

WORKING EQUITATION, MADE FOR MORGANS

Riders are finding our breed has a talent for this growing sport.

By Bernadette Stang



GATE

Coulee Bend Kahlua (CN) & Emily Gill
(photo © Kristina Powers/Silver Stallion Photography).



SPEAR RING

Wicked James Blonde & Katherine Lowry.

Looking for an equestrian sport that rewards the athleticism and versatility that has long been a hallmark of the Morgan breed? A discipline that combines the skills of a ranch horse, the precision and beauty of dressage, the confidence and adaptability needed for trail, plus adds the excitement of a speed event? A sport that you can ride the style you prefer, English or Western? Then Working Equitation is the sport for you and your Morgan!

The sport of Working Equitation was developed to maintain and showcase the riding and horses traditionally used for working cattle in southern Europe and France. These horses (such as the Italian Murgeses, Camargues of France, and Iberians of Portugal and Spain) were quick, agile, athletic animals that were ideal for working the more aggressive breeds of cattle found in the region. Originally started in four countries (Portugal, Spain, France, and Italy) Working Equitation has been an international sport since 1996, with the first European championship held that same year in Italy. From its European origins the sport has quickly spread to almost 20 other countries, including the United States.

While the World Association for Working Equitation (WAWÉ) is the sport's international regulatory body, each country has their own governing bodies. Until recently, there were two main organizations for Working Equitation in the United States: WE United and the Confederation for Working Equitation. However, in 2020, the boards of the two organizations began the process of consolidation and, as of 2021, Working Equitation competitions in the United States are held under one regulatory group, USA Working Equitation (USAWE.org).

Similar to other multi-phase equestrian sports, Working Equitation competitions are made up of a minimum of three trials: Dressage, Ease of Handling, and Speed. A fourth (Cattle Trial) is sometimes offered as an optional element but isn't included in the overall placings for the official Working Equitation competition.

DRESSAGE TRIAL

Dressage tests are somewhat similar to those used in USDF/USEF Introductory through FEI levels, with each level having a prescribed test which increases in difficulty as the level increases. It is performed in a "short court" (20 x 40 meters), with competitors scored from "0" (not performed) to "10" (excellent) for each movement and, as with traditional dressage, the final score includes collectives that judge gaits, impulsion, submission, and rider effectiveness. The goal is to develop a horse with the collection and engagement to



CATTLE TRAIL

LBF Bella Flora & Kat Waters.



BRIDGE

Lisa's Captain Jack & Rob Zimmerman.



SPEAR RING

Fortunate Destiny & Barbara Harris.

compete at the upper level of the sport (Masters) where highly collected movements are ridden using only one hand on the reins.

EASE OF HANDLING (EOH) TRIAL

Horse and riders are tested on a course designed to mirror the types of obstacles that would be encountered in the field. Obstacles often include a combination of a bridge, a pen, a slalom between vertical posts, a jump, spearing a ring with a pole, opening and closing a gate, side passing over poles, and a figure eight around barrels or drums.

One obstacle that has become a signature for Working Equitation is Spearing the Ring. Spearing the Ring is usually performed in conjunction with the Remove and Replace the Pole obstacle, with the competitor picking up an eight to 11.5-foot pole (called a *garrocha*) from the one barrel, skewering a ring with the tip of the pole, and then putting both the pole and the ring into the second barrel. Often the ring is affixed on top of a wooden silhouette in the shape of a bull as the obstacle is designed to test the horse's confidence, with a nod to the tradition of working cattle on horseback.

Competitors can be disqualified for multiple refusals at the same obstacle, knocking over an element of an obstacle, crossing through an obstacle they have not yet performed, switching the hand with which they are working obstacles, or going off course. For a good score, the horse must maintain gait as prescribed for the level of competition, starting at a walk or trot at the Introductory level, and progressing to a canter/lope at the upper levels. Difficulty of transitions in and between obstacles also increases as horse and rider move up the levels, with flying changes of lead required starting at Intermediate B/Level 5.

Ease of Handling differs in several important aspects from traditional trail classes. Judging is based on a dressage rubric (0–10 points), in comparison to conventional trail which adds or subtracts from a base score of 70 and features a more limited obstacle scoring system (seven obstacle scores from +1.5 to –1.5) and more extensive list of penalties. Working Equitation also judges the performance of the rider with collective marks focusing on the rider's position and seat, use and effectiveness of the aids, and appropriateness of tack and attire. Evaluation of gaits (correctness, freedom, and regularity) are also included in the collectives.

SPEED TRIAL

The third phase is the Speed Trial, which is designed to test the ability of a horse and rider to navigate an obstacle course as quickly and accurately as possible. The speed course is first required at Novice A (Level 2) and is a timed, not scored, event. The final time is calculated by taking the raw time, subtracting seconds for any bonuses (such as successfully spearing the ring), and/or adding seconds for any penalties earned (such as knocking over or dislodging any part of an obstacle). As might be expected, the Spearing the Ring obstacle adds a level of excitement as competitors balance having to slow down enough to successfully earn a time bonus against tackling the course as quickly as possible and potentially incurring penalties.

CATTLE TRIAL

Cattle trials are not offered at all Working Equitation events. Each individual team member, with the help of a team of three or four riders, has three minutes to move a designated steer into a holding pen. The clock

stops once the steer has entered the holding pen, the rest of the cattle are all in a containment zone, and the rider's horse is outside the pen. The fastest individual time determines final placing, with failure to move the steer into the pen within the time limit resulting in no points awarded.

Another appeal of Working Equitation is its encouragement of different ethnographic and cultural styles of riding, helping to preserve the equestrian traditions, tack, and attire of each nation. While it is most common to see riders compete in Western or English saddles, it is also not unusual to see Australian saddles or the tack and turnout associated with the traditional Spanish (Doma Vaquera) style of riding. Working Equitation is a sport that is inclusive of all ages and levels of riders, offering amateur, open, and youth divisions. While all breeds and sizes of horses are welcome, the overall athleticism necessary for Working Equitation make it particularly well-suited for Morgans, a breed long known for its versatility.

Rob Zimmerman, who was the first US rider to win a Working Equitation Year-End Morgan High Point on Lisa's Captain Jack, elaborates. "I find Morgans to be a hotter, sensitive breed that are easy to keep in front of your leg. They are also well-balanced and seem to enjoy the challenge of the four phases. Plus, of all the breeds I have worked with, Morgans have the strongest bond to you if worked correctly and will always try to do better."

Kat Waters, who competes several Morgans in the sport, including regional champion and nationally ranked SC Island Navy, agrees. "Morgans are a great fit for Working Equitation. They engage with the challenges of the sport. They love figuring out how to execute the different obstacles and trials, and they do it with style. And often their smaller size is an advantage getting through the courses effortlessly." Kat elaborates on her attraction to Working Equitation from a rider's point of view, "The challenge of the dynamic trials appealed to me coming from a background in Pony Club, dressage, and distance riding. It looked like a fun way to do something exciting and beautiful, that's safe for horse and rider. The first few clinics I attended showed that my Morgans loved it and I was hooked."

Many riders find Working Equitation to be excellent for cross-training as it adds variety, but still has the same basic requirements needed to excel in dressage, Western dressage, eventing, and related disciplines. In 2021, the Grand Prix Morgan Coulee Bend Kahlua, with his rider Emily Gill, became the first Morgan to compete at the master's level in Working Equitation, and Emily appreciates the value of the discipline outside the traditional dressage court. "This sport encourages you to use your dressage training and enhance it by putting it to work with the obstacles." Emily explains, "And there is a new challenge with every level so there is always something to work on. I have seen it on many occasions that when you give the horses something to focus on such as the obstacles they can really excel."

Adrienne Dymesich, a recent convert to Working Equitation, is especially excited about the cattle trials, "We are a working ranch here at the Sunrise Ranch, raising Scottish Highland cattle along with Morgans. Morgans love to work cattle and it is a great partnering tool for young horses and young riders. To have that included in Working Equitation brings the riding skills directly to a practical purpose we are very familiar with here."

The focus on ranch work is also one of the appeals of Working Equitation to Barbara Harris, who rode her mare Fortunate Destiny



SIDEPASS POLES

SC Island Navy & Kat Waters (photo © to Jordan Koepeke Photography).



SWITCH CUP

Gladheart Black Harris & Kimberlee Barker.



PEN

HD Redford GCH & Josephine Trott.

HIGHLIGHTS OF MORGANS COMPETING IN WORKING EQUITATION

2016

Lisa's Captain Jack (Liz's Blackjack x PRM Rosalita) and Rob Zimmerman are the first WE United High Point Morgan Breed winners. The bay gelding is the first Morgan to compete at the Intermediate Level.

2017

Wicked James Blonde (Amberfields Desperado x Olneys Emerald Mystique), with Katherine Lowry, becomes the second Morgan to compete at the Intermediate Level.

Fortunate Destiny (Reynard Of Hawk Creek x Mulberry Mystical Flight), with Barbara Harris of Colorado, are the second WE United High Point Morgan Breed winners.

2018

My Inspiration (Reginald Di Boscodonne x HDD Imperial Blue Satin) and Darcy Henkel take home the WE United High Point Morgan Breed award.

Wicked James Blonde and Katherine Lowry are awarded the Confederation for Working Equitation Intermediate A/Level 4 Open Reserve Champion High Point.

2019

LBF Ruby Red Vermont (Triple S Wings Of Wind x LBF Ella Vermont) and Kat Waters are awarded the first Morgan High Point from the Confederation for Working Equitation.

For WE United, the Morgan Breed High Point is awarded to Gladheart Black Harris (DJJJ Ebony Gold x Rogue's Midnight Melody) and his trainer, Kimberlee Barker.

2020

Gladheart Black Harris with Kimberlee Barker are once again the WE United High Point Morgan Breed winners and rank top five nationally in both Novice B/Level 3 and Intermediate A/Level 4. Emily Gill and Coulee Bend Kahlua (Season's Forever French x Coulee Bend Anticipation [CN]) are National Reserve Champions at Intermediate B/Level 5, and HD Redford GCH (Tedwin Titlist x Perinton Serenity) and Josephine Trott are the National Champions Advanced Level/Level 6.

For Confederation for Working Equitation, RG Blu Ridge Mountain (Ragtime Catman Blu x RG Whispering Angel) and Tessa Nicolet are National Reserve Champion Open at Novice B/Level 3, with KS Bluestem B Borias (Kells In Kirby's Honor x KS Bluestem B Mine) and Emma Frimml earning the Morgan High Point Award.

2021

Gladheart Black Harris and Kimberlee Barker are USA Working Equitation National Reserve Champion Intermediate B/Level 5, with SC Island Navy (Caduceus Nicholas x Blue Diamond Robin [CN]) and Kat Waters only one point behind in third place. HD Redford and Josephine Trott are USA Working Equitation National Champions Advanced Level/Level 6, and Emily Gill and Coulee Bend Kahlua are National Champions Masters Level/Level 7 and the first Morgan to be competed at this level. Morgan Breed High Point goes to SC Island Navy and Kat Waters.

to win the 2017 WE United Morgan High Point, "This sport is for the 'doing' horse that is smart, athletic, and versatile. I also love that there are several levels and just about anyone can compete. You do not need special show equipment or a specialized horse to participate."

Working Equitation is an ideal venue to showcase the versatility and athletic talent that have long been a characteristic of the Morgan breed, and so it is not surprising that the number of Morgans competing in the sport has been steadily increasing, with almost 100 Morgans currently recorded with USAWE. Despite relatively low numbers of Morgans in comparison to more populous breeds such as Quarter Horses and the more traditional Southern European breeds such as Andalusians and Lusitanos, Morgans have been well represented at the top of the national leader boards, placing in the top five nationally at the upper levels in 2020 (WEUnited) and 2021 (USAWE).

But for many people, it isn't necessarily about reaching the top of the competition leader boards that attracts them to Working Equitation, it is the fun and challenge inherent in the sport. "The four parts of Working Equitation involve everything I love to do with horses," says Jane Pietenpol of Mossrose Morgans. "When we started our weekly Working Equitation obstacle practice nights two years ago, I wondered how I would stay interested with the same 10 to 12 obstacles over and over again. [But] our group has had a lot of fun trying to master each obstacle. The details are the most fun for us, but also what challenges us the most."

Krista Martinko, who is looking forward to starting to compete in Working Equitation in 2022 with both her FEI Dressage gelding Mythic Juma and her new youngster BlueAndWhite Royal, was hooked when her trainer began incorporating WE exercises in their classical dressage lessons. "I'm a former eventer so picking up a discipline that involves three different phases was exciting to me. We've just started working on speed round exercises and I think one of our shining points will be the slalom poles. Juma's so balanced we don't even need to change lead. We both have fun with that. And who doesn't like to embrace their inner cowboy and 'spear the bull?'"

In a competition world that often focuses (perhaps a little too much) on specialization, Working Equitation is a sport designed to showcase versatility in a horse. Trainability, strength, athleticism, confidence, quickness, and adaptability are all essential in a Working Equitation horse. And all are traits characteristic of the Morgan breed. So, looking for a perfect sport for your versatile Morgan? Look no further, Working Equitation is made for Morgans. ■