

VICTORY IS GOLDEN:



MLB Capo Di' Capo
with Garn Walker
and Dianne Lents
(Photo by Lesley Deutsch)

≈ COLORFUL ≈

MLB CAPO DI' CAPO

The buckskin stallion makes history as the first colorful Morgan to win a big blanket of roses in the Western Pleasure World Championship.

It's almost like a fairytale: a beautiful buckskin stallion dancing to the World Championship under the spotlight at the biggest Morgan show in the world. The product of a small breeder, a non-traditional color, overcoming the odds in a rise to the top of the Morgan show world.

Indeed, the life of reigning Western Pleasure World Champion MLB Capo Di' Capo reads like something out of a storybook.

It all began on the Florida-based farm of Morgan breeder Laurie Faust. Laurie is not one to breed huge numbers of foals

every year. In fact, years go by in between foal crops on her farm, and in almost 30 years of breeding she has produced just 21 carefully bred Morgans with the MLB prefix. She had leased the buckskin mare Aquila's Sure Prize (Futurity Command x Aquilas Grand

Prize) from owner Kim Rother. Prize's cream dilution gene came from the palomino mare Cotton Candy (see "Legacy Mares, Cotton Candy: Let Her Colors Shine," *TMH* March 2010), her maternal great-grand dam. Laurie bred Prize to The Last Don

By Laura Hornick Behning



COLORFUL *~* Victory is Golden



LEFT TO RIGHT: MLB Capo Di' Capo as a weanling and with Laurie Faust at the 2011 Dixie Cup

(Photos by Laurie Faust and Laura Hornick Behning).

(HVK Noble Obsession x My Blue Heaven). “I try to keep to blood lines that were producing more refinement, length of neck with more laid back shoulders, as well as athleticism,” Laurie says. “I took the blood of one of the breeds’ most beloved mares, My Blue Heaven, to that of her sibling Futurity Command, keeping in mind the old time breeder’s adage of ‘taking the stallion to the best of his dam’s blood.’” The result of this cross, MLB Capo Di’ Capo, was foaled in 2004. “I wanted to play off the stallion’s name—The Last Don—and the whole Mafia idea,” Laurie says. “I was working with a wonderful orthopedic surgeon who happened to be Italian. We were talking about strong names for my new colt and he suggested ‘Capo Di’ Capo’ which very roughly translates to ‘The Boss of all Bosses,’ the Boss being the head of the Mafia.”

The colt loved to dance around the foaling stall and paddocks, so he became known as “Cha Cha” around the barn. “From the time he was about a week of age, he thought very highly of himself,” Laurie says. “When Cha Cha was born I must admit that I thought he was bay (and yes, regardless of what any color breeder says about color being the icing on the cake, ultimately we want to produce color).” This was Laurie’s first buckskin foal, and as anyone who has ever bred a colorful Morgan can tell you, their foal colors can fool you for awhile. “I will admit that I said ‘it’s a darn bay, this colt is really lovely but he is just a bay,’” Laurie continues. “However, my husband Bryce (the eternal optimist) said ‘no, Laurie, you have yourself a buckskin there.’” Indeed, Bryce was correct, and as the days passed and Cha Cha unfolded, it became very apparent that he truly was a very special foal—regardless of color.

Making his show debut as a two-year-old in 2006, Cha Cha took a top five placement at the Grand National and World Championship Morgan Horse Show® in the Grand National Two-Year-Old Pleasure Driving. The following year (2007) Laurie

made the decision to send him to Bonnie Sogoloff to see what his potential would be under saddle. Bonnie felt he was best suited as a hunter prospect and he was shown at New England in the three-year-old division taking a very well earned third place in a large class. In 2008 Laurie continued showing Cha Cha as a four-year-old in the hunter division. “We showed in a few shows, we did well, but I felt that Cha Cha really wasn’t happy,” Laurie says. “I kept saying to my husband ‘I think he wants to be a Western horse’ so that fall we changed direction, and with the help of several trainers, I took lessons to try to learn how to take Cha Cha in the direction he truly seemed happiest. We made our Western debut at the 2009 Citrus Cup and while we did not set the world on fire, we came away from that experience with so many positive comments and words of encouragement from well-respected breeders and friends. I was driving home from the Citrus Cup and called home to check my messages. I was absolutely stunned to hear one from trainer Garn Walker. Apparently Garn had Cha Cha on his radar and had seen photos of Cha Cha and I on the internet making our Western debut!”

In the spring of 2010 Laurie took a few Western lessons with trainer Rick Davis (Davis Stables). Rick was immediately intrigued with Cha Cha and later that year the decision was made that Rick would show Cha Cha as his open Western horse. The more he worked with the stallion the more he appreciated his sweet and willing disposition. The newly formed team went to Oklahoma that fall, and came away with two very respectable top ten placements in the Western Pleasure Gentleman’s Finals and the Grand National Western Pleasure Stallions.

In 2011, Laurie was back in the show ring with Cha Cha. “We showed at Citrus Cup, Dixie Cup, and the Blue Ridge Classic, but I felt I was only just getting so far with him,” Laurie says. “I was getting frustrated; I had issues that I couldn’t quite fix. By July it was time to face facts—I lacked that extra training ability to really



LEFT TO RIGHT: MLB Capo Di' Capo was crowned Western Pleasure World Champion at the 2013 Grand Nationals.
(Photos by Casey McBride and Howard Schatzberg)

make this special horse into what I knew in my heart of hearts he was capable of.” She got help from Florida trainers Valerie Siemer and Allyson Hughes, but in January 2012, fate intervened. Laurie got a phone call from Garn Walker who asked her, “What are you doing with Cha Cha?”

Garn had not forgotten about the big buckskin stallion, and neither had his client, Dianne Lents. “About four years ago I saw a photo of MLB Capo Di Capo,” Dianne remembers. “I saw what I thought was perfect conformation, which I think should always come first, and a gorgeous, golden, buckskin color. We made some inquiries and were told he was no longer available. I was really disappointed and kept looking. A year or so later, I was whining to Garn about missing my chance with Cha and was overheard by Rebecca Miller who helps out at Garn’s barn. Rebecca took it upon herself to check on Cha’s status and found out that Cha had not been sold after all and was still with his breeder, Laurie Faust, and might be available. Garn and I got to Florida about as fast as we could. Garn liked what he saw and asked me if Cha Cha ‘made my heart go pitter-pat.’ I replied, ‘Hell, yes!’ and we bought him.”

Parting with Cha Cha was not an easy thing for Laurie to do, but she knew it was the right thing. “Watching Garn ride Cha Cha, I saw how patient and kind he was, and in turn how Cha Cha seemed to respond to him. I was still emotionally torn about the decision to sell Cha Cha, as I truly loved this horse, but I also recognized that Garn and Dianne would make this horse into everything I believed he could be.” Cha Cha joined Dianne’s two beautiful buckskin mares, Holiday Bonita Fe and Holiday Pachita Fe (both by Santa Fe Renegade), at Garn Walker Stables.

Dianne has always been attracted to colorful horses. In her early 30’s she showed a palomino Quarter Horse named Dalton “who was my heart horse,” she says. “I showed Western pleasure, trail, team penning, and anything they’d let me enter.” When

Dalton passed away, a broken hearted Dianne’s showing days were over until her family moved to California in 2008, where she was introduced to the Morgan breed. “I soon had several beautiful Morgans that my daughter and I showed on the West Coast,” Dianne says. “I still had a soft spot in my heart for colorfuls and always was drawn to the photos of Morgan horses with color, especially the rare golden ones.”

There is always a “getting to know you” phase when a new horse and rider team is created. Cha Cha was campaigned lightly in 2012 while he was “Walkerized” as Garn’s wife, Melissa, calls it. Garn found Cha Cha to be, “a willing and nice horse, and he always tries very hard.” The pairing was a fruitful one. A full show season in 2013 resulted in championships at the MHCSC Spring Classic, Morgan Medallion and the UPHA Chapter One shows, setting the stage for the October and the Grand National.

Excitement and anticipation were the emotions of the week as a blue ribbon in the Grand National Western Pleasure Stallions class and a reserve in the Western Pleasure Gentleman’s Finals led up to the world championship on Saturday night. With MLB Capo Di’ Capo’s incredible win in the Western Pleasure World Championship, he became the first colorful Morgan ever to win that honor.

Garn emphasized that for him, the highlight of any win is seeing the happiness on the faces of the horse’s owners, and the look on Dianne’s was priceless. Dianne says, “As anyone who has seen that picture of my face when they announced the (world championship) win can attest, I was excited. A lot.” History was being made, and everyone—including those of us in the cheap seats, at home watching the live feed—knew it.

The acceptance of colorful Morgans in the breed show ring has been an evolutionary process. Slowly, the resistance to color is eroding, accelerated by the increasing quality of colorful Morgans and their presentation. “It took a long time even for chestnuts to

be accepted in the show ring,” Garn points out. “People thought all Morgans had to be bay.” Many colorful breeders have felt the sting of prejudice over the years. “Back in the late 90’s when I was showing R Heart Tickle My Fancy in the classic division with trainer Mary Brannon, we had our share of negative comments,” Laurie says. “I even had someone come up to me once and tell me, ‘what a lovely mare, it is a shame she is a palomino.’ However, there were also those that I believe watched with much interest (kind of like covering their eyes, but with their fingers splayed so they could peek!).”

At a time when registrations, breeding, and show attendance is down, colorful Morgans just might help give the industry a much-needed shot in the arm. Garn believes that color is helpful in attracting new people to the breed. Laurie agrees, saying “I have always maintained that people love the unique, and the more quality colorfules that continue to be bred and shown, the more buyers (exhibitors) will want to present them. I truly believe that Cha Cha has set the stage for more colorfules to be shown and appreciated, and that is really pretty special.”

What’s next for our golden boy? Plans are to breed Holiday Pachita Fe to Cha Cha this year. Garn adds that it’s possible we’ll see the big stallion in the new Cowboy Dressage shows. Cha Cha is also back in the show ring and winning, taking the Morgan Western Pleasure class as well as the Western Pleasure Stake at the Carousel Charity in March. His first foal, the four-year-old palomino mare MLB Bella Sonata (out of Glydan Melodious Joy) is winning in the junior horse hunter division in Michigan for owners Rebecca & Zachary Marano.

MLB Capo Di’ Capo was produced by a small breeder who has tried to breed the best colorful Morgans, not the most colorful Morgans. He succeeded because of Garn’s training and Dianne’s faith in Garn, and perhaps more so in her horse. Dianne sums it up nicely. “It is fun to be in the Morgan history books, but in the end, I just love the way he goes and always feel a tug on my heart strings when I see that flash of gold in the sunlight.” Everyone who has ever loved a colorful Morgan knows exactly what she means. ■

MLB Capo Di’ Capo
with Garn Walker at the
2013 Grand Nationals
(Photo by Howard Schatzberg)