

A Working Man's Dream and a Companion in Sport, the Morgan Horse Provides it All

BY MARK LLEWELLYN

In 1791, Justin Morgan, a soft-spoken school-teacher from Springfield, Massachusetts, accepted a little bay stallion as partial remuneration of a debt. By all historical memoirs, the bay stallion was small and sturdily assembled with a short back, powerful loin and voluminous muscling blanketing oblique shoulders and ample quarters. A well crested neck rose high out of his shoulders and a noble head, with delicate ears and expressive eyes, sat atop this arching neck. Legs of substance and soundness braced his compact yet mighty frame and propelled him stylishly across the ground.

Known as Figure, the horse was used by Morgan in conventional early nineteenth century ways - as a beast of burden and as entertainment. Figure drew upon his brawn to extract logs from the forest and to pull plows during the week. As a source of entertainment, Figure used his speed and endurance to

Longview Sundance displays the presence and personality of the Morgan.

fend off taller, sleeker racehorses in weekend races. Justin Morgan, as the stallion came to be known, was a contradiction. He was not as stout or as rugged as colonial workhorses or as lean or long-legged as horses bred solely for speed, but he consistently dominated his competition in each discipline.

Justin Morgan possessed beauty, strength, swiftness, endurance, soundness and tractability and

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word of these attributes spread like wildfire over New England. Stud services of Justin Morgan were offered in the Connecticut River Valley and throughout Vermont. The breeding arena is perhaps the venue in which Justin Morgan left his most indelible contributions to the equine kingdom. With fierce prepotency, Justin Morgan sired foals of unquestionable quality and structural correctness, regardless of the conformational shortcomings of the mares he bred. Although not mighty in stature, Justin Morgan's progeny were robust, stylish, clean-legged and capable of performing any task asked of them. Justin Morgan died in 1821, but his legacy persevered through the 1800s, most notably through his sons Sherman, Bulrush and Woodbury.

Descendants of Justin Morgan proved to be popular among colonial Americans. Countrymen valued the strength and determination of the Morgan and used the horses to convert mountainsides and forests into farmlands. Financiers and other businessmen, as well as men and women of society, cherished the style and elegance of the Morgan and employed them as roadsters. In the world of entertainment, Morgans excelled as harness racing horses. Ethan Allen, a great grandson of Justin Morgan, was considered the world's fastest trotting stallion.

In the 1840s, New England horse breeders, especially those in Vermont and New Hampshire, set out to locate direct relatives of Justin Morgan in a concerted effort to authenticate the foundation of the breed. Second, third and fourth generation descendants were found and these Morgan lines documented carefully.





Photo by Jay Gess Photography

The Morgan was influential in the development of several American breeds. The speed of the Morgan was critical in the establishment of the Standardbred and the Morgan's flashy, flamboyant way of going contributed to the American Saddlebred with famous members of the breed such as Bourbon King, Rex Peavine and Wing Commander tracing to Justin Morgan. The Morgan was a trusted ally during the Civil War. For instance, the First Vermont Cavalry, mounted entirely on Morgans, possessed a reputa-

tion as a formidable fighting unit. The ravages of war, however, caused Morgan populations to decline dramatically. Coinciding with this was an apparent wane in popularity of Morgans. In 1894, Colonel Joseph Battell, a horseman devoted to the Morgan, founded the Morgan breed registry in a crusade to preserve the Morgan breed. Battell was so enamored with the breed that he ensured its survival by donating his 400-acre farm in Weybridge, Vermont to the United States government in 1907 with the sole purpose of initiating a Morgan breeding program.

The United States government maintained possession of the breeding farm for several years. In 1951, the farm was relinquished to the University of Vermont where hundreds of foals have been produced. Ancestors of horses bred and raised by the University of Vermont are considered "government" Morgans, and these horses have made an exceptional impact on the development of the breed. The University of Vermont maintains a herd of broodmares and young horses in addition to standing several government stallions. A testament to the success of the University of Vermont breeding program lies in the multiple world champions it has bred.

The conformation of the modern Morgan deviates little from that of Justin Morgan. A broad forehead, prominent eyes, a straight or slightly concave nose, large nostrils, and short shapely ears define the ideal Morgan head. The neck emerges from a well-angulated shoulder with the topline of the neck considerably longer than the underline. Well defined withers blend into a short back. A closely coupled, powerful loin gives way to a nearly level croup and a high tail set. Well-sprung ribs and depth through the heart girth and flanks add substance to the overall picture. The chest should be wide, offering a generous expanse between forelegs. Ideally, Morgans should stand on a straight column of flat bone with a long forearm and a short cannon. Pasterns should be of sufficient length and angulation to provide a comfortable ride. Proper angulation of the hind limbs and a pair of strong hocks set low to the ground enable the Morgan to drive from his hindquarters with incredible strength. Durable hooves are a signature characteristic of Morgans, and they should be round and open-heeled with a concave sole. Much emphasis is placed on way of going when selecting a Morgan. The walk should be flat-footed and elastic with a distinct four-beat cadence while the trot should be animated, square and equally expressive in the rear as in the front.

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The average Morgan ranges from 14.1 to 15.2 hands. Despite its small stature, the conformation, way of going and disposition of the Morgan lend themselves well to an array of disciplines. The Morgan's power, prowess and mettle have made it a premier driving horse. Morgans are commonly seen at combined driving and carriage competitions across the United States and abroad. The Morgan is also a sensational show horse. Park saddle and harness Morgans combine dignity and flair, and perhaps most importantly, attitude to dazzle audiences with incredible action and extension. The Morgan performs equally as well as a western pleasure horse, exhibiting slow, yet animated, gaits in a workmanlike manner. The Morgan's gentle nature makes it a perfect mount in lesson programs, 4-H arenas and therapeutic riding situations.

The Morgan has not completely escaped specialization in the show ring. As with many other breeds, many Morgans are being bred with a particular purpose or event in mind, thereby diffusing the notion that all members of the breed are versatile. Some breeders, however, do aspire to produce Morgans capable of performing in a variety of disciplines. These breeders can showcase the strength, style and stamina of their horses in the Justin Morgan class. In this event, entries are asked to compete in four consecutive phases: a one-half mile trot in harness, a one-half mile at speed under saddle, a show ring presentation

at the walk, trot and canter, and finally a weight pulling contest. For the pulling portion of the event, entries are asked to pull a minimum of 500 pounds on a stone boat for at least six feet while wearing a work harness. A horse which fails to pull the boat the required distance is eliminated from the competition. Each phase accounts for one-quarter of the total score.

The Morgan breed has perhaps the humblest beginnings of any American breed. A single bay stallion, given to his owner as repayment on a debt, founded a breed which today is revered for its versatility and gentleness. 

Driven for Excellence

Lisa Singer stands by her breed of choice, the Morgan. Singer, a veteran combined driving competitor from Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, has taken a group of Morgan geldings, collectively known as “The Beasties,” and developed them into international caliber carriage horses. Owned by Mimi Thorington, the Morgan geldings have proven that good things do indeed come in small packages. In a sport dominated by larger horses, most frequently of warmblood breeding, The Beasties cannot be ignored.

With The Beasties, Singer was the first woman to win the National Pairs Driving Championship in 1994 and repeated this feat in 1997. She represented the United States at the 1997 and 1999 World Pairs Driving Championship, finishing eleventh and nineteenth respectively. Singer attributes much of her success to the innate work ethic and uncompromising willingness of the Morgan. “They know they have to work and they want to get on with it,” remarked Singer. “They have so much heart, TONS of heart. They will try very hard, sometimes too hard, to do what you want.”

Natural vigor and hardiness, as well as a docile disposition, are other qualities Singer admires in the Morgan. Unlike other international sport horses, Singer’s equine athletes are not coddled. Instead, The Beasties, all naturally easy keepers, live the majority of their lives outside. Because combined driving is a hard-knocks, rigorous sport, horses are susceptible to countless blemishes and unsoundnesses. Through years of competition, however, The Beasties have remained sound and free of blemishes, attesting to the natural sturdiness of the breed. Tractable temperaments allow Singer to work the seasoned horses without assistance, although she does enlist help when training younger horses.

Intelligence is a paramount consideration when selecting carriage horses. Singer has discovered this characteristic in overwhelming quantities in members of the Morgan breed. “What I find most important about these horses is what is between their ears,” remarked Singer.

In her Morgans, Singer has found partners capable of catapulting her to the highest echelon of combined driving. And she would not have it any other way.