

Working Western Sports: The Morgan Way

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From spins to sliding stops, learn how Morgans are making waves in western sports.

The Morgan Horse is a versatile breed that is a popular choice for a wide variety of disciplines. Known for their strong work ethic and athletic ability, Morgans are suitable for everything from saddle seat to carriage driving.

Read on to discover yet another arena that one of New England's most beloved breeds is turning heads in: the working western division. You might be surprised to learn that Morgans are a good fit for reining, cutting, team penning, and ranch horse versatility, among other western sports.

Kathy Newcomb, chair of the AMHA disciplines council, explains the reason behind their success in this area. She says "The Morgan horse has been the breed of choice for some ranchers as their working ranch horse for many years because of their stamina, good feet and legs, natural athletic ability, intelligence, and most of all, their undying dedication to their people and their jobs. These qualities as working horses have enlightened people to see that Morgans can also excel in working western competitions. They may not be recognized yet as the traditional working western horse, but they have the ability to rise to the top in this competitive arena."

Read on to meet a few of the breed's top show stars who are facing the challenge of these demanding sports head-on and have become ambassadors for the Morgan breed in open competition.

Bucky's Legacy

For Karen Myers of Binghamton, N.Y., Morgans and reining go hand in hand. Karen has owned and shown the legendary Morgan reining stallion Twin Pond Disco Kid, or "Bucky," as he is better known as to his fans, since 1992. After he started his career as a saddle seat horse and fell into the wrong hands, Karen leased the promising young stallion for a year and later purchased him.

Starting from the ground up, Karen and Bucky formed a partnership that would lead to countless titles on the regional and national level and began a career that has helped set the standard for other Morgan reiners to follow. Together, they began with the basics—lateral movements, bending and flexing—and continued to progress while working under the guidance of reining trainer Ed Cridge.

Karen soon realized Bucky's potential, explaining that his athletic ability and sheer willingness to comply with her made him a perfect fit for reining. His uncanny ability to "tune in" to his rider and react to even the most subtle cues helped them continue to climb the ranks at the Morgan shows.

“He loved to be told what to do,” Karen says with a smile, “in a good way.” Ready to take on new challenges, they went on to prove their worth in open competition. Many Morgan reiners get much of their show ring experience in open competition since Morgan shows generally don’t offer a reining division.

Karen’s most memorable run was at the Ohio State Fair in a Limited Non Pro class with 113 entries. At this event, Bucky was the only Morgan on the show grounds and bested nearly 100 Quarter Horses in the class to finish in thirteenth place. Other highlights include amassing several World and Grand National titles at the Grand National and World Championship Morgan Horse Show held annually in Oklahoma City.

Throughout his career and since his retirement in 2002, Bucky has continued to represent the Morgan breed, participating in breed demonstrations and performances at Equine Affaire, UVM Morgan Horse Farm, AMHA Open House and most recently at the 2007 Grand Old Champions event at the New England Morgan Horse Show at the age of 27.

In addition to showing and breeding, Karen is also a NRHA judge, a role that she clearly enjoys and finds both rewarding and educational. She officiates at some 20 reining shows every year. Typically, she finds that a horse with a well-developed front end, strong lower back and a natural swinging motion in the hip have the ability to execute the required maneuvers well. Clear communication between horse and rider and the ability to react to each stride also help exhibitors excel. In addition, Karen explains that Morgans who have experience working cattle generally stand out from other competitors and thus have a distinct advantage.

When you set out in search of a prospect, there are a few things to keep in mind. Karen suggests looking for a horse that likes to lope and possesses good natural gaits. In addition, the ability to develop a strong front end, specifically the pectoral muscles, will help a horse push off, cross their front legs and develop greater speed — all important factors in executing the movements required in reining patterns.

Patty’s Passion

Karen is continually working to refine her breeding program through her experience as an owner, exhibitor and judge. One of her foundation mares, More Apples Please, is another star whose decade-long run in the show ring has resulted in several Grand National and World titles. Both Bucky and More Apples Please are passing their legacy on to the next generation.

For third-generation Morgan lover Ellen Palillo of Meshoppen, Pa., reining is a welcome new challenge after a lifetime spent showing in the traditional show ring disciplines. After seeing trainer Josette Conti ride in a reining demonstration at Mike Goebig’s Farm in Kutztown, Pa., Ellen remembers thinking, “That’s the next thing that I want to do!”

In search of a reining prospect, Ellen and her husband Joe contacted Karen and purchased the two-year-old filly Disco Patricia by Bucky and out of More Apples Please from her. Like her sire and dam, the young mare proved to be a natural fit for the reining division, showing successfully as a four- and five-year-old. Highlights include winning the 2006 Reserve World Champion

Reining Snaffle Bit/Hackamore and Reserve Champion NMHRA Derby titles with Josette and the 2007 NMRHA Non-Pro Derby and placing third in the World Champion Snaffle Bit/Hackamore with Ellen.

This season, Patty is stepping up to the next challenge in her young career—making the transition to the non pro division with Ellen. In the reining division, the numerical judging system helps create a level playing field. Exhibitors start with a score of 70 and have the opportunity to add points to their score for smoothness, finesse and quickness and to lose points for any deviations from the exact written pattern. Humbled by the technical aspect of the sport, Ellen says with a smile, “You learn quickly what you don’t know how to do!”

For those new to the sport, Ellen agrees that reining is a true partnership in every sense of the word. Each stride requires complete and total concentration from both horse and rider. Ellen and Patty have been honing their skills in both Morgan and open competition. And even though Patty is often the only Morgan at an open show, her consistent performances and ability to tune in to Ellen and stay focused have earned her solid scores time and time again.

Future plans for this team include competing in the Grand National Non Pro, World Champion Non Pro and the Rookie Non Pro classes at the 2008 Grand National & World Championship Horse Show. Ellen is particularly excited to compete in the Rookie class, a new addition to the show schedule this year. This division is especially important to the future of the sport due to the number of riders competing at this level.

Cutting Class

Morgan lover Gerry Paiva got hooked on western sports after watching a cutting class at the Motherlode Morgan Horse Show in California in the early 1970s. Soon after, she purchased a finished cutting horse to learn on. Since then, Gerry has spent more than three decades honing her skills in the saddle and promoting the Morgan cutting horse in both breed and open shows.

Gerry is clearly a hands-on owner, doing all of the under saddle training herself while working with different trainers as she has progressed throughout her riding career. She currently serves on the AMHA Working Western Committee, a position that she has held for several years. In this role, she works to promote the two things that she loves the most: Morgans and cutting.

Not surprisingly, the Morgan’s conformation, intelligence and natural balance also help them excel in cutting. In Gerry’s experience, the breed also has good cow sense—especially the mares. Their inquisitive nature and love of competition help make them ideal partners. Gerry is bringing along a couple of different horses that she bred for this purpose in her own program.

Current projects include a young mare, Girlfriend, who earned the 2007 AMHA Open Competition Award in cutting in her first season showing. Gerry also trail rides her retired cutting horse Kizzy Kitten, an 18-year-old seasoned campaigner who amassed several blues during her show career in the cutting arena.

The number of Morgan shows offering cutting classes has subsided over the years due to lack of participation. As a result, many exhibitors compete on the open circuit. And while this can be intimidating for newcomers, it offers a great opportunity to increase the visibility of the breed.

Ranch Horse Versatility is another western sport that Morgans are well suited for, but may not often be associated with. The five components mirror daily tasks that a ranch horse must complete: ranch riding, ranch trail, ranch conformation, ranch working cowhorse, and ranch cutting. Ranch Horse Versatility offers newcomers the ability to learn about several different western sports at one time and to develop a wide variety of skills.

Morgans clearly have what it takes to excel in the working western division. They have the work ethic, athletic ability and heart to demonstrate unlimited potential in reining, cutting, team penning, ranch horse versatility and more. As Julie Broadway, Executive Director of the AMHA summarizes, “Their intelligence and willingness combined with their soundness, athleticism and stamina make them excel at whatever is asked of them. Companionable and comfortable, reliable, loyal, and eager to please, the Morgan is a versatile horse.”

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