



Life *After* Racing

A look at the lives of Standardbreds away from the track

From Rehab to Roadster





STEPPING UP / Owner Duncan Huyler has been competing with former trotter Gabe The Bear Dean in Roadster classes since the fall of 2020 and says that despite the 16-hand bay's size, he is one of the best at trotting the turns.

College friends connect for Gabe The Bear Dean

story by **Megan Rider**

As a product of the Hanover Shoe Farms operation, Gabe The Bear Dean was originally named Minix Hanover. But when he was purchased as a yearling by horseman Ray Schnittker, he became Gabe The Bear Dean.

The reason for the name change? Schnittker, who competed as a wrestler in high school and followed the sport closely, named the horse after two-time NCAA Division I champion wrestling great Gabe Dean, who competed for Cornell University.

While Gabe The Bear Dean initially lived up to his namesake's toughness in competition, he suffered injuries that eventually ended his racing career. The horse endured four suspensory injuries on two different legs. The last one occurred in the spring of 2018, ending his racing days. Fortunately for Gabe The Bear Dean, Ray Schnittker's wife, Janet Durso, was a polo teammate of a gentleman named Duncan Huyler at Cornell University in the early 1980s. Durso, an equine veterinarian, also kept up

“All his training is done at home on our quarter-mile track or in our 60-foot round pen. He is one of the few horses showing in our division that is amateur-owned and -trained.”

Duncan Huyler



with Huyler since he too worked as an equine vet while residing in New York.

In spring 2019, Huyler asked Durso to find him an off-track Standardbred trotter so he could give Roadster horses a try after he stopped playing polo.

“I followed the career of Dewey-cheatumnhowe and was there when he won the 2008 Hambletonian,” said Huyler. “I have great respect for Ray and Janet and the Standardbred breed. Janet told me about Gabe and his suspensory injury and said if I took care of it, he would be as good as new in six months.”

Huyler came to an agreement with Schnittker and Durso that Gabe The Bear Dean’s new home would be with him.

Although he moved to Aiken, S.C., about five years ago, Huyler grew up in Upstate New York, riding and showing Morgans and a few Saddlebreds throughout the New England region and New York. His father was a veterinarian, which spurred his interest in horses.

“I was fortunate to have great instructors, from Coby Holowacz to Woody and Louise Henry and Marsha Shepard at Bobbin Hollow Farm,” said Huyler of his early instruction in riding horses. “I showed saddle seat equitation, park, pleasure and even some Roadsters as a kid. I met my wife of 38 years at Cornell when she was on the

LET’S GO! / Gabe The Bear Dean waits to enter the ring at one of his first Roadster events in 2020. Huyler was meticulous in preparing the horse for Roadster work after an injury ended the trotter’s racing career.

riding team, and I was on the polo team in the early ’80s. After a 15-year break after college, which included four years as an Army officer at Fort Knox, Ky., I played polo for about 17 years, mostly in New York.”

Huyler is now settled on a 15-acre farm in Aiken, which is well known for its horse culture. He and his wife, Erica, currently own one of Huyler’s retired polo ponies, Erica’s Thoroughbred show hunter, Gabe The Bear Dean and a dog they rescued. Erica helps groom Gabe The Bear Dean and Huyler helps her with her show hunters.

Erica is also an “R” United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) Hunter judge. During the couple’s time in New York, she ran her own business giving lessons and boarding horses.

“Our farm’s name is Angel View Farm, which we brought with us from New York,” Huyler noted. “It is in memory of our son, Peter, who died from leukemia at the age of 2 in 1994. We have two other sons; one resides in New York City and one in Charlotte, along with one grandson.”

Huyler recalls the day he brought Gabe The Bear Dean home, and said it could not have been any simpler. Huyler met well known horse transporter Robert Lasky at the Red Lobster restaurant off of Interstate 95 in Florence, S.C. Huyler loaded Gabe The Bear Dean into his trailer and brought him back to his farm.

For the first six months, Huyler hand-walked Gabe The Bear Dean two miles a day and had their veterinarian, Keelin Redmond, track his progress with ultrasounds.

“We were pretty meticulous in his rehabilitation,” Huyler said. “I tried to do everything Keelin said.”

Gabe The Bear Dean’s first show was in Conyers, Ga., in September 2020. In 2021—his first full year of showing—he won two classes and three reserve championships in addition to being named ASAC Reserve Champion



PERFORMANCE PRIMER



Gabe The Bear Dean

6,1:56.1h—\$304,590
(2012, Lucky Chucky-Madam Hooch)
Bred by Hanover Shoe Farms

A \$105,000 yearling purchase by Ray Schnittker, Gabe The Bear Dean made it to the races at age two, won New York Sires Stakes legs and finished fourth in the final. He was winless at age three, but continued racing until he was a 6-year-old and suffered an injury. Schnittker trained him throughout his 94-start racing career.

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Gabe The Bear Dean's routine includes adjustments every six to eight weeks and a rigid schedule of stretches prior to each of his works.

"We try to manage his conditioning to minimize the possibility of another injury," Huyler said. "All his training is done at home on our quarter-mile track or in our 60-foot round pen. He is one of the few horses showing in our division that is amateur-owned and -trained."

Gabe The Bear Dean shows during the spring and fall in the Southeast. After November, he is turned out for three months before beginning to prep for the next round of shows in the spring.

"The horse shows we go to are usually at least three days long," said Huyler. "Gabe is handwalked for 20 minutes or so three to four times a day; most horses don't come out of their stalls except for when they show or work the day prior."

Gabe The Bear Dean just finished showing in the Carolinas and Georgia in Amateur and Open Roadster-to-Bike classes. At the prestigious June horse show in Devon, Pa., he earned two third-place finishes, plus a fifth in the open stake, with two world champions ahead of him in the top five.

"At 16 hands, Gabe is one of the biggest Standardbreds showing in Roadster classes, but he is one of the best at trotting the turns," noted Huyler.

He describes Gabe The Bear Dean as an extremely intelligent horse who loves his work but is a character. And he credits Rick Adams, a trainer near Atlanta who specializes in Roadster show horses, and Hall of Famer Larry Jenkins with assisting him and Gabe The Bear Dean along the way.

After the gelding's performances at Devon, Huyler couldn't help but reflect on Gabe The Bear Dean's journey to this point in his life.

"It's fun thinking that three years ago he was just off the track mending his suspensory injury. I wouldn't trade him for any of the others," he said. *HB*

Megan Rider is a freelance writer living in New York. To comment on this story, email us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.

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