

~ BREEDERS ROUNDTABLE ~

BOUTIQUE BREEDERS

By Abbie Trexler



Robin Herrick,
Cherrydale Manor
New Wilmington,
Pennsylvania



Anne Wyland,
Ancan Morgans
Davison,
Michigan



Laura Braddock,
LBJ Morgans
Spencer,
Ohio



Susan Carlino,
Silver Creek Farm
San Martin,
California



Jay Kleiber,
Ridgewood Farm
Elizabeth,
Colorado

(Photo © Caprice Soltice)

The state of the equine economy has caused most breeders to downsize the number of foals they produce each year: for the time being, supply has responded to lower demand. Some breeders, however, have long been small breeders by choice. Regardless of the disciplines for which they've bred, they've kept numbers low.

This permits them to develop a plan for every foal, regardless of the vagaries of the marketplace.

We've termed them "boutique breeders." Sit in as this group chats about the economy, their breeding philosophies, evaluation of stock, marketing and what lies ahead for them.

Tell us about your program: What is the size of your breeding operation? Do you own your own stallion? How many mares do you own? How many foals do you have a year?

Robin Herrick: We generally have eight to ten mares actively in the breeding program. I am currently on an every-other-year rotation with them so we produce three to five foals per year. Because all of our youngsters leave the farm to obtain "higher education," I find this to be a more manageable number when they reach that age. I currently do not stand a stallion. It has been my experience that the vast majority of studs in our breed are very available through the generosity of the stallion owners. The stallion owners are, of course, a huge part of our industry but with a smaller operation the choices are much greater breeding to a variety of studs rather than standing one of my own. That being said, the total cost of producing a foal can be substantially more using that approach. I like my total number of horses to be under 25.

Anne Wyland: I began my breeding program in the early 1990s. Presently, I have 29 Morgans, although that includes five which

are boarded here and another who is on lease for breeding. Of my own 23 horses, I have 14 mares of breeding age, and two others that will mature into my program someday. I own and stand my own stallion but breed to outside stallions occasionally, too. I am expecting five foals in 2011 and that number is up from the previous two years. Five or six mares will be bred for 2012 foals. I have raised as many as 10-12 foals a year, but that was in the '90s and early 2000s.

Laura Braddock: Our first foal was born in 1999 and at that time we had three Morgans. Currently we have 12 horses; two stallions, six broodmares and our sale stock which consists of a four-year-old Western mare, a three-year-old pleasure driving mare, a two-year-old gelding, and a yearling filly. We are expecting only one foal for 2011 and plan to breed three mares this year. We normally breed between two and three mares per year.

Susan Carlino: Silver Creek Stables is a small five-acre farm located in San Martin, Ca. Owned by my mother, Lorraine Bumb and I, we breed, raise, show and sell good Morgan horses. As most

breeding programs are based on the stallion, our program is based on the bloodlines of one great mare, Fletcher Music Lee. And from her daughters, GLB Bell Of The Ball (by HVK Bell Flaire), GLB Perfect Harmony (by Futurity French Command), GLB Grand And Glorious (by HVK Bell Flaire), GLB Moonlight Sonata (by Liberation First Star), and GLB Like Nobody's Byz (by Stonecroft Byzantine), her legacy lives on in the tradition of producing great Morgans that are pretty, sound, sane show horses that have the heart and desire not only to compete, but to win!

We do not own our own stallion. There are so many proven stallions available that we feel it's easier and less expensive in the long-run to take advantage of the great bloodlines available through frozen and fresh cooled semen. We usually have between two and four foals each year, of which one or two are embryo transfers. This way we are able to continue to show and promote our great mares throughout the year.

Jay Kleiber: Ridgewood Farm is a small, 25-acre farm located in the southeast Denver area. We maintain a select group of mares, typically around ten. We do not own a breeding stallion at this time. In the past we have bred as many as 14 foals per year; however, with the economy as it is we have tailored our program, cutting back significantly on the number we breed.

Do you do this all on your own, as a family or does it require staff?

Robin Herrick: It would be impossible for Neil and I to practice medicine full time and not have an amazing support structure. From the trainers that prepare and campaign the show stock—including those that have gone on to new owners and are no longer owned by Cherrydale—to the dedicated veterinary and reproductive staff, to the great people who stay at home and care for everyone as if they were their very own, enabling Neil and I to travel and enjoy the shows and the “fruits of our labor.” We need and are very thankful for them all!

Anne Wyland: Since the horses are my passion and not that of my family, I do a lot of the work myself. I have two college aged “barn girls” who help out by doing evening chores on a part-time basis. My son works for me part-time cleaning stalls, putting hay up in the loft, and in other miscellaneous ways as needed and when available. It's the same with my husband. My husband likes the horses, just not the work that comes with them and that's usually the only time he complains...It seems there is always a broken board to repair or something else that needs fixed; and he is good about helping out when I need it. I think my son and my husband would both cheer if the day ever came when I said, “Let's sell all the horses,” but that isn't going to happen.

Laura Braddock: Our breeding program is managed by my husband, Jim, and myself. Jim is mostly responsible for handling the day-to-day tasks from feeding, cleaning the stalls to the pasture management and, of course, spoiling the new foals. I handle the vet and blacksmith care, choosing the stallions, breeding and working with the foals. The training and showing responsibilities are handled by Tim Roesink of Grove Pointe Stables.

Susan Carlino: No matter the size of your operation those you work with are your family whether they are related to you or not.

Ours could definitely be classified as a family operation. With my mom at the helm, I manage and make sure everything gets done at the right time, our daughter Jessica is the go-to gal—if you need something done she is the one who makes it happen. My husband, Dan and son, Daniel, are the voices of reason and keep us grounded in reality. Along with Jessica, our other daughters, Anna, Elise and Genevieve are the research specialists, catch riders/drivers, emergency farm EMTs, bag ladies for photo and video shoots, and good old fashioned comic relief.

And we wouldn't be able to pull it all together without such a gifted trainer as Cathy (Grimes) and our one full-time and two part-time maintenance guys who are specialists at keeping all our horses happy and the farm safe and beautiful.

Jay Kleiber: Ours is a family operation, but we do have staff that does the feeding and cleaning twice daily. They also ensure the horses are all okay in the fields, clean stock tanks and tend to the overall maintenance of the farm. Julie oversees the staff on a daily basis and is in the barn every morning before she leaves for work. She is very much a hands-on manager.

Has the economic downturn affected how many of your mares you breed each year?

Robin Herrick: Of course!! As a breeder, we tread a fine line in regards to numbers. We must have quality stock available to the public at various levels of training to keep ourselves marketable but be cautious as to not become “overstocked” and not do justice to each individual animal.

Anne Wyland: Absolutely. I have reduced the number by half to two thirds. I'm a little concerned about having five foals arrive this year and I'm hoping the market will support fair sales for them. I'm prepared to keep them until they are trained and wearing leather if it doesn't. I've already decided that if the market hasn't improved by spring of 2012, I will not breed anymore foals until all my youngsters have sold.

Laura Braddock: Fortunately, we went into the economic downturn with only a few Morgans to sell and the young stock we have today for sale already hold impressive in-hand titles and are currently continuing their performance training at Grove Pointe. Therefore, we have continued to breed two to three mares each year and only keeping and investing in the exceptional foals for future sale stock.

Susan Carlino: Maybe a little bit. Between the economy and the small size of our farm we have to make sure that all the horses on the farm have a job. Those who don't have jobs are hard to find homes for so we try to make sure our crystal ball is polished and in good working order when we plan each year's breedings.

Jay Kleiber: The economy has had a significant impact on our breeding program. Prior to the downturn, we were able to market and sell weanlings and yearlings as fast as we could produce them. Our program was directed toward speculation buyers and we were very successful, with our clients buying young stock from us and going on to win Grand National and World Championships with them. Since then, the market demand has changed significantly. It is difficult to sell horses that are not wearing leather and, necessarily, we have had to tailor our approach to the changing market. We

breed fewer mares now and need to direct our resources toward having our Morgans in training in order to market them. Since Julie and I do not train ourselves, it is a significant change in how we funnel resources. As responsible breeders, we have reduced our total herd count from our peak of 48 down to 17. Our plan is to continue to reduce our numbers and not breed more than one to three foals per year. In this market, even that may be unrealistic.

How did you evaluate your broodmares?

Robin Herrick: I have found most success with retaining daughters of mares that have been exceptionally good producers for me. I like to give them the opportunity to be bred to several different stallions before I make a decision as to them staying in our program long-term. I then select an occasional individual to purchase that would best complement our bloodlines. The very best mares consistently produce better than themselves when bred to multiple different stallions.

Anne Wyland: For those who have given me foals in the past, I evaluate them based upon their production records. For new mares just entering my program, I evaluate them based upon pedigree, conformation (and form for function), disposition, and past production records if available. When I buy or lease a mare, I'm looking for specific traits to compliment the stallion I have in mind for them.

Laura Braddock: I have invested a lot of time in the decision process when it came to the broodmares. Our broodmares possess some very grand old bloodlines which enable us to breed them to the more popular bloodlines sought after in our breed today, creating a small ear, pretty headed animal with the size and athletic ability that is consistently dominating the winners circle. Our mares have good size and substance which make them good broodmares with very few foaling problems. We have bred some of our mares for the soul purpose of creating our own breeding stock, which has proven to be a good decision for us.

Susan Carlino: We have a very high opinion of all our mares. They are beautiful, talented, have tremendous bloodlines and, most of all, are true and gifted athletes with the charisma and charm to do well in the show ring. And, most of all, they give us foals that easily carry on in the tradition of their great parents and grandparents.

Jay Kleiber: We tend to be in constant upgrade mode. Our goal is to continuously improve our herd quality as opportunities present themselves. We try to select the very best mares we can afford at the time and do our best to breed them wisely. Both bloodlines and individual conformation traits are evaluated. Specifically, we like to see a great shoulder on a mare, though this is a very elusive trait. Tight, refined ears are very important to us as are big eyes. They both bring an overall quality to the look of a mare. More and more size is becoming a factor and while we recognize this as breeders, most of our mares are 15 hands or smaller. Long front legs, regardless of size, are also very important to us. We've valued strong powerful hocks in our program and have been able to keep this trait primarily by utilizing the Serenity Masterpiece blood both in our mares and in some of the stallions we have used for our mares. We are in the minority in believing there is such a thing as a neck that is too long. We are also in the minority in believing

if you have to make a compromise, it should be the topline before it is the shoulder. Despite the varied bloodlines, if you were to walk our fields you would find our mares are all very consistent. Beautiful, refined, mid-sized with strong bodies, medium length necks, strong hocks and good shoulders.

What thought process do you go through when choosing matings?

Robin Herrick: I begin early in the spring (after the foal crop is safely here) to plan for the next year. I begin with a short list being very critical of what I view as my mares' biggest shortcomings (they all have them!). I have a list of options in mind...usually three to five stallions that I feel would be a good cross. I find the AMHA online access to be a wonderful tool to research bloodlines. I try to choose the cross that would best complement my mare on paper and still be very strong phenotypically where she may not be as much so. Finally, as the list becomes even shorter, I do put some consideration into the breeding contract and the availability of the stallion...where he is standing, how many days a week semen is available, etc.

Anne Wyland: I can't look at a mare—any Morgan mare—and not size her up for breeding quality. It's almost second nature to me anymore. I'm not sure that is a good thing, but it's how my mind works. Until the market really comes back with a demand for young stock again, I'm basically looking to use my own stallion. So, when considering mares for him, I'm looking to create a "marketable" result. I tend to stick with the tried-n-true crosses of the past, and if a new mare comes in to my program, I look at her phenotype. Does it compliment that of my stallion, and visa versa?

I did purchase outside stallion services this year and I haven't done that in several years. I try to always stay within a certain bloodline or two. I do that because I'm familiar with it; the pros and the cons. Then I looked for traits in stallions (and their blend of bloodlines) that would best compliment my mares. For instance, if the mare needs a better tip-over at the poll, but has outstanding use of her hocks, I'll look for a mate whose lines are known for a good tip at the poll. If the stallion doesn't have the best hock action I want but it's acceptable, I'll still consider him for the "fix" at the poll and count on the mare to improve his hocks. Breeding is always a gamble, but when you make it an educated guess, it works more often than not.

Laura Braddock: I try to find the best stallion to complement and improve over my mares, I put a lot of weight on the stallion's performance ability as well as his current offspring and what characteristics he passes on to them. Tim Roesink is especially helpful in this area, he has a lot of knowledge and expertise, his guidance has been an important part of my breeding process as well as its success.

Susan Carlino: Breed the best to the best. We know what our mares will produce. Evaluating the stallion is more of a process. Show record, consistency in what they produce and how they are as individuals all go in to deciding which stallions to breed to our mares.

Jay Kleiber: Several factors come into play when choosing stallions

for our mares. Phenotype and genotype considerations both enter the decision-making process. While we revere bloodlines, in the final analysis you've got to look at the mare standing in front of you prior to selecting a stallion. Of course there is always that plain Jane mare that turns out to be a top producer, but they are the exception. We look at crosses that have proven to be successful for other breeders and we consider the prepotency of the stallion. We also rely on input from others in the industry we respect, including Ann Hailey, Iann Fu-Longenecker, Renee Page, Debi Boies and Ken Martin. Each of these people has been a willing sounding board for us when making breeding decisions and their input has been invaluable. Having someone you can rely on for candid feedback is so important in this process. More and more, we are leaning toward using only stallions that are proven in the industry and have breed caché, but we do, on occasion, select a young unproven stallion for one of our mares. Lastly, gut instinct plays no small role when we make our decisions. The World Champion Mare, RWF Over The Rainbow, was a gut instinct breeding. We never underestimate the power of the little voice within.

How do you judge the foals you produce and do you make a marketing plan for each of them?

Robin Herrick: Because we produce only a few foals each year, we strive to make sure each one becomes the best they can be. All of the foals grow up here...at least until they are long yearlings and sometimes until they are two before they go off for training. That gives one a lot of insight as to what we think they may be and what division they would excel in. We then rely on the trainers to bring those qualities to the forefront. Most buyers are shopping for a specific division and their decision is much simpler when they can envision that individual in their respective divisions. We formulate our marketing plan based on where each individual is best suited.

Anne Wyland: We take pictures of our stock all the time. In fact, through the summer months, as the foals are growing and maturing, we take photographs and video of them almost every weekend. Sitting back and studying video and still photography really helps you critique the individual. I like the expression, "judge the foal at two weeks, two months, and two years." I do that and price it accordingly.

Every foal has a marketing plan. I use the Internet and my website predominantly as my source of marketing, but advertise in Morgan periodicals from time to time as well. In February, I announced my 2012 breeding plans on my website and have received feedback from visitors on those plans already. I have people eager to see foals who aren't even conceived yet, and have already had interest from prospective buyers on some of them.

Laura Braddock: We start our foal's showing careers as early as three months therefore we start evaluating them at about a month old. I normally have them entered in one or two sweepstakes as weanlings and two or three sweepstakes as yearlings. We show them accordingly depending on their individual development or make a decision to sell them early before investing in their future.

Susan Carlino: We love each of our foals and think very highly of them all. Usually by the end of their yearling year when they are brought in, cleaned up and put to work we have a pretty good idea

of what they want to do and Cathy is so good at bringing out the best in each one. Our marketing plan is flexible and we tailor it to fit each individual.

Jay Kleiber: As small breeders we have had to make quick decisions about our foals in the past. Julie will sometimes get frustrated with me because I'll pass judgment on a foal too quickly. It's probably the one area where we tend to disagree consistently. I believe you can get a very good feel for the quality of a foal when it is very young, say three weeks. Julie often prefers to wait until three years. The problem with Julie's approach is that it's very costly to keep a foal until it is three years old; only to find out it is not going to be a top caliber show horse. I would prefer to make that decision at a much younger age and take my lumps when I find I've sold one short in the process. We do not make a marketing plan for each of our foals. We tend to let them tell us what they want to be and often that takes time. This tends to tip the balance in Julie's favor.

How do you market and promote your breeding program? What is your target market?

Robin Herrick: Most of our horses are targeted toward the show horse market. We do a fair amount of advertising in all of the publications and certainly get a lot of inquiries based on what we may have out showing that people can see. The internet is a wonderful tool but I do admit difficulty finding time to update websites! I also like to have one or two in the barn that can be true ambassadors to the breed and perhaps be marketed to an owner that may never have experienced the joy of owning Morgan horses!

Anne Wyland: Well, my target market has changed in the past few years and I feel it's a result of the overall economy. I used to breed for show, and now I try my best to breed "show quality" horses that buyers can use at home and safely enjoy on trails. I find that people still want "show quality" but they would rather take that nice horse down a relaxing country trail than down the tanbark of a high end horse show.

I have branched out in my circle of "where" I market and always try to advertise available horses in venues where John Q Public can find them. Those who may not have a Morgan or aren't active in the Morgan clubs across the nation aren't necessarily privy to all our club magazines, newsletters, and networking circles. They don't know about some of our all-Morgan advertising venues—so I try to place ads in all breed areas so those searching for their first Morgan can find me there.

Then I always try to mention the "show quality" but safe and sane for use at home—because I feel that is what most buyers are looking for.

Laura Braddock: We have a website that we use to inform interested parties as to what stallions our mares are bred to, pictures of the breeding stock as well as the offspring and their accomplishments, picture pages and sales pages. I like to run a few ads in the breed magazine including not only show stock, but also the younger stock for sale. Our foals are shown very young and, fortunately for us, they have been pretty successful. I feel that my target market is probably three- to five-year-old stock selling a few younger horses from time to time.

Susan Carlino: First and foremost you need to have a good product

BREEDERS ROUNDTABLE: THE BOUTIQUE BREEDERS

to offer—one that is pretty, sound, correct and that has the heart, desire and charisma to excel at their given task.

Next would be to have a good show record. And nobody will know about that if there is no advertising to tell the world about what you have to offer. Print ads in *TMH* magazine, show programs and other trade magazines keep your product fresh in everyone's minds. And, in this age of the electronic super-highway, websites are one of the greatest tools available to breeders. A good website that is easy to find and to navigate, that has all pertinent information available at a glance with good photos and video that are updated on a regular basis will bring the world to your front door. A bad website can do the opposite if the information and photos are of poor quality and out of date. See some good examples at www.CarlinoWebServices.com

Jay Kleiber: We have a comprehensive website available as a promotional tool. We also use trainers, personal networking, social networking (Facebook) and breed publications. Our target market is the show horse market.

What are your plans for 2011 and beyond?

Robin Herrick: We are expecting three foals in 2011 and have plans underway to breed four mares for 2012. We have a number of youngsters to be very excited about and look forward to them growing up to be the very best they can be!

Anne Wyland: With the overall soft market for sales that we have experienced the past four or five years, it's really hard to project

more than a year or two in to the future. Breeders need to keep abreast of the market, wait and see how it turns out, then breed accordingly. I'm optimistic. The ball has to hit the floor before it can bounce back up again, and I think that's where we are today. I think 2012 will bring a change where the supply and demand is much more even than it's been in the past. But I will wait to see that happen before I make any concrete breeding decisions.

Laura Braddock: I feel that the economy will be on a gradual upswing beginning this year, however the recovery of our industry will be slower than other parts of our economy. My goal is to make available as the market recovers a nice selection of young broke Morgans for the amateur market as well as some, young stock for the buyer wanting to make an investment in our breed, keeping the quality and quantity of our stock manageable.

Susan Carlino: To breed great Morgan horses and to see the next generations of riders, drivers and great Morgans trot in to the winner's circle and on to the pages of Morgan history.

Jay Kleiber: For 2011, we are excited to have leased RWF Over The Rainbow from Copper Beech LLC to breed in 2011. We are currently in the process of selecting the right stallion. I'll be calling on my confidants, for sure, and listening to my gut, of course. Much is to be learned about the future of the industry. Our plans are to scale back significantly while riding the economic downturn wave. We do not have confidence we will ever return to the glory days we enjoyed over the last decade but we are confident the breed is here to stay. And so is Ridgewood Farm. ■



To get that big smile like
Tracy Hall-Britt's:

Start with a good young foal like
Whippoorwill Coronet
(Whippoorwill King Jubilee x
Whippoorwill Corona);

Work with a friend,
trainer/instructor like Heidi Lucas;

Take an active part in every stage of
his training

And before you know it you have
the thrill of riding that very special
Morgan, all your own!

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