelope."

At her first high school rodeo cutting, Nicole's coach was absent. Near an arena, she recognized Sunny McCormick and approached the Temecula-based performance horse trainer.

"I asked her if she would help me, and then we became friends," says Nicole, who had never met McCormick beforehand. "After my run, I asked her what I could improve on, and she helped me out. That was kind of where it all started."

Nicole trained under Temecula cutting trainer Ruben Mageno, and shortly after, cow horse lured her under McCormick's tutelage.

"She was like a fish that just found water," says Richard. "Cow horse is her thing, and she's been really dedicated to it."

The cow horse step wasn't without difficulties. She rode one of the family's horses -- a pole bending horse and a very nice Quarter Horse -- but it was time for the next step, a cow horse.

With McCormick's help, Captain Jack was acquired. Very Smart Pearl is a 2015 gelding by Very Smart Remedy, a \$2 Million

Sire and the seventh-highest earning reined cow horse sire of all-time. His dam, Black Pearl (by Smart Little Pepinic), a \$1 Million Sire, earned \$120,203 in the show pen for Ward Ranch in reined cow horse events, including the 2008 NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity. He is Smart Little Pepinic's top earner.

Nicole calls Captain Jack "the real deal", but the two years between his purchase and the World's Greatest Youth Horseman title were just as real.

"I had a lot of trouble with this horse going down the fence," she says. "When I first got him, I didn't know anything. So trying to play

catch up and learn so much while I have this really awesome horse who's very high-powered and wants to, you know, just handle it.

"I struggled with that for probably a year and a half," she adds. "It took a long time to overcome. When my ability caught up with his, then we were ready to go."

Her dad remembers this step well.

"The first two years, there were a lot of tears," he recalls. "They were not where they wanted to be -- together. She struggled and was frustrated. But she stuck with it. I would tell her, 'one day you guys are going to come together, and it's just going to work.'"

Nicole and Captain Jack got runs down the fence together at the Southern California Reined Cow Horse Association shows. Last summer, she relocated to Cal Poly where she is an Animal Science major and member of the



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rodeo team. Captain Jack went north with her, and they now train with Tucker and Tina Robinson at Robinson Performance Horses in nearby Shandon.

“Being around Tucker and Tina pushes me to work harder and to really think about what I’m practicing when I’m working my horses,” says Nicole, who loves practice as much -- or perhaps more than -- competing. “They make me be better.”

Last February, at the end of her final run, Tina was the first person Nicole saw in the loud Coliseum. She was standing at the fence, laughing because Nicole had almost fallen off Captain Jack during the run.

“I kind of misread the situation, and my horse just swallowed the cow -- and I was about hanging on to my horse’s shoulders,” Nicole laughs. “But we recovered and put together a good run. It was pretty funny, a little embarrassing. I would be a lot more upset about it if it had cost me -- I can laugh about it now!”

After all 11 finalists had gone

and officials tabulated and announced the 2024 World’s Greatest Youth Horseman, Nicole and Captain Jack were in the underground warm-up arena alongside Tucker and fellow NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity Champion Nick Dowers.

“It was pretty cool to get to share the moment with both of them. High fives. It was cool,” she says.

From her early western riding classes at Ortega Equestrian Center in San Juan Capistrano through high school rodeo and now cow horse celebrations, Nicole’s appreciation touches all of it. She distinguishes differences, too.

“In rodeo, obviously, you’re going for speed,” she says. “So, sometimes painting a pretty picture isn’t the most important thing. And I’d say the rodeo world is a little bit more about showing off your skills rather than your horses or the horsemanship, which can be really fun. That’s how I always think of it when it comes to roping.

“With the cow horse, I think there’s a lot of emphasis on show-



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ing unity between your horse and the rider, trying to make a pretty picture because you are judged. That's something that I've really come to enjoy," she adds. "Lately, I've been a bit more into the cow horse because my horse and I have just been getting along really well and we've had some success. Since moving up to San Luis Obispo, I've had the opportunity to show more -- it's just kind of worked out that way. I still like college rodeo a lot, too. So, I split my time pretty evenly, but definitely I get to ride my show horse more and compete more now."

The rodeo world will always be a part of her.

"High school rodeo gave me everything," she says. "It is the best program ever. It makes kids be competitive and gets them out of their comfort zone. Plus there are a lot of opportunities for leadership, and you have to maintain your grades. It's an amazing program."

Far from over, Nicole's career has left dad with many memories and points of fatherly pride.



Courtesy photo

**Nicole and Buster at Ortega Equestrian Center**

Richard says his favorite qualities are internal ones.

"Probably one of her great qualities is she appreciates the people that have helped her, and she is leveraging that and growing," Richard says. "She's had great trainers and she's had some good horses and she's worked really hard at it, but she appreciates everyone who has been a part of it."

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