

MORGAN PEOPLE

THE DATA DRIVEN MISSION BEHIND THE MORGAN SPORT RESOURCE

By Stacey Stearns

Winning test scores and championship ribbons are more than accolades for a job well done in the horse world. They provide important information about the bloodlines and athletic traits of the horses that earned them and help shape decisions of breeders for the next generations. Looking for a way to make this information available to these breeders—Morgan sport breeders in particular—was the driving force behind Jack and Nadette Stang's Morgan Sport Resource.

With careers in academic research, Jack and Nadette have spent their professional lives asking questions, gathering data, challenging assumptions, and following where the results lead. As breeders, they felt this approach could be an important tool to help Morgans realize the potential the Stangs felt was largely untapped in the world of sport horses. When pedigrees and sport performance records over time are analyzed, the results help provide breeders with insights into what individuals, bloodlines, and programs are significant sources of ability—information that is essential for the improvement of our breed in sport.

"We felt that the breed was a long way from realizing its significant potential in the sport disciplines," Jack shares. "When one looks at other sport-focused breeds, selection (breeding choices) is strongly influenced by performance records, but this type of information was not readily available for breeders focused on producing Morgans for sport."

A comprehensive archive of competition records, historical research, and bloodline analysis, the Morgan Sport Resource (morgansportresource.com) is driven by the belief that to the extent selection decisions are guided by performance, the quality of Mor-

ABOVE: Silver Valley Tate and Sarah Rinne (photo © Gore-Baylor Event Photography).





LEFT TO RIGHT: Flower Of Alliance and Sally Anderson; Chandler Creek Eclipse & Anna Koopman (photo © Pics of You).

gans for sport will improve, making the breed more competitive and attractive in the sport horse market. Thoroughbreds, Warmbloods, and other sport-focused breeds and registries have successfully used this strategy for decades, as have show ring Morgans where stallions are advertised with their competition records and the records of their progeny. "We track the performance data and bloodlines, because selection of breeding stock based on performance records is key to improving overall quality and consistency of Morgan sport prospects. It is performance breeding 101," says Jack.

The Morgan Sport Resource (MSR) almost exclusively reports on open competition results, with a strong focus on those Morgans who have performed at the highest levels in their chosen sport. It is a free resource for breeders and anyone else interested in Morgans in sport and also includes a myriad of articles on sport-related topics—some dating back as far as 1910, and many from non-breed publications. Databases are updated annually, and articles added as they become available. The idea is to provide both a current and historical perspective on Morgans as sport horses.

A secondary goal is the promotion—especially to a non-Morgan population—of Morgans in open competition. This is the focus of the MSR's Facebook page, where Morgans are highlighted throughout the year in individual competitions and championships. Especially popular are the highlights of Morgans that have earned a spot on the Year-End Rankings or awards in sport associations and American Morgan Horse Association (AMHA) Open Competition. These are the riders and horses that are proving the point that Morgans are competitive against all breeds, as well as being ambassadors of our breed to the open competition community.

DATA TELLS THE STORY

Data collection includes information from more than ten sport associations—from the American Driving Society (ADS) to the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF)—plus a variety of competition results sites and internet searches, along with combing social media to discover horses and confirm results. One example is the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) Horse of the Year, which has data on thousands of horses and often includes Morgans that are not listed on the USDF All-Breed Awards, but are included in the MSR database. Some organizations, such as the United States Eventing Association (USEA), graciously provide Nadette and Jack with year-end results of Morgans and part-Morgans who have competed in USEA-recognized competitions. The databases include individual sport association year-end awards and standings (e.g., USDF, USEA, American Endurance Ride Conference [AERC], and USA Working Equitation [USAWE]), results of prestigious competitions (e.g., the Tevis Cup for endurance riding and Live Oak International for combined driving), and historical (e.g., "Morgans and Morgan-Crosses Who Have Competed at the FEI Level," "Morgans/Morgan-Crosses Who Have Competed at Preliminary and Above"). "What is included depends on what is available that can be made into a complete record," according to Nadette.

Despite the countless hours of work, Nadette and Jack are quick to emphasize that they are continuing work begun decades earlier by other Morgan sport breeders; their main advantage now being the vastly improved availability of data through the internet and social media.

The Stangs have used this data to write articles for *The Morgan Horse* that provide a more in-depth analysis of Morgans in sport. Jack's articles, such as "Significant Sires in the Pedigrees of Morgan FEI Dressage Horses," "A Survey of Morgans in USEA Eventing Competitions," "Significant Mares in the Pedigrees of FEI Dressage Morgans," and "Morgan Presence at Eventing's Upper Levels" sift through the databases to help readers identify the ancestry behind some of the individuals who have excelled at the highest levels. "The State of Morgans in Dressage" and "If They Are Good Enough, They Are Big Enough," written by Nadette, look at the state and potential of Morgans in sport in more general terms.

"Both of us have spent over forty years in academics where the focus is teaching and research, and the articles we have authored reflect this background. Our primary purpose is to present information and analysis that is accurate and well-referenced so a reader can





LEFT TO RIGHT: Mia-Mar Hillbilly Rock and Hannah Sue Hollberg; Misty Green Cimmaron GCH and Gia Long (photos © Xpress Foto, Captivation Photography).

go to the sources in the literature—both to see where we got the information and/or data and to give them a resource to do research on their own. Our hope is to present information that is useful to breeders," says Jack. For both, it's an important role serving the breed, but it's also something they enjoy, and have spent thousands of hours working on. "Part of my job has always been data collection and analysis—it is something that is both fun and rewarding because often you discover things that you wouldn't otherwise," Nadette adds.

The articles archive on MSR provides an introduction for those interested in Morgans as sport horses, and a resource for those within the breed. Many of the articles are from sources outside of the Morgan world, introducing horses and information that readers might not otherwise encounter. The historical articles highlight contributions of past Morgan sport breeders; their programs offer valuable lessons and bloodline references. Their contributions are also made apparent by the frequency with which their farm prefixes are found in the databases. This information can provide today's breeders with information on potential sources for breeding stock, albeit perhaps sometimes a generation removed. Historical articles of particular significance include those in the *Performance of Morgan Horses Under Saddle* series from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). They provide an example of how Morgans were evaluated during a time when their purpose was much more utilitarian. "The USDA piece is particularly interesting as its focus was for the selection of breeding stock using a methodology that somewhat mirrors what we want to see more of in sport," Jack says.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE MORGAN BREED

There are many individual equestrian sports with thousands of riders and enthusiasts within each—USDF alone has over 30,000 members, and USEA has close to 13,000. With rider demographics leaning more toward smaller, rideable mounts, particularly in dressage, there is a significant market potential for our breed.

"When it comes to Morgans in open competition, perceptions from within the Morgan community can be the biggest obstacle. That's because for people in open competition in the sport disciplines, the focus is on the sport, not the breed of the horse. They are looking for talent and respect it regardless of the breed," Nadette says. "A talented, smaller horse that is correctly trained and is ridden well will always be very competitive. We have seen this over and over—both with our own horses and others. It isn't about size; it is about athletic talent and trainability. Unfortunately, there still is the idea within the Morgan community that—and dressage is the most common example—a Morgan needs to be sixteen hands to compete against Warmbloods."

Warmbloods are purpose-bred for sports such as dressage and eventing, and it's one of the main reasons they have dominated sport horse competitions. Their breeders know what it takes to be successful in these sports and breed accordingly. Understanding what a discipline rewards, and breeding for that, is the key to advancement of Morgan success in sport as well. An example from dressage illustrates this point. There is an old adage: "ride the walk, train the trot, buy the canter." Dressage values a quality walk and canter because the trot can be adjusted more easily through training, while the quality of the canter and walk is the hardest to improve significantly. Understanding this and selecting accordingly is key—especially as Morgans have a reputation of the canter being their weakest gait for sport. "People tend to get caught up in that fancy extended trot. But if you look at the scoring in a dressage test—especially at the upper levels—it is the canter and the walk that get the coefficients," Nadette explains. "If you are trying to breed a dressage Morgan, you need to be paying attention to the quality of that canter and the other traits desirable for dressage—and those bloodlines that have proven to have produced it consistently."

GLADHEART FARM: BREEDING WITH A PURPOSE

Jack and Nadette lead by example in their own program, where they continue to breed for sport using performance and performance-based pedigrees as a foundation.

The first foal with their Gladheart prefix was Gladheart Lin-





LEFT TO RIGHT: Gladheart Black Harris and Gladheart Linhawk, both with Kimberlee Barker (photos © Diana Inch, Carol Bunch Photography).

hawk (Funquest Diviner x Rogue's Midnight Melody). "LC" was a 13.3 hand bay gelding foaled in 1998, and his dam was closely related to both the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) Morgan Rogue Hill's Galaxy and the Third Level dressage Morgan Rogue's Flight Time. Funquest Diviner, while not competed, was very athletic and brought in a lot of Flyhawk breeding which had been shown to produce solid dressage Morgans for several other programs.

Although LC didn't fit the dressage horse stereotype, he was very competitive in open dressage and reached Grand Prix with his trainer, Kim Barker, despite his size and being a non-traditional dressage breed. "LC probably has had the biggest impact for promotion of our breeding program. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, he was the antithesis of everything it was thought a Morgan dressage horse should be at the time," Nadette says. "But he had the gaits, ability to collect, and received correct training. I can tell you he was taken very, very seriously by anyone who had to compete against him at the dressage competitions, because he often was the one to beat."

Rogue's Midnight Melody's last foal, Gladheart Black Harris (by DJJJ Ebony Gold), a half-brother to LC, was foaled in 2005. By the renowned Morgan sport stallion DJJJ Ebony Gold and out of a mare who had now produced a Grand Prix horse, "Maus" was also very successful in open competition, both in dressage—competing through Prix St. Georges—as well as at Working Equitation, where he was nationally ranked in the top five at the Masters level—one of only a few Morgans to have reached that level of competition. Like his brother, Maus had an excellent canter and the ability to collect, both crucial skills for sport, and something he passes onto his foals who are competing successfully in dressage, driving, working equitation, and endurance. He also was unmistakably Morgan. "More than one judge would comment on how much they loved how typey Maus was," says Nadette. "We heard similar things for both LC and Maus when they were at dressage clinics—clinicians enjoyed seeing non-traditional breeds."

These horses help illustrate the Stangs' belief that breeding decisions should be based on proven athletic ability and the value of understanding what is required to be successful in sport. For stallions especially, this means a performance record and/or a record as proven producers in sport performance. Both stallions and mares should have individuals close-up in their pedigrees that have been proven in competition—ideally at higher levels in the sport of focus. They believe sport breeders should set their sights high.

Throughout their research, the Stangs have found that no single bloodline is dominant in upper-level Morgan sport horses, instead, they come from many Morgan families. "That exceptional sport Morgans come from diverse bloodlines is not at all surprising," Jack says. "An important feature of the sport disciplines is that they require a horse to use varied athletic skills. Since versatile athleticism has been a defining feature of the breed since its inception, it is no wonder that it can be found in many different bloodlines." Jack adds, "An important issue with respect to the long-term health of the Morgan breed is a loss of genetic diversity. The relatively small number of Morgan horses being bred and a closed registry exacerbates this problem. So does intense selection pressure directed toward a single trait. Its effects are manifested in the narrow range of bloodlines that dominate the show disciplines ("*Morgan Show and Sport Bloodlines: A Comparison*" TMH *January/February 2021*). On the other hand, the diversity of bloodlines found among the breed's top sport horses shows that breeding for sport does not have to diminish the breed's genetic diversity, and may in fact provide a needed counterweight to the effects of show breeding. This is another reason we believe it is important to promote Morgans for sport."

The Morgan Sport Resource is a blueprint where Jack and Nadette Stang have spent years collecting evidence, preserving history, and documenting success to help shape the future of the Morgan sport horse. Through analysis and a commitment to objective performance data, they hope the next generation of breeders will have the tools to produce more Morgans capable of competing successfully on the world's biggest stages, while remaining unmistakably Morgan. ■