

Stayner Haller Has Found His Perfect Challenge

By: Kate Dernocoeur
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A stubborn horse and rider from Michigan turned out to be just the right match for each other.

On paper, they seem an unlikely pair to be winning events. Stayner Haller turned 70 in August, and his Morgan mount, L.G.M. Challenger, is 24. But they've been in the ribbons at events throughout the Midwest, most recently winning the Area VIII Training Level Championship at Richland Park (Mich.) in August, and completed their 100th event together at South Farm Horse Trials (Ohio) in July.



In fact, out of 102 horse trials beginning in 1995, said Haller, he and "Chally" have jumped clean cross-country 97 times and double-clean 77 times. They have 81 clean show jumping rounds, 79 of them double clean. The pair has finished on their dressage score 60 times.

Things weren't so stellar in the beginning. When Haller saw a 9-year-old Morgan listed for sale in the "Wheeler-Dealer"—a sell-anything circular in the Lansing, Mich., area—in October, 1992, he figured it was worth a call.

"I asked how big the horse was, and they said 14.3. I was looking for something 15.1 or 15.3. But then I asked, 'How big can he jump?' and they said, '3'9'."

"You mean 2'9"?" he asked.

"No, 3'9"."

Haller, who had never jumped that high, decided to take a look.

"When I walked in, he looked at me like he was interviewing me for a job," recalled Haller, who said the horse, an idle 4-H project, was at least 150 pounds overweight and hadn't been cantered or jumped for months. "I was struck by how he looked right at you.

"The trainer got on and pointed him at a big jump without even a circle, put a leg on, and, man, you should have seen him light up. He boomed over it!"

He negotiated a one-month trial lease, and, sensing that the horse needed some discipline, Haller gave it a try. "What a joke. I rode him two weeks on the flat and thought, 'This horse is too stubborn for me. I can't get along with him.' But I thought I'd jump him one more time."

When Chally jumped, Haller had never felt such power. "That's when I said, 'I like him!'"

Finding Their Niche

Haller, whose 5'4", 143-pound physique is just right for Chally's compact Morgan build, has always been athletic. At Sacred Heart High School in Dearborn, Mich., he played hockey and baseball and was both guard and tackle on the football team, too. He also caddied at Dearborn Country Club, taking runner-up in their Caddy Championship in 1954. He taught and played golf "very seriously" until 1976.

Haller's start with horses was an outgrowth of his passion for big-game hunting. "I had to learn to ride to go hunting in British Columbia in 1970," said Haller, who signed up at a Western trail-riding stable. Over the years, he has bagged such trophies as moose, Dall sheep, and "one very large caribou," although the Rocky Mountain bighorn still eludes him.

When his daughter, Laurie, now 37, asked for riding lessons at age 10, one thing led to another. When she was 16, Haller got her a nice Thoroughbred named Easy. After watching Laurie at hunter/jumper shows for several years, Haller decided to give English riding a try.

Haller decided to try the jumper classes in 1997.

"He was an absolute killer in the jumper ring," he said of Chally. They qualified for the Morgan Grand Nationals in Oklahoma City. "There were 11 horses in the jumper division, and Chally ended up reserve world champion jumper!"

Haller was 60 years old that year.

Athletic though they both are, it took more than athleticism to hammer out their legendary partnership. Although supremely self-assured, both horse and rider are notoriously strong-willed and stubborn.

Cheryl Connell-Marsh, a 29-year veteran dressage trainer and judge, has been Haller's dressage coach since shortly after he got Chally. "He was already a strong jumper rider. He came to me to learn dressage, and I was the fourth or fifth trainer he'd gone through."

She recalled that it was terrifying to watch Chally canter at their first lesson. "He was completely unbalanced and had out-of-control speed," she said. "It was horrific."

But she saw something unusual about the horse. "Chally knew that he was special. I could sense how hard he wanted to do [whatever we were working on]. It didn't matter what it was, he wanted to do it right so badly," she said.

Haller admits he's also bull-headed: "The two of us are two of a kind. I am very stubborn, so when we disagree, we really disagree! If there were ever a horse with the right name, 'Challenger' is it. He'll challenge anything, whether it's the jumps or authority."

(The "L.G.M." in Chally's name stands for "Looking Glass Morgans," the Williamston, Mich., farm where Chally was born and raised.)

Haller recounted a night when it took 3 1/2 hours to get Chally to take the right lead. "I wouldn't let him outlast me. We've had some bad arguments, and I don't always win—but I don't let him know that. I try to find a compromise."

One early battle was Chally's introduction to water. "I went to put him in a creek in Rose Lake Wildlife Area, and I couldn't get him in. There's a footbridge, and people were looking at me because I was trying and trying. We spent about an hour and a half on a hot July day. There were mosquitos. He smashed my leg on a tree, and he was all lathered. Finally, he offered to go forward to the water. He put his head down, I put him on the buckle—and he went right in. As long as it was his idea, he was going to do it, but there's no way I was going to make him go in the water. He's just not a horse you can dictate to."

A Unique Bond

Over time, Haller and Chally have changed, said Connell-Marsh.

"At our first lesson, midway through, Stayner lost his temper and yelled at Chally," she said. "I called him to the center and said, 'I won't tolerate this. Ninety-nine percent of the time, it's your fault when something goes wrong, not the horse's. I can leave now and not waste your time.'"

Now, 12 years later, she said, "What's fun is not what they've done—which is considerable—but really to watch the two of them and how they've grown into this mutual adoration and respect for each other."

It's easy to see their unique bond. The little man and the little horse have carved out an iconic reputation, and it's hard not to stop and cheer them on when they are announced on course. After-wards, because things usually go well, Haller's face is engulfed by his wonderful smile, which Connell-Marsh describes as a "delightful, lopsided Popeye grin."

Their topnotch record is partly due to Haller's attention to detail and commitment to preparation. "At events where I'm familiar [with the cross-country course], I may walk only two or three times," he said. "If it's a new course, even if I'm familiar with the grounds, I'll walk a minimum of three, preferably four times."

He frequently walks his show jumping courses five or six times. "The first time, I'm getting to know the track, the second, I'm planning the ride, and it's all finetuning after that," he said.

According to Michigan event rider, Jennifer Lewandowski, "Stayner remembers every course he's ever ridden. When we walked Spring Bay [Ky.] this year, he knew last year's course, every piece of footing."

Lewandowski, a preliminary-level rider hadn't seen Haller since they were neighbors when she was a preschooler. In 1995, Haller and Chally came to her barn. When he expressed an interest in eventing, she offered to introduce him to cross-country jumping at an upcoming schooling day at Hunter's Run Farm in Metamora, Mich.

"He was excited, but cautious. He was nervous that the jumps wouldn't fall down," she said. "I remember he gave me this speech that he'd never go higher than novice, because he didn't want to hurt Chally. He was worried about that from the first day."

It took only seven novice-level events before Haller and Chally moved up to training. As of August 2007, they had completed 94 training level events (plus one preliminary event, when Chally was 19).

Lewandowski remembers playing with Haller's daughters as a child and credits Laurie with her love of riding. Haller—also a woodworking hobbyist—had crafted a play barn for Laurie.

"I didn't even like horses until I started playing with Laurie's barn," said Lewandowski. "I really think my love of horses started there."

With his woodworking skills, Haller has made many things, including a beautiful stall nameplate for Chally. A work-in-progress is his handcrafted getaway cabin, which he shares with his wife of 41 years, Geraldine, on the Au Sable River in Grayling, Mich. His daughters, Laurie and Carol, 36, and six grandchildren all live nearby.

Haller graduated from the University of Detroit dental school in 1963. After finishing endodontist training there in 1967, he established his endodontist practice—still thriving—in Lansing.

But to those who know him as an event rider, it's all about Chally. "He's got person-ality and then some; he's mischievous as all hell. He's always trying to get one up on you," said Haller.

Chally is renowned for "serious misbehaviors," as Haller calls them. "But he means no harm; he just means 'pay attention to me!'"

For example, one February feeding, he said, a carrot fell through the bars of his stall. "I thought I'd be a nice guy and go in and get the carrot. While I was bent over, he went to his water bucket, took a mouthful and spit it down my neck—in the middle of February! I couldn't get mad at him."

In October 2006, Chally fractured the lateral splint bone on his left foreleg.

"He dropped his head, and I thought he'd stumbled," recounted Haller. "After three strides, he dumped me in a puddle, and he went off carrying his foreleg in the air. It looked very, very bad."

Haller went to visit Connell-Marsh the day Chally hurt himself. "I knew looking at his face something horrible had happened. I thought Chally had died," she said.

But after 21/2 weeks of stall rest, Chally was ready for rehab. "I was permitted to handwalk him around the arena and then down the road. The last couple of weeks, I was going 3 to 4 miles a day."

Lewandowski caught him handjogging the horse up and down the road for miles. "He was leading him and running when the horse was in rehab last year, to get him reconditioned. He's 70. He's a rock!"

Connell-Marsh credits the transformation she's seen in Stayner to Chally: "A hundred percent isn't good enough for that horse. He has a heart like few I've seen. The way that man has softened over the years is amazing to me. That horse has taught him love."

When tornado-force winds ripped down stabling tents at Richland Park Horse Trials in August, the horses waited out the storm in their trailers. Haller spent the six hours of bad weather in his small Keifer trailer, arms around the neck of his beloved Chally.

This fall, Haller plans to retire his equine partner from competition—but never from his heart.

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