

Magazine Articles

DrivingDigest

Driving a Morgan Offers Endless Possibilities

Written by Suzy Lucine

“Morgans are a very intriguing breed,” said Suzy Stafford, whose Morgan mare, PVF Peace of Mind, was the 2016 USEF International Horse of the Year. “They have many natural attributes that lend them to be exceptional driving horses. The breed is a strong, powerful type with a trainable attitude and exceptional work ethic. The breed’s power to size ratio still baffles me.

“Morgans were bred to drive,” Suzy explained. “Years of breeding traits that lend themselves to be good at the job of driving are very evident.”

When a little bay stallion was foaled in 1789 in Springfield, Mass., you would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the area who believed he would become a prolific sire and change the face of American equine history. Justin Morgan, a teacher, composer and horseman, acquired the colt and named him Figure. Later, Figure became known by his owner’s name, and went on to become the foundation of the Morgan horse breed.

Justin Morgan made a name for himself by out trotting, out pulling and out running the best horses the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions had to offer. However, his everlasting contribution to the breed came with his ability to pass his distinguished characteristics on to his offspring and several generations to follow.

During this era, equine enthusiasts were looking for horses that were gentle, easy to train, and were sound with natural ability and agility. Soon people were looking for horses that also looked good, and those rich with Morgan blood fit the bill. When they were bred, their desirable traits were repeated, thereby establishing a genetic base.

Harness racing developed in the mid-1880s, creating a new market for Morgans. They became known as the “Champion Trotting Horse of the World.” In just a few generations, Ethan Allen, a double great grandson of Justin Morgan, was foaled and earned his place in racing history, and was known as the “King of the Trot.”

Daniel Lambert, one of Ethan Allen’s winning offspring, contributed many get to the foundation of the American Trotting Horse that is today’s Standardbred.

As the breed’s popularity grew during this time, it also repeated it almost a century later with the growth of combined driving events in the 1980s. The first World Single Horse CDE Championship was held in Austria in 1998. The first brave soul to perform the dressage test out of 65 drivers was Tom Hilgenberg. Driving his Morgan gelding, Who’s Zoomin’ Who, Tom finished seventh overall. His best score came in the cones phase, which earned Tom and ‘Gus’ a medal in the first world competition.

“Tom Hilgenberg was a great competitor, “ said Larry Poulin, an eight time USEF Pairs Combined Driving Champion. “He put his heart and soul into the sport as a competitor and did a lot to promote the sport of combined driving.”

In those early years, the late George Hoffman was also doing well in Singles with his Morgan, Morgan Woods Yankee. “George was a gem of a competitor,” Larry remembered. “He was a gentleman and always scored well.”

Lisa Singer said this was a great time for the growing sport of combined driving. She remembers Bill Orth and his Morgan gelding, New Rans Hawk. They were also in the early group of stars winning world and national single horse combined driving championships.

A riding instructor since she was a teenager, Shelly Temple took her first riding lesson from Lisa Singer. Her chestnut Morgan gelding, LR Ami B-Line, won the USEF National Single Pony Championship in 2006, 2010 and 2011. ‘Cooper’ and Shelly were also members of the US team in the 2007 and 2009 World Single Pony Combined Driving Championships, and helped the team to win a bronze medal both years. Individually, ‘Cooper’ won a silver and bronze medal in dressage

In 1985, Larry Poulin won his first of eight USET Pairs Championships. He won with the Morgan father/son pair of Margaret Gardiner's Kennebec Count and Kennebec Russell. They would take the honors again in 1987 and 1989.

"When I first went to Europe with Count and Russell, many European drivers had not seen Morgans work," said Larry. "We shipped over early, before the Worlds, to do more training and to adjust after the lengthy travel time coming overseas. The morning I was warming the chestnut pair up for the dressage test, I saw this Land Rover barreling toward me. When it finally came to a stop near us, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, jumped out of the vehicle, ran over to me and asked, 'Are these the Morgans?' Obviously, word had spread about this breed of horse."

There were 45 competitors at the first World Pairs Combined Driving Championship. Larry's Morgan pair finished eighth overall, and tied for first in the dressage phase. He left Europe very pleased.

"Morgans are great horses who do well in the various sport disciplines," Larry said.

"If you are just getting involved in carriage driving, Morgans are a good breed to consider," Larry said. "They are easy and sensible to work with at the lower levels and also do very well at the FEI level when you are ready to progress.

"I look for a horse that likes to work, has a beautiful eye and good movement," Larry explained, when looking for a driving prospect. "I want it to be good mentally and to be a good listener.

"Morgans are indestructible. They are very stable and extremely strong and easy to maintain. They work extremely hard with lots of positive energy and they try to please.

"Throughout your life time, you have one or two great ones to work with," said Larry. "Count was one of those special horses. Today, drivers around the world still talk about this chestnut Morgan stallion with his flaxen mane and tail, and his athletic abilities." Lisa Singer also had combined driving success with a Count son. "We like to keep it all in the family," she said.

Lisa represented the U.S. at eight World Pair Combined Driving Championships (1995 through 2009 – on the odd calendar year), driving Mimi Thorington's Morgan

pair, fondly known as the Beasties. Lisa and the Morgans also won the USET Pairs Championship nine times and the Triple Crown of Combined Driving three times. Throughout this time, she drove different combinations of Mimi's Beasties.

"Morgans are willing, have heart, are awesome workers, maintain their strength, and most have awesome feet and most good physical being," said Lisa. "Morgans are easy keepers, but their attention span is short, so don't plan on drilling them for hours (short and sweet is better). They are like cats in hazards. Morgans appreciate more to be treated as a horse and out, than locked up. This helps their brain compute."

"I take my hat off to Lisa Singer," Larry said of his more than 30-year friendship. "She groomed for me during one of the US Pair Championships to help learn more about international competitions, then moved on to training and competing with sponsor-owned horses. There were times when I ate her dust, but the opposite was also true. She puts a lot of work into her entries and the sport, and has a strong commitment to what she does."

A long-time horsewoman, Donna Crookston took her first driving lesson with Lisa Singer more than ten years ago.

Her second driving horse was a Morgan gelding, RG Cowboys Black Cadillac. In 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2014, Donna and 'Cowboy' were members of the US team at the FEI World Single Horse Combined Driving Championships. In 2012, they were members of the sixth-place finishing US team at the FEI Single Horse Combined Driving World Championships. In 2014, they received the Bronze medal in the cones phase of the competition.

In 2013, this black gelding finished first or second in every competition they entered, ended the season as the USEF National Single Horse Combined Driving Champions. They had previously won this award in 2007 and 2008, and were Reserve Champions in 2009.

"My first Morgan was more suitable for recreational driving," Donna Crookston said. "Cowboy is my Morgan of a lifetime. He had all the traits you want in a good combined driving horse."

“Cowboy had a great work ethic, and he liked his job,” Donna continued about her gelding who now is enjoying retirement. “He came out daily ready to work in a consistent, steady, sensible and quiet manner.

“As a breed, I think Morgans are suitable for this sport as they can be solid citizens who are very dependable. This is the type of horse most of us want to drive and to use for competitions.”

In 2012, Jacob Arnold was honored with the prestigious USEF Junior Equestrian of the Year award. He was the first junior from the world of combined driving to win this honor. After a successful few years driving his Morgan mare, Spring Hollow Dark Shadow, Jacob was nominated by the American Driving Society and endorsed by the American Morgan Horse Association for this award.

Two years later, due to a medical issue, Cheryl Pratt Rivers was unable to compete for USET in the World Single Horse Combined Driving Championships in Hungary. Jacob was asked to drive her Morgan gelding, Hot Spur’s Red Row. They won the marathon phase of the CDE, and competitors once again sat up and took notice of a talented Morgan horse.

“With the sport of combined driving, you need horses and ponies that are versatile,” Jacob said. “Morgans have drive and determination and they never give up. They can manage to do all three phases of CDEs and do them well.

“Morgans are also fun to work with because they are playful and very sweet, they love human attention, and they try to please you,” Jacob continued. “Once they figure out what you are asking them to do, they try really hard to please you.”

“If you think you can force a Morgan into learning, it won’t work,” said Lisa Singer. “If you show them what you want them to do, they will learn, then they will be willing to do anything.”

Last year, when Suzy Stafford’s Morgan, PBF Peace of Mind, won the USEF International Horse of the Year award, she became the first Morgan to ever win this award, and first time a CDE Single Horse won. She was inducted into the Equus Horse Stars Hall of Fame. ‘Hunny’ also won the 2015 2016 USEF Single Horse National.

Suzy got her start with international success driving a small Morgan mare she called Courage to Lead. ('Katy' is known in the international world by her registered name, as it accurately depicts her personality.) She was the 2009 USEF Horse of the Year and won an individual bronze medal at the 2009 World Pony Driving Championships in Germany. The following year, Katy was inducted into the Equus Horse Stars Hall of Fame. Suzy drove Katy to three USEF Single Pony National Championships (2005, 2007 and 2009).

"This is the Morgan who made Suzy who she is today," said Lisa.

"Lisa Singer got me hooked on Morgans," said Suzy Stafford. "When I went to buy my own driving horse I asked her what I should buy and she told me a Morgan. I bought my first Morgan name Double M Eden Quest and competed her through advanced. When we had gone as far as we were able, I decided to sell her and strictly work for Lisa.

"Katy was at the farm in training with Lisa and she and Bev Leshner (Katy's owner) offered the pony to me as her Apprentice to train and show," Suzy explained. "This was the first equine I had true success with in the show ring, winning many advanced shows and my first national championship.

"There are many equines and people throughout my career that made me who I am today. Lisa and Katy were certainly influential in my success," Suzy said.

After winning the 2009 USEF Horse of the Year honor, Bev Leshner retired Katy. "Katy is an extraordinary mare," Bev said. "She has a heart bigger than all get out.

"She produced a filly, who has a very similar attitude," Bev said. "Lead to Courage is in training with Lisa Singer, who is bringing her along at the preliminary level."

"Suzy will be around for a long time," Larry said. "She is a lady competitor, and will be a good replacement for those of us who are starting to age out."

It is evident that from the grass roots to the international level, the popularity of using Morgans for combined driving, pleasure driving and coaching continues to grow. Several of the very best the sport has to offer will, in fact, share their wisdom and experience in clinics across the country. Many of these clinics are sold out or have standing room only.