



~ DRESSAGE ~

# THE STATE OF MORGANS IN DRESSAGE

*How the Morgan breed is positioned in one of the equestrian world's most enduring disciplines.*

By Bernadette Stang

**W**hile many breed shows have struggled to stay afloat in the wake of dwindling entries, participation in the sport-focus competitions have been relatively stable and the market gaining increasing attention.<sup>1</sup>

The attraction to sport and sport-related disciplines is evident on several levels. Sport disciplines have an objective or semi-objective scoring system often coupled with a time component versus the more subjective judging of traditional ring classes. Sport classes such as dressage, often include direct comments from the judge that gives feedback on the scores earned as well as direction for improvement. Many of these disciplines share a similar type of training and general type of movement within their (English or Western) riding style, making exploring or competing between

related sports (dressage, Western dressage, eventing, working equitation, etc.) easier and arguably takes advantage of the inherent versatility of Morgans.

It is logical that most equine sport disciplines favor breeds that are being specifically selected for that sport or purpose: Quarter Horses dominate the events of reining and cutting, Arabians are overwhelmingly represented in the sport of endurance, and Warmbloods are considered the breeds of choice for show jumping, dressage, and eventing. However, more and more non-traditional breeds, such as Morgans, are also competing successfully and making their presence felt at the highest levels. But how competitive are Morgans against those specialized breeds, particularly in dressage?

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**ABOVE:** Lucy Tidd and GKB Coal Magic.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Sean Cunningham and Greentree Ever Reddi; Jen Drescher and Blueandwhite Raven (photo © High Time Photography).

The sport of dressage is designed to recognize excellence both on a local/regional level with show championships and high-scores in a variety of sections (i.e. Open, Adult Amateur, and Junior/Young Rider), as well as on a national level through All-Breeds and Horse of the Year Awards. Other national organizations (such as US Equestrian, American Morgan Horse Association, National Dressage Pony Cup, and the Morgan Dressage Association) offer similar accolades.

However, it cannot be over-emphasized that arguably the highest achievement in dressage is a horse and rider moving up through the levels to the peak of the dressage training pyramid—Grand Prix. The appeal to this challenge rests in the level of skill and partnership required of the horse and rider as the higher the level ridden, the greater the physical and mental demands are made upon both. These demands are reflected by the fact that the number of competitors decreases as the level increases. For example, the number of horses in 2017 (regardless of breed) that *qualified* for the United Dressage Association (USDF) Horse of the Year standings noticeably decrease as one moves upwards from Training Level (526), to the mid-levels (Third Level, 369) and finally Grand Prix (176).<sup>2</sup> As indicated previously, many organizations reward this demanding climb up the levels with life-time achievement awards for both riders and horses that recognizes the consistency and dedication required.

The Morgan Dressage Association's database shows the number of Morgans that have competed in dressage at Third Level through Grand Prix in dressage. Overall, these numbers continue to increase with more Morgans now having a notable presence at the FEI levels. For most competition years, there are Morgans showing at most, if not all levels through FEI (I-2 and Grand Prix being

the least consistent) as is seen in the USDF All-Breeds and Horse of the Year (HOY) standings. It should be noted that qualification for USDF year-end awards is a significant achievement in itself, regardless of breed. Just to be eligible for USDF All-Breeds or USDF HOY requires a median score of 60 percent or higher calculated from a minimum of eight scores (four scores for FEI) under four different judges at four different USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized competitions—including two scores at 60 percent or higher from the highest test of the level.<sup>2</sup>

### THE BIG PICTURE

As would be expected, Warmbloods tend to have more All-Breeds/HOY eligible competitors at more levels than non-Warmblood breeds. Nevertheless, Morgans do hold their own both in scores and at the levels shown (including a consistent presence at FEI)—a noteworthy accomplishment especially considering the lower number

of Morgans showing. For example, there were 628 Morgans registered for USDF All-Breeds Award eligibility at the beginning of 2018, significantly less than Quarter Horses (978) and Arabians (2,214) or more popular Warmblood breeds such as Hanoverians (3,418), Trakehner (1,151), and KWPN (3,441).<sup>2</sup>

Also it is important, when making comparisons to Warmbloods, to realize that Morgans have been selecting for sport for a far shorter period of time. The one notable exception would be the Government Farm program in the 1940s and '50s that focused on performance testing of three-year-old Morgan horses with the "purpose of determining the characters associated with performance and whether these characters are inherited and therefore can be used in the selection of breeding stock."<sup>3</sup> Overall, many of the parameters the Government Farm focused on were very simi-

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**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Josephine Trott and HD Redford (photo © Mattie Tucker Photography); Deb M'Gonigle and Forsite Renior (photo © Howard Schatzberg).

lar to those evaluated in the 100-Day Stallion Trials: basic gaits, endurance, temperament, and trainability.<sup>3, 4</sup> It is noteworthy that these parameters, as taken as a whole, basically evaluate the versatility and ridability of the horse—traits for which the Morgan breed has long been known. The Government Program was discontinued circa 1950.

In comparison, many of the Warmblood breeds/registries have been in existence for centuries (e.g. Hanoverians (1735),<sup>5</sup> Trakheners (1732)<sup>6</sup> and Oldenburgs (1700–1800s).<sup>7</sup> While, like Morgans, many Warmbloods were used during the war and in the fields (such as the Trakehner), and in harness (for years, the Royal Coach horses of the Queen of Britain were Oldenburgs<sup>7</sup>) there have been decades of specific breeding selection aimed toward excellence in the Olympic events, so much so that the term sport horse is generally specifically associated with Warmblood breeds/registries. In essence, Morgans are still in their infancy in regards to breeding for equine sports such as dressage.

## MORGANS COMPETING IN DRESSAGE

It is important to realize, particularly in regard to the open divisions at the middle and upper levels, that the high scores seen in the top of the USDF rankings are not a simple reflection of purpose-breeding for dressage. Gifted, ambitious riders paired with exceptionally talented horses coupled with owners that have dedicated (unlimited?) funds tend to equate to exceptional performances in the dressage court. Internationally ranked U.S. trainers such as Steffen Peters, Heather Mason, Jan Ebeling,

and Laura Graves are U.S. riders that predictably dominate the top places in both their respective All-Breeds Awards and HOY rankings. While the Morgans and other non-traditional dressage breeds are not competitive against these types of horses and riders, neither is anyone else.

Despite all of these caveats, Morgans are consistently competitive, even against some of the top performing dressage breeds. For instance, from 2011 to 2018, the highest median Morgan All-Breeds Open score was often high enough to place in the top ten (some-

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times in the top five) of some of the most popular Warmblood All-Breeds Award standings. Morgans have also been listed by the USDF as one of the top twenty breeds amongst the Great American/USDF Regional Championship Participants for 2016 and 2017 based on number of participants. Over 80 breeds were represented in the 2017

Regional Championship series.<sup>8</sup>

This is even truer at the Adult Amateur level, which is significant because most Morgans are ridden by Adult Amateurs, not professionals. In 2018, the top Morgan at Training Level (69.778 percent) scored higher than the All-Breeds AA Champions for Trakehners (69.467 percent), International Sporthorse/Oldenburgs (68.883), placed reserve in NA Danish Warmbloods and Holsteiners, and would have been in the top five for KWPN, and Hanoverians.<sup>2</sup> First, Second and Third Level (no Morgans were listed for Fourth Level at All-Breeds for 2018) showed similar trends; Morgans would have placed in the top ten, often top five in many of the Warmblood registries/breeds.





LEFT TO RIGHT: Margaret Bailey and Kennebec Jester (photo © Ree Photographics); Margaret Bailey and Kennebec Ladyhawke.

While FEI is difficult to compare as fewer Morgans are shown at that level, it is worth noting that the 2017 Reserve Champion in the Grand Prix Freestyle Adult Amateur Championship division at the US Dressage Finals was a Morgan (Blueandwhite Raven with his rider Jen Drescher); Greentree Ever Reddi and her rider Sean Cunningham placing fifth out of 71 qualifying horses in the USDF Final Year-End Standings at First Level Musical Freestyle in 2013. Kennebec Ladyhawke and Margaret Bailey were the Region 8 Adult Amateur Third Level Champion in 2011, and the Morgan stallion GKB Coal Magic was Region 1 Adult Amateur Champion or Reserve Champion at Prix St Georges or Intermediate over multiple years (2010–2014) as well as being in the top ten in the Adequan®/USDF Final Year-End Awards Horse of the Year at Intermediate I out of over 50 qualifying horses and riders in 2012.<sup>2</sup> In 2018, HD Redford and his rider, Josephine Trott, were ranked 7<sup>th</sup> out of 21 qualifying horses

at Intermediate II, and Margaret Bailey and Kennebec Jester were 12<sup>th</sup> out of 135 qualifying horses in Adequan®/USDF Final Year-End Adult Amateur Awards at Second Level. Deb M'Gonigle and Forsite Renior were top ten out of at Adequan®/USDF Final Year-End Vintage Cup Intermediate I Open Awards. These achievements were against all breeds, not just Morgans.

Morgans also have consistently been a strong presence at National Dressage Pony Cup (NDPC) at the FEI. Avatar's Jazzman and Lauren Chumley were Champion or Reserve Champion at FEI Test of Choice Open for three consecutive years, and V Back In Black with Brynne Varvel were FEI Pony Champion or Reserve for three years in a row as well. This trend went one step further in

2017 as three of the four ponies competing at FEI TOC Open were Morgans, with 2016 defending champions Debra M'Gonigle and Forsite Renior (Intermediate-1) going home as Reserve Champions, Avatar's Jazzman and Lauren Chumley (Grand Prix) just behind them in third place, and fourth place going to M'Gonigle and her other stallion, Forsite Zephyr. 2018 show a similar trend with Avatar's Jazzman pinned as Champion at both FEI Test of Choice and Musical Freestyle Open. And while the National Dressage Pony Cup focuses on spotlighting more diminutive dressage mounts in general, Morgans as a breed are not overly represented in the entrant numbers, making their continued presence at the FEI levels noteworthy.<sup>9</sup>

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#### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Dressage has slowly been adapting to the changes seen in the industry—both in the demographics of the types of riders (aging baby-boomers, primarily women) and the

increased cost of owning horses as the U.S. population becomes more and more urbanized effecting participation in shows overall.<sup>11</sup> One of the adaptations in dressage has been a more welcoming attitude toward non-traditional breeds and ponies; a point illustrated by the popularity of the National Dressage Pony cup and by the USDF webpage devoted to ponies in dressage (“Ponies are an ever growing demographic in the US dressage scene”). In 2019, the USDF also has recently introduced a Regional Schooling Show Awards program.<sup>12</sup> These non-recognized competitions often see a greater proportion of non-traditional breeds in participation, such as Morgans, and are increasingly popular due to their reduced costs.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Lauren Chumley and Avatars Jazzman (photo © Joanna Jodka); Brynne Varvel and V Back In Black.

As we have seen, Morgans are competitive in open competition venues and should be an attractive option as an equine partner for smaller, adult amateur women due to the breed's reasonable cost, more manageable size and willing disposition.<sup>13,16</sup> A search of online forums, such as *Chronicle of the Horse*, will reveal multiple threads on this increasing popularity of smaller dressage horses and favorable reviews of non-traditional dressage breeds. These discussions often include Morgans, due to the breed's personality, hardiness, more appropriate gaits for older riders, and affordability especially in comparison to Warmbloods. However, the question is still often raised as to why the breed has not caught on in greater numbers for dressage.

Sport Ponies (e.g. German Riding Pony, North American Sport Pony, Danish Sport Pony) were developed in the middle to later part of the twentieth century initially as competition-quality ponies for children and youth to ride in sport horse competitions, but now

are filling a need for smaller horses with more rideable gaits for smaller, older adults as well as youth.<sup>13-16</sup> The growing popularity of the NDPC (which also includes small horse awards) as well as the popularity of smaller breeds such as Welsh Cobs (demonstrated by the success of the US Nationals Grand Prix Freestyle Open Champion, North Forks Cardi, a Welsh Cob) is further evidence of this growing interest and reduced bias against more diminutive dressage mounts. While it seems that this would be an obvious fit for Morgans, with the exception of a handful of Morgan breeding programs dedicated toward dressage/sport, the breed as a whole has not taken advantage of this potential niche and therefore does not tend to it promote aggressively as such.

**“One way to elevate our breed’s presence in dressage and perhaps even make them more sought after as dressage mounts, is to participate in dressage not only within, but especially outside the breed show circuit.”**

One reason for this is that the Morgan breed is known primarily as a show horse—particularly in regards to park and English pleasure (i.e. the saddle seat divisions). This stereotype tends to be off-putting to sport enthusiasts because the training and way-of-going of a horse for saddle seat divisions is very different than what is required for dressage. Retraining tends to be time-consuming and expensive—a significant drawback in a sport that already requires a long-term investment in time and training of both the horse and rider. It is not to say that there are not show horses with exceptional talent for sport, or individuals that were easily re-trained to their new sport vocation, but on the whole, the stereotype is a promotional hurdle.

In marketing for dressage, breed enthusiasts often miss an important point when trying to promote and sell their Morgans for sport. Unlike selling within “Morgandom” where the primary focus is a love of the breed itself, a dressage person is looking for a horse that will help them have fun and be successful in the discipline they are passionate about. The difference is important, because to present and promote a Morgan credibly for dressage or sport in general, a knowledge base of that sport that includes an understanding of what physical and mental characteristics are necessary for success in the sport is essential. Assuming that a dressage rider will buy a Morgan just because it is a Morgan is a serious mistake.

Not that long ago any Morgan competing in dressage, regardless of the level, was a laudable achievement. But we are well past that point, and need to understand that most dressage riders are not looking for a Training or First Level horse; they are



looking for a horse with the expectations of finishing well past the lower-levels. Therefore if we, as breeders of Morgans for dressage and related sports, expect to be taken seriously by open dressage enthusiasts, we need to share those expectations and set our goals not on a Training or First Level horse, but on a horse that has the talent to move well past lower levels thru to at least mid—but preferably to FEI. These are the horses and programs that attract the type of rider that is necessary to help to establish a serious market for Morgans in dressage (with accompanying increases in demand and prices).

## PROMOTING OUR BREED

One way to elevate our breed's presence in dressage and perhaps even make them more sought after as dressage mounts, is to participate in dressage not only within, but especially outside the breed show circuit. Venues that are open to all breeds, whether they are schooling shows, clinics, or recognized competitions provide a captive audience that often is very receptive to an attractive, well presented, trained, and ridden Morgan. It also gives us chances to observe horses (often at all levels) that demonstrate what is desirable in a dressage horse, and to see horses from programs that are successful. Volunteering at competitions, particularly as a scribe, is also valuable for breeders that are focusing on producing Morgans for dressage and related sports.

However, it is important to realize that the promotion of Morgans in dressage needs to be within the Morgan community itself as well. Supporting dressage at breed shows, whether as a volunteer, competitor or a spectator, sends a message to the show management that the sport is popular and worth offering. Attending breed shows also presents an opportunity to share positive experiences and enthusiasm in regards to dressage to non-

dressage Morgan folk. There are many dated, misconceptions that persist within the breed about both dressage and the suitability of our breed. Taking the time on a personal level to share our own passion for the sport, as well as the successes of all sizes and types of Morgans is a powerful tool to correcting those misconceptions and opening up a positive dialog about the sport.

Also, making an effort to share dressage-related news within our breed organization and on breed-related Facebook pages can send a strong, positive message that dressage is fun and Morgans are well received and competitive.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

As is evident, the current state of Morgans in the dressage is not a straight-forward narrative. On one hand, it is certain that the breed has the ability to be competitive all the way to Grand Prix—even against traditional Warmblood breeds. On the other hand, there is a very legitimate question as to why Morgans have not caught on in greater numbers for dressage, especially considering an increased popularity of other non-traditional breeds (e.g. Welsh Cobs and Arabians) and the growing interest in smaller horses in general. The answer to this question is important not only for Morgan dressage enthusiasts, but also in the bigger picture of the future of Morgans. Increasing the number of Morgans in dressage and other sport disciplines will not only bring new and more people into the breed, it will also help to maintain the phenotype that is essential to maintaining the versatility of the breed itself.

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