

~ BREEDERS' ROUNDTABLE ~

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

By Abbie Trexler

I polled a panel of Morgan breeders about the importance of quality in their breeding program. The answers are varied, but each gives thoughtful insight as to how quality is both defined in their breeding philosophy and applied in the breeding shed.

The question I asked our panel of breeders was: Quality is a very elusive trait, but all breeders say they breed for it. What does quality mean to you? Can you give me an example of it?



(Photo © Stuart Vesty)

Clare Simpson, Winterset

Ah, the elusive illusion of equine quality! Definable? Maybe not.

To me when I think of quality it is instant recognition beyond the physical attributes of the horse. It is based on my experience of what I prefer for the Morgan breed that is so ingrained that it becomes visceral.

Any breeder can recall foals playing in the fields and noting one that was special because it had “a lot of quality.” History is replete with future champions, some of which were the downtrodden, mere cart horses who were given a new life because they had that “look” beyond their condition. Such was the case of Snowman the grade horse, bought for a few dollars at a slaughter auction to be used as a kids’ lesson horse. Saved by a trainer because he had that “look in his eyes.” Hardly a model of conformation for a jumper he ultimately became National Jumper Champion at the Garden in the 1950’s! A book and a movie followed.

Many Morgans have comparable desired breed traits and all can have a degree of quality, but not all quality is created equal. What is it then that makes some superior? An example of a horse that possessed this exalted characteristic was a stallion being expertly shown in-hand (in a fashion that the great choreographer Busby Berkeley would have applauded!) at the 1972 New York Morgan show that gave me goose bumps—that stallion was Bennfield’s Ace. What was so defining about Ace’s performance? It’s what a certain quality means to me—his presence. That foal in the field and Snowman also had that elusive

quality of presence. That’s what defines my special horse.

Having said the above, recognition of this very special aspect of quality can also be very simple and I believe most horsepersons will agree, “You’ll know it when you see it!” Again it’s very visceral.



Diana Wold, Merriwold Morgans

Breeding for quality can mean different things to different breeders. But I believe there are a few characteristics of top individuals regardless of breed or type:

- Smooth pleasing lines that go together to form a harmonious picture
- Gaits that flow with natural rhythm
- Temperament that is suited for the horse’s purpose

There are other more elusive aspects of “quality” in horses such as willingness, heart, expression and intelligence. We have all known a horse that had amazing “presence,” it is hard to define. In addition, quality usually denotes a level of beauty and refinement. Breeders of quality horses strive for these traits. The most successful breeders are able to consistently produce top individuals.

Merriewold is a broodmare operation, producing Morgan foals. We believe that the mare adds as much as the stallion to the end result and in some traits such as size and temperament the mare adds more. Our challenge is to assess the pluses and minuses of each mare and to try to find the best match for her.

In the show horse division, Saralin and Kohler stand out as top producers of quality individuals. Statesman Farm consistently

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produces quality sport horses. And the MEMC lines produce quality Western pleasure horses.

It takes an astute horse person to identify quality and to make those breeding choices that will produce quality horses.



**Carol Hudson,
Treble's Morgan Manor**

Striving for perfection is the goal at Treble's Morgan Manor. Our idea of breed perfection never varies and yes, we do breed for quality. It is easy to see, however, it is hard to put into words.

Quality for me is the epitome of refinement and smoothness that connects all the body parts together like liquid gold. An elegant horse should be as unique as a high end car. If they look expensive, they usually are. A horse with extreme refinement, a beautiful head, sculpted from head to tail can take your breath away.

Quality is the difference between ordinary and extraordinary. Anyone can breed for the "Chorus Line," but here at Treble's we strive to breed the "Star of the Show."



Jay Kleiber, Ridgewood Farm

I've spent a lot of time thinking about my response to this question as it's not one that is easily answered. I thought about horses I considered to have a lot of quality and the characteristics they had that made them special. I thought about my mentors, people like Sharon Harper, Jackie Sweeney, Steve Quaid, and Bruce Ekstrom from whom I learned so much in the early days. I thought about conversations with my breeding peers—people like Renee Page, Ann Hailey, Iann Fu Longenecker and others and still it's hard to come up with the words to define quality. The French have a phrase for this; *je ne sais quoi*: an indefinable, elusive quality, especially a pleasing one.

Many years ago, I recall Steve Quaid teaching me that in order to have an individual horse you would consider putting into a breeding program, it needed to have something about it that was extreme. Extreme beauty, extreme length of neck, extreme motion—anything that would set it apart from his or her horse peers. Good was just not good enough, he said. Years later, I would find myself in a conversation with Rick Lane. Rick and I were talking about a horse that was for sale and he asked if I felt the price reflected the quality of the individual. I doubt Rick knew what a profound impact that statement had on me but it was the beginning of Julie's and my concerted effort to think of quality in a different way. Less emotion, more objective evidence.

In my early years with Morgans I spent a lot of time with Brunk bloodlines. Specifically, Beamington and Beamine and the Irish Lane and Silver Maple programs influenced me a great deal. It was here that I developed a love for a beautiful Brunk headpiece and I still look for the qualities in our own mares to this day. Big

eyes that are wide set, small swivel ears that are set close together, large jowl but not so large as to cut off air flow when their head is set (a lesson learned from Steve as well). The beauty of a Morgan's head can make or break the overall quality of an individual, in my opinion. There is nothing more disappointing than a nice horse that has ears sticking out the side of its head like motorcycle handlebars. This is a trademark Ridgewood opinion and many people know I'm not shy about it.

Another factor for us is overall refinement. Clean lines, never heavy or coarse, with an easy bend at the poll are important characteristics that enhance overall quality. Long hips with flat top lines, long forearms with short canon bones, and a long underline with a prominent wither—these are the qualities that Doris Ryan taught me to seek and are those that I find evident when I see a horse I consider to be of quality.

I anticipate there will be responses different than my own that speak more to a horse's tractability, legs and way of moving, etc., and I grant these are very important suitability characteristics. For our purposes, though, we look for something a little extreme, a horse with big eyes and tight set ears, refinement as opposed to heavier boned, long front legs and a beautiful topline. That is the blueprint upon which we believe Morgan quality is built.

In closing, imagine two Morgan stallions standing side by side. One of them is so obviously stallion worthy, the other you would geld rather quickly. They might even be full brothers. What makes one better than the other? What are the quality characteristics that make one worthy to carry the gene pool forward while the other does not? *Je ne sais quoi*. We can't describe it but we know it when it's there.



Bill Haines, Ledyard Farm

"I will know it when I see it" is one response to the question of quality in our Morgan breed. As we view a horse show, whether in-hand or performance classes, we see a myriad of opinions from the judges and experienced horse people as to the quality quotient of competing Morgans. At Ledyard, as

at most breeding farms, we breed for conformation as well as performance. Sounds as if that would be easy: take two great looking horses with great show records, they should produce a quality offspring. Specifically, I want a perfect shoulder, long legs, long upright neck, beautiful turn of poll, fluid gait and great disposition/trainability. Fortunately, I have achieved all of these traits but not in the same foal.

Our two-year-old Reserve World Champion Stallion, Ledyard's Lucky Lucas, has many of the conformational attributes that we breed for; beautiful neck to well-proportioned back to balanced trot. The question remains: can he now become a quality performance horse? Only time will tell. I may be a slow learner but it takes me at least three years to determine if my breeding program at Ledyard has produced a "Quality Morgan." I am still trying!

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(Photo © Howard Schatzberg)



Laurie Faust, MLB Morgans

"Quality" is multi-faceted; conformation and athleticism are always part of the package, but for me it is the all-important disposition. The disposition (temperament/train-ability/good brain/call it what you will) is the one trait of a "quality horse" that is undeniable and one that should be the priority of every breeder. Disposition is the trait that

separates the good horses from the great ones, the mediocre from the quality. In my opinion the horse's temperament is most definitely an inherited trait. Too many times the owner/breeder will lay blame on the trainer for the inability to get the horse trained. When, in fact, in many cases the responsibility lies with the owner or breeder to recognize the horse may have a less than optimal disposition to meet their expectations. How useful is the most gorgeous and athletic horse if the temperament (disposition) can't get it out of the paddock and into work. Regardless, if the goal is show horse or trail buddy, a sane, good minded, individual should always come first. I would hesitate to breed on anything less, no matter how beautiful or athletic he may be.



Debi Donoho, Keepsake Stables

What does "quality" mean to me?

Webster defines "quality" as: "A high level of value or excellence."

Simple enough, but how does one illustrate this intangible concept? I know it when I see it, but I'm not sure how to explain it. I have seen mares turned out and un-groomed that ooze quality and I have seen horses in the

show arena that lack quality. So, what is it?

Of the many factors that combine to create quality, the most important, I think, is genetics. Correct conformation, smoothness of body, intellect, attitude—each has a genetic component. Well-bred Morgans possess these characteristics. A Morgan of quality is most certainly well-bred, but is also regal. She carries herself like royalty and is easily noticed in the field or in the arena. She cares little what others think of her and knows she is superior. She is an ethereal beauty, born into the greatness that she claims. Quality spans generations and, while not easy to define, "quality" is simple to discern. ■

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