



~ SPORT ~

“IF THEY ARE GOOD ENOUGH, THEY ARE BIG ENOUGH”

Adjusting assumptions about the size of successful sport horses.

By Bernadette Stang

The assumption that size is necessary to be competitive in sport is understandable. Warmbloods, the breeds that have dominated the popular sports of dressage and eventing for decades, average 16 to 17 hands in height. In the past, smaller, non-traditional breeds such as Morgans struggled against a size bias in dressage judging, as well as the fact test movements and court size were designed with much bigger horses in mind. There is no “pony” Grand Prix test that is adapted for smaller horses, nor is there a parallel preliminary cross-country course that is shortened to accommodate a smaller stride.

Times have changed, and a horse’s size or breed are not the issue they were in the past. While it is true that the dressage court and the eventing course are both still designed with larger horses in mind, judges do not reward size over ability and accuracy. In eventing, there are no bonus points for size; a clear round is a clear round. In fact, it could be argued that a smaller horse that excels under these competition conditions could, inch-for-inch, be the better athlete.

However, there are many people who are convinced that in order for a Morgan to be successful in sport, it must be BIG. It

Photos accompanying this article are of Morgans who have successfully campaigned in open competition at some of the highest levels in dressage, eventing, and combined driving. None would be considered “big” horses (all are under 16 hands, many under 15 hands), but all listed horses had the talent necessary for some of the most difficult challenges their discipline offered.

ABOVE: Courage To Lead & Suzy Stafford; Avatar’s Jazzman & Lauren Chumley (photo © Suzanne Fischer).



DRESSAGE

1. Avatar’s Jazzman (Grand Prix), 14.1 h, & Lauren Chumley (photo © Suzanne Fischer); 2. Coulee Bend Kahlua (Grand Prix), 15.2 h, & Emily Gill (photo © Erich Linder); 3. Forsite Renoir GCH (Grand Prix), 13.3 h, & Deb M’Gonigle (photo © John Borys Photography); 4. Gladheart Linhawk (Grand Prix), 13.3 h, & Kimberlee Barker; 5. Queen’s Moody Blues (Grand Prix), 15 h, & Kelly Hendrick (photo © John Chevalier); 6. Whippoorwill Ebony (Grand Prix), 14.3 h, & Cathy Echternach.

does not take much browsing through sales listings and stallion advertisements to see that a taller horse is assumed to be suitable for every sport imaginable. Yet, when one looks at Morgans who have competed at preliminary and above in eventing and at Grand Prix in dressage, the median height is only fifteen hands. There are a few that are 16 hands or more, but the vast majority are much smaller—not surprising since most Morgan horses are between the breed standard of 14.1 and 15.2 hands.

Cynthia Henry Bayles, who rode 14.3 hand Roseridge Johnny Reb to the FEI-level in eventing, adds that smaller horses are “... catty like a sports car [and are] so much easier and more fun than a huge horse. The little ones can make time and be super-fast across the ground because they can turn on a dime and don’t waste time hanging in the air.” While not specifically Morgan focused, an article by William Micklem (“Does Size Matter? In Praise of Smaller Horses”) provides ample evidence of the advantages of smaller horses in sport and a long list of diminutive superstars.¹

Another key point to consider is the market itself. While there are riders out there that want, or even need, a taller horse, there are many who do not. This is not surprising, as over 75 percent of all riders, regardless of discipline, are women, a fact that is reflected both in dressage (96 percent of United States Dressage Federation [USDF] members are women) and eventing (the average member is female between the ages of 35 and 49).²⁻⁴

Particularly in sport, there are many stories about riders being “over-horsed” on big warmbloods that are tough to get organized and collected, whose gaits are so extravagant that it is hard for normal human beings (which, frankly, describes the vast majority of us) to ride, whose ginormous size often comes with ginormous veterinary bills to keep sound. Research has shown that taller horses tend to have more lameness issues, have shorter competitive careers, and are more at risk of musculoskeletal injuries.⁵⁻⁸

In dressage, this change in the market is reflected in the increased presence of “sport ponies,” such as German Riding Ponies, Haflingers, and Welsh Pony/Cobs. Europe has long valued dressage ponies for developing their young riders.⁹ This growing attraction to smaller horses is reflected in the growing numbers of horses that participate in the National Dressage Pony Cup program and Championship Show, which showcases small horses and ponies in dressage.

Barbi Breen-Gurley, an USDF “S” judge who has earned her Bronze, Silver, and Gold Medals on horses she has trained (including eight horses to Grand Prix) shares: “I find smaller horses can do as well as larger horses in the sport of dressage. What matters most is temperament, gaits, scope, elasticity, power, and trainability. In some cases, they find it easier to manage some of the movements than the really large horses. Good training makes a willing horse a champion. International competition presents larger sport horses

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EVENTING

1. Artistic Flaire (Intermediate), 14.2 h, & Claire Jan (photo © McCool Photography); 2. Kennebec Rugby (Preliminary), 15.1 h, & Kathleen Bailey; 3. Mia-Mar Hillbilly Rock (FEI 2*), 15.2 h, & Hannah Sue Hollberg (photo © XPress Foto); 4. Roseridge Johnny Reb (Intermediate), 14.3 h, & Cynthia Bayles; Not pictured: Temple (Intermediate), 14.3 h, and Expat's Fireworks (FEI 1*), 14.2 h.

typically, but athleticism is a key factor as well as that the horse and rider are well-proportioned and well-suited.” Breen-Gurley has worked with numerous FEI Morgans, including Alamar’s Touch Of Magic and Gladheart Linhawk.

A discussion of Morgans excelling in sport would not be complete without mentioning their success in Combined Driving Events. From Kennebec Count and Kennebec Russel with Larry Poulin at the World Pairs Combined Driving Championship in the mid-1980s, Morgans have historically competed at the highest levels in the sport. They have won countless national championships and have represented the United States at multiple FEI Driving Combined Ponies World Championships, including this year’s event in Oirschot, Netherlands, with Chandler Creek Eclipse and Anna Koopman as alternates in the Single Division.

That is not to say that there are not 16 hand Morgans making their mark in sport. However, too often horses are considered unsuitable for sport because they are of smaller statures or the decision whether or not to keep a stallion for breeding is based

only on height. Since the Morgan breed standard is between 14.1 and 15.2 hands, if size is the main selection criteria for sport, a significant number of talented Morgans will not be considered for competition or as breeding stock.

In an article by Sophie Harris a few years ago, “Who Said Little Horses Can’t?”, amateur event rider Katie Preston, who competes at five-star level eventing competitions with a 15.2 hand horse called Templar Justice, said it best: “I believe that if they are good enough, they are big enough.”¹⁰

When Morgan breeders put too much focus on selecting for a look, such as a certain height, they are ignoring the crucial fact that sport is about performance. Serious discipline enthusiasts are not always breed enthusiasts; their focus is the potential of the horse to “take them up the levels.” As shown here, some of the best Morgan athletes are well within the breed standard in size, and that coupled with a market that is becoming increasingly favorable toward smaller horses is an opportunity that should be explored more aggressively.



COMBINED DRIVING

1. Chandler Creek Eclipse (2023 FEI Driving World Championships for Combined Ponies) & Anna Koopman (photo © Abbie Trexler for ADS); 2. Courage To Lead (2009 FEI Driving World Championships for Combined Ponies) & Suzy Stafford 3. High Country Doc (2003 FEI Driving World Championships for Combined Ponies) & Sara Schmitt; 4. LR Ami B-Line (2011 FEI Driving World Championships for Combined Ponies, also 2006/2010/2011 USEF Single Pony Championships and Intermediate I/Dressage) & Shelley Temple.

A horse that has a good mind, correct gaits, is athletic, and has genuine talent is rare—whatever their size. Focusing too much on how tall a Morgan is can translate to a lot of genetic potential being discarded and it will slow our progress in breeding and selling quality Morgans. ■

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