

≈ COMBINED DRIVING ≈

MORGANS SHINE

AT WORLD SINGLES DRIVING CHAMPIONSHIP

By Cheryl Pratt Rivers



Jacob Arnold and Hotspur's Red Row take a victory lap
(photo by Driving News).

The author brings a compelling insider's point of view to an historic occasion for the Morgan breed on the scene of international competition.

Two out of three horses selected to the United States singles team competing at the World Singles Driving Championships in Izsak Hungary, September 24-27, were Morgans.

Hotspur's Red Rowley (Book's End Trademark x L&A-Knapp Ule Easter Onyx), "Rowley," owned by Karen K. Chandor and John C. Merritt, driven by Jacob Arnold, and RG Cowboys Black Cadillac (Teton Black Beauty x Kahlua's Onyx Star), owned and driven by Donna Crookston, joined Leslie Berndl and her Royal Dutch Warmblood gelding, Umico (Travis), to represent the USA.

I had planned to drive Rowley, but at the end of July I injured myself on a motor scooter at a competition in Hungary (broken ankle); Two days later, I flipped the carriage driving cones in the same competition (broken pelvis)—estimated recovery time: 12 weeks.

Assistant team coach Thorsten Zarembowicz and I came up with a way for Rowley, America's top marathon horse, to compete. We asked Jacob Arnold if he would be willing to drive Rowley. Up until then, Rowley had been driven exclusively by me. He was trained

and conditioned carefully over six years, winning in combined driving events and pleasure shows. We had had lessons together with top U. S. and European instructors. Together Rowley and I had won the Morgan Horse Association's Open Competition Championships in both Combined Driving and Carriage Pleasure. We won the marathon segment at each Florida selection trial and won six out of eight hazards at the National Championship. But Rowley had always been a bit suspicious of strangers. Would he trust a new driver?

Twenty-one years old, Jacob had previous success driving and competing a Morgan mare, Spring Hollow Dark Shadow (Statesmans Silhouette x Caduceus Jocasta), owned by his family who breed Morgans. He had extensive competitive experience, and he was already in Germany competing. Sunday the decision was made to try the new combination. On Friday Rowley and Jacob were headed down the center line in their dressage test in a competition in Piber, Austria. Their score was respectable: (54.76). When they began the marathon, their only practice for obstacles had been cantering around some trees the previous afternoon. Jacob and



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A Simple Strategy for Increasing the Morgan Presence in Combined Driving

One of our nation's great whips urges Morgan breeders to consider placing prospects in training for combined driving careers. The result could earn the breed its rightful place on the world stage.

By Cheryl Pratt Rivers



I am convinced that Morgan horses have the potential to enjoy great success at the highest levels of the sport of combined driving. Many of America's top drivers have enjoyed the greatest success of their careers competing Morgans, yet the perception many drivers and potential buyers appear to have is that if they wish to be successful in international competition, they need a European Warmblood or a German riding pony. In my opinion the Morgan breed is missing out on golden opportunities to expand our market for driving horses and ponies, both in the United States and internationally.

Of the United States top drivers, only a very few have continued developing and competing Morgans once they achieve success. Most, routinely, move on to another breed. Yet if we look at the record, it can be argued that none of these drivers who switched breeds have ever achieved the success that they did when they competed a Morgan.

Why then, is it the traditional wisdom of the day, that Morgans are second rate combined driving horses? Why are many Americans going to Europe to find their prospects, instead of looking for American-bred Morgans? There seems to be a perception that Morgans do not have the type of lofty motion currently being rewarded in dressage by international judges.

Yet I know that our breed has quite a few individuals who have the type of motion that is rewarded in international dressage

his navigator were shocked by Rowley's power and speed. The announcer described Rowley as, "The Super-Schnell American Morgan"—schnell being a German term meaning "go faster." In a stunning achievement, they won the marathon against more than 30 top entries, becoming the first American singles combination to win a marathon in Europe since Bill Orth and another great Morgan, New-Ran's Hawk (Funquest Aries x Dy-berry Nancy Ann), more than 20 years ago. A strong cones performance, moved them up to finish fourth. I knew then that the chances for success at the world championship were excellent.

They returned to Germany where they had several weeks to train with the expert help of assistant U.S. team coach Thorsten Zarembowicz. They sent me photos and reports, as I recovered back in America. My doctors gave me a green light to travel, and soon my husband Rick and I were on our way to Hungary where Rowley gave me the best greeting I've ever had!

On Thursday, Leslie Berndl and Travis turned in a solid dressage test and were awarded the 12th best score out of the 77 who competed with a score of 46.34. (In driven dressage, the lower the score the better the placing.)

Into the spotlight stepped veteran international competitors Donna Crookston and her 18-year-old Morgan RG Cowboys Black Cadillac. The achievements of these two great horses have the potential to pave the way for a bright future for Morgans in the sport of combined driving. Cadillac has had a successful this was his to a world ship. It is a to his great- was able to this level at an age when most elite equine athletes have long since been retired! Cowboy was obedient and forward, and the test was accurate. The score awarded was 57.28, perhaps reflecting international judges' preferences for loftier motion.

Jacob and Rowley were in the last quarter of horses to perform their dressage test on Friday afternoon. Rowley, who is 15 hands tall, was one of the smallest horses in the competition. Finally the moment was at hand. It was my first chance to watch Rowley in a dressage test, as before I was always driving. His working trot was impressive. It was accurately driven. Rowley does not have the big gaits that some of the Warmbloods have. His extensions are not his strength, but they have improved. He was balanced and even. His halts were excellent, and the walk and canter were great. As Jacob asked for the second canter lead, something was not quite right and Rowley made one stride on the wrong lead. I was amazed at how quickly Jacob corrected it. The score was 55.23. Out of 77 tests, they stood 39th after dressage.

Marathon day was sunny and cool. The weather was perfect. The ground was dry. The crowds started arriving. The obstacles were designed to allow spectators to easily view seven out of the eight obstacles. Donna, Jacob, and Leslie were spaced out nicely in their start times.

Rick was game to wheel me around in my wheelchair to see our USA horses at each obstacle. We watched some early horses, and a glimmer of hope started to burn that Rowley's day could be a great one. But these were the lower placed horses so far. Donna and Cowboy turned in a steady and error free marathon. It wasn't fast, but Donna's role on the team was to make sure she finished the marathon so that what was expected to be an excellent cones score would be able to count for the team. She delivered.

Now came the wait for Jacob and Rowley. The crowds grew. The times were quicker. Here they came. Rowley came flying in and it was poetry in motion. Smooth is fast. Jacob knew where he was going and meant business. Rowley responded, never coming out of his position through the tight spots and then went flying out to the cheering of the gallery. Time 45.64. He ended up winning the first obstacle by 3.71 seconds.

Obstacle two was the one we couldn't watch. When the time was announced, it was the fastest so far. In obstacle three they looked smooth and fast. Same in obstacle four, which they won. In hazard five Rowley looked winded I thought, and they were not quite as quick. I saw Thorsten go flying, I think to tell Jacob to give Rowley a short walk. Rowley loves to run the obstacles, and I had observed he was taking off quite a ways from the in gate. He was running further than he needed to. The breather worked because he went on to win obstacle six. The last two obstacles they cruised home. Rowley stood in first place and had the fastest time in four out of the eight obstacles. His complete marathon score was 81.72. Jacob had driven error free and smoothly. Rowley had run his heart out, digging deeper when the crowd cheered. As they made their way through the hazards the gallery followed to watch this gutsy proud Morgan horse make history. The score would be tough to match, but the best drivers in the world would all have a chance.

Next came Leslie and Travis. They completed the first hazard, and we cheered and then waited at hazard three for them to return from hazard two. Waited and waited. We knew something was wrong. Their rubber bit had broken in the second obstacle. Travis stopped. No one was hurt, but the hopes for a team medal were dashed as no scores

competition. I believe that many of the breed's best show horses would have excelled at high levels of combined driving given the opportunity and the correct training.

These prospects can be found in training with Morgan trainers who specialize in competing in Class A Morgan shows. My purpose is not to detract from these trainers or the horses they show. It is to suggest that if Morgan breeders have an interest in increasing their market and in obtaining better prices for the young horses they breed, that they might consider evaluating some of their young stock with an eye toward developing world class combined driving horses. The best opportunity for this, so as not to conflict with the show world, probably resides with Morgans under 15 hands tall, who are eligible to compete in the pony division in combined driving. Instead of sending one of these to the traditional show trainer, why not try matching them with a trainer and driver who has success in developing combined driving horses?

Currently there is an excellent example of a big moving Morgan who has been developed as a top combined driving horse. She is actually a horse, not a pony. This mare is PVF Peace Of Mind who is owned, trained and driven by Suzy Stafford. She is only seven years old, but already has an impressive record in both combined driving and pleasure carriage shows.

"Hunny," as she is called, is not unique in my opinion. What sets her apart from hundreds of other Morgans is that she was acquired at a young age by someone who introduced her to classical dressage training from the very beginning. This happens very rarely.

I have accompanied several prospective buyers looking for carriage/combined driving horses to breeding farms. The buyers are most often seeking a young horse who is green broke to drive, ready to be brought along. When arriving at most breeders or Morgan trainers, ones find that virtually all young horses are started with the same methods, with biting harnesses, draw reins, and checks. They have already been developing different muscles and different habits than are required for combined driving

horses. This is usually a deal killer, as experienced drivers know that the risk is high that these already acquired habits will be difficult to change. Sometimes the shoeing practices also cause pause.

So these potential buyers most often become discouraged, and look outside our breed, or go looking for prospects from some of the Amish trainers who have trained a young Morgan horse to just drive down the road. Most of the horses available from these situations are not the big movers who have the ability to wow international dressage judges.

I am aware that there are Morgan carriage trainers who specialize in retraining former show horses to be carriage horses. I have done it myself. This is often wonderful for the horses, and wonderful for expanding the market. As far as I am aware though, none of these retrained horses have ever made it to the highest levels of international competition. They still have show headsets, and seldom have learned the elasticity, relaxation, and suppleness that comes most readily to horses who learn this from the beginning of their training.

An article in this magazine describes recent successes of two Morgan horses in international competition, where they excelled in the marathon and cones competitions. If we want to build on this success, we need a few breeders and owners to try a new strategy.

It would only take a couple of such successes to make a real difference and to change the current negative perception about the potential of Morgans to become top Combined Driving Event horses. A good first move would be to invite some of America's top CDE drivers to participate on a panel at the AMHA convention to solicit their ideas and to connect them with the breeders who have the potential to make this simple strategy a reality. ■

(Editor's Note: The author's suggestion of convening a panel at an upcoming AMHA convention is most welcome. AMHA Executive Director Julie Broadway is co-chairing the sport horse track for the 2016 Super Convention and is pleased to take this under consideration.)



Donna Crookston takes RG Cowboys Black Cadillac through the cones (photo by Kristina Horvath/Hoefnet).

of an eliminated horse are counted toward a team score.

The wait seemed long as we waited for the top dressage placers to finish. It was clear Rowley's victory was not threatened by most horses, but those Germans are always tough. In the end, Rowley's victory was secure. He had won four out of eight obstacles and the margin of victory was 2.52 points. Rowley is the first American single horse to win a marathon at the world championships. He made history. The very top marathon horse in the world is a Vermont Morgan horse.

Next morning was another sunny cool day in Hungary. The cones arena was beautiful with brilliant green grass accented with flowers and flags flying. Music added atmosphere. As Donna and Cowboy trotted into the ring, Cowboy looked fresh and happy, and Donna drove like the best cones driver in the world that I believe she is! They finished on a perfect note, driving "double clear" with no balls down and well within the time.

After a long wait, Rowley and Jacob delivered a smooth flowing double clear round. They had begun the day in 13th place, but cones moved them up to seventh place overall, just over six points behind the gold.

When the cones winners were called back into the ring, we watched proudly as Rowley and Jacob, and Donna and Cowboy trotted into the ring with American flags flying. Two out of the top six horses in the cones competition in a field of 77 were American

Morgans! Cowboy was third taking the bronze, and Rowley was sixth.

In every championship there are disappointments as well as victories. For the United States team there were a series of mishaps and disappointments this year leading to their tenth place finish.

Out of the clouds two great Morgan horses emerged victorious. Cowboy demonstrated his heart athleticism, and staying power, finishing his International career with a bronze medal performance in cones.

"I planned to retire Cowboy from International and FEI competition at the end of this season. He has developed into an exceptional combined driving horse over the years. It was awesome to finish in third place in cones in Hungary. What a way for Cowboy to celebrate his career," said Donna Crookston.

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Rowley's history making marathon win, and his strong overall performance surprised many. "As a Morgan, Rowley has the biggest heart of any horse I have ever encountered," said Jacob. "His abilities on the marathon course are really something special, I truly do believe this horse is unique in that aspect. His acceleration and balance are extraordinary, and he proved his talent once again at the world championships."

The achievements of these two great horses have the potential to pave the way for a bright future for Morgans in the sport of combined driving. ■