

The Morgan Horse: Pride and Product of the Horse Drawn Era

By Jeff Morse

Should it be a surprise that the Morgan Horse excels as a carriage horse? It is easy to forget as we roll along on high speed radial tires toward the new millennium that only mere decades ago America moved on the wooden wheels of horse drawn vehicles. At 65 miles an hour down the interstate, we literally move through our world today about 10 times faster than we did less than 100 years ago. My grandfather was one year old when his father was killed in 1901 as the first motor vehicle fatality in Berkshire County in Massachusetts. I grew up hearing eyewitness accounts of the last of the horse and buggy days: my grandfather going up the street to the local livery stable in Lenox to fetch a horse and buggy to drive his mother to Pittsfield or running from his house early enough on cold winter days to catch a ride on Mr. Schemerhorn's sleigh down to Stockbridge Bowl to cut ice for the ice houses or going by sleigh 'cross lots' into town from his own farm in Richmond. It won't be long before the last generation of the horse and buggy age passes on and there will be no living witnesses to the horse drawn era. The Morgan breed is carrying on a legacy from that age. Most of the horses in general use by farmers and shop keepers around here and throughout New England at the turn of the century were Morgans and virtually all of them pulled vehicles of some kind. Riding was not as common as we might think. The Morgan breed is the pride and product of the horse drawn era. They were bred and selected for well over 100 years for the qualities desirable in an all-purpose driving horse. There was a reason why 80% of the horses in New York City were Morgans at one time: they were good at the job. They still are.

Today the world is re-awakening to the slumbering talents of the Morgan as a carriage horse. Morgans have shown the world that they are capable of living up to their heritage earned during the 19th century. They have won at the highest levels of international and national carriage driving competition. Countless other Morgans are showing the carriage community at the local level across this country what naturally gifted carriage horses Morgans are. One simply can not attend any driving competition in the Northeast without seeing Morgans in the thick of the competition and they are always consistently at or near the top. At the last Green Mountain Horse Association Carriage Pleasure Driving show, 16 out of the 17 single driving horses competing were Morgans. The New England Morgan show's carriage division in the last few years has drawn upwards of 30 good Carriage driving horses. There simply is no other breed that gathers that many good carriage driving horses in one place to compete. There is no other breed that **can!** That is a remarkable achievement. But I submit this is the mere tip of the iceberg. The best is yet to come for the Morgan breed..

At carriage driving competitions, we are just beginning to see the first Morgans that have been trained for the job since birth. To be fair there has been a handful in the past but they have been the rarest exceptions and occurred in the infancy of the exponentially growing sport of carriage driving. Most of the Morgans competing today have done other jobs before carriage driving. Some are ex-show horses, some were broke to drive as youngsters and have only been ridden until recently. Most merely happened to be owned by someone who decided to try carriage driving competition and took their trusty Morgan out of the barn to do it. Almost none have been consciously selected by owners as babies to grow up to be carriage horses. I maintain that our breed has not yet seen the best carriage driving horses we can produce.

Carriage driving is generally not thought of as a breed specific sport. At the Saratoga Carriage Driving Pleasure Show this spring there were 9 different breeds competing, a testament to the accessibility of the sport to any breed. Two Morgans took the Single Horse Championships, by the way. If there were such a thing as a carriage driving competition where teams of horses from specific breeds competed against each other, one would be a fool to bet against the Morgans.

What allows Morgan horses excel as competitive driving horses? In a word: versatility. The competitive carriage horse can not excel in just one area. While speed will help you thru the hazards of a combined driving event, it will be of no value to performing a high scoring dressage test or winning a working pleasure driving class. While elegant, floating motion will make you stand out in a pleasure class, it won't help you much when you are timed through an obstacle course. Stamina and soundness will

be your friend on marathons and distance drives but if your horse can not relax and remain responsive and supple, your performance in dressage will suffer. The good carriage horses have to excel in many facets of equine athleticism for each facet plays some important part in your scores at the end of the day. The Morgan horse is a well-rounded athlete. It is the supreme all-purpose equine. Its soundness, stamina and strength to size ratio have been legendary since the days of Figure and provide the basic and necessary building blocks for marathon and hazard challenges. Its tractability, willingness, mental acuity contribute to the ideal mindset for dressage tests and ring work. Its quickness, agility, forward attitude and keenness give Morgans the advantage in obstacle driving over the more laid back breeds. And let's not discount the bottomless Morgan heart that drivers can call on at any moment to pull them through. In fact, name almost any attribute which is characteristic of the Morgan breed and you can use it to competitive advantage at driving events. Now that's versatility.

The Morgan community is sitting on a gold mine of talent and the timing could not be better. There are some wonderful concepts about the sport of carriage driving that make it a very attractive market for the Morgan horse. The carriage world is structured to welcome drivers and horses of all abilities. It provides competitive opportunities at every level and is especially inviting at the entry level. This fact combined with the fact that the basic skills of driving are fairly simple to understand and readily acquired means that drivers new to the sport can experience success relatively early in the game. This provides the much needed incentive that encourages beginners to stay with the sport and it keeps their frustration level low. In addition, there is no urgency to move up in the levels of competition. One can compete with their peers as long as they feel it necessary and move on to the next level when their skills improve. This allows people who very often are maintaining careers outside of their love of horses to progress at a pace that suits their lifestyle. The camaraderie and helpful attitude among carriage driving competitors is frequently noted by those new to the sport. It is an attitude carefully guarded and maintained by those who have been at it for a while as something unique and special about the sport that helps set it apart from other equine competitions. In short, carriage driving is an inclusive sport that welcomes the new driver and provides a competitive environment that meets their needs without over facing them. It is also a supremely challenging sport to which one can easily devote a lifetime to master.

The Morgan breed could not be poised in a better position. We have a terrific gene pool of over 100 years of selection with the carriage horse in mind. Carriage driving is a rapidly expanding market in its relative infancy welcoming us in with open arms. As a product for that market the Morgan horse has proven it can meet the needs of the full spectrum from the entry level horse to the world caliber competitor. The equine market is being flooded with adult retirees or semi retirees who want to get back into horses. Carriage driving is an equine activity that has a quick learning curve combined with a lifetime of challenges. I hope the Morgan community realizes what we have and seizes the opportunity before them. We are poised to take this market. We have the pride and product of the horse drawn era. Let's show the world how it's done.