



≈ ROUNDTABLE ≈

# MORGANS IN RODEO

*The Morgan today is as fitting for rodeo as the Morgans who once worked the big ranches of the West. A panel of rodeo insiders discusses our breed's suitability for the sport.*

By Kim Oplotnik

There is a lot to learn about the art, or sport, of rodeo. And this article, while not comprehensive, is intended to open that door of knowledge and inquisitiveness in hopes that the Morgan owner can discover a new horse experience. Rodeo and/or ranch rodeo are scenes that suit the Morgan. A multitude of rodeo events, which vary depending on the type of competition and the state, cater to their versatility and ultimate ability to fit right into rodeo competition.

Rodeo has a unique origin; it emerged from an industry, a way of life, an occupation. Its foundation is built upon the long hours, skills, and traditions of a working ranch. The cowboy's way of life on the ranch is dependent upon the horse. Rodeo events are tailored to reflect the horsemanship skills needed by ranch hands. For example, roping calves was born on the Western ranch.

The calf roping event created for rodeo competition mimics a cowboy's need to be able to rope a calf on the open range should the animal need attention. No other equestrian sport has a basis like that of rodeo.

So, we know about the extensive Morgan involvement and history in Western ranching. Thus, the Morgan horse and rodeo seem to be perfect partners. To help us understand that partnership, *The Morgan Horse* reached out to some experts, four ladies who have been involved in rodeo events with their Morgans; Katie Bostick, of Jackalope Ranch; Jane Pietenpol, owner of Mossrose Morgans; Lucy Ray of Blackberry Morgans; and Amie Tabor, of LittleWood Morgans. Additionally, all use their Morgans for ranch work, as trail partners, or performance horses.

Our panel details two models of competition.

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**ABOVE:** Lucy Ray, Katie Bostick, and Amie Tabor (photo © Kim Oplotnik); Jane Pietenpol and Mossrose Top Of The World sorting cattle.



Jessica Spence of Wonderland Performance Horses introducing RMH Texas Silver to the elements of patterning through barrels (Photo by Katie Bostick).

Jane Pietenpol describes Ranch Rodeo as, “an exciting rodeo to watch. In our area of the Midwest, it involves four events: Cattle Sorting, Team Penning, Rope and Vet, and Trailer Loading. The events may vary somewhat in other areas of the United States. There are four people on a team. Every event is timed and there is a lot of action to accomplish the goals of each event.”

Katie Bostick outlined for us the events found in traditional rodeo, including: Tie Down Roping (formerly known as Calf Roping), Team Roping, Steer Wrestling, Barrel Racing, and Bronc and Bull Riding and more.

In addition to the rodeo competition, there are crowd pleasing specialty acts for horse and rider. These specialty acts are areas where Morgans excel. According to Jane Pietenpol, “specialty acts would be things like drill teams or vaulting acts that may be performed during the halftime or intermission of the rodeo. You and your horse could carry the flag for the grand entry. There are pick-up horses and riders needed for the rough stock riding events.”

Lucy Ray shared that she and “several other ladies, contracted as a specialty act for the 4L Rodeo company several years ago. At one point, two-thirds of our horses were Morgans.”

Now, that ranch rodeo and traditional rodeo competition have been defined, our questions focus on the ideal equine rodeo partner and what a rider needs for success in the arena.

### **What Morgan qualities make for a good rodeo mount?**

**KATIE BOSTICK:** Morgans can make wonderful rodeo horses! The Morgans I’ve been around are all very intelligent and agile. They have a ton of heart and tend to stay fairly sound. They want to take care of themselves and their rider, which is very helpful when you are competing on ground that isn’t always very good. They are very driven with great endurance, which is helpful when you are on the tail end of a long rodeo season and many other horses would be running out of will to keep pushing on and trying hard. Back when



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Carl Brown and Keia's What A Deal demonstrating heeling (photo © Peter Hammer); Amie Taber and LittleWood Inside Strait hook onto a cow (photo © Melody De Lappe).

rodeo was first starting, most people were still riding Morgans or some sort of Morgan cross, so it isn't exactly foreign to be using them for these events. They have just been overlooked for some time now. We need some people to get back out there and show the world what they can do!

**JANE PIETENPOL:** The Morgan qualities that make for a good rodeo mount are the breed's hallmark traits of good feet and legs, endurance, speed, and excellent work ethic.

**LUCY RAY:** I think that the intelligence of a Morgan is great for rodeos. Our horses typically really want a job and rise to the challenge that this presents. Morgan also have good feet and legs which minimizes soundness issues. This is a physically demanding sport and good feet and legs are a must. One attribute that I don't think a lot of people are aware of is how "cowy" our Morgans are. The desire and ability to watch a cow is something that a lot of Morgans do naturally.

**AMIE TABOR:** Strength, stamina, agility, good disposition, trainable.

**What type of conformation do you look for in a quality rodeo mount?**

**KATIE BOSTICK:** Depends on what event you are shopping for, as broken down above, I think the constants throughout all events are short back, long underline, short cannon bones, low hocks, long hip, nice shoulder. I also like a well-muscled chest and gaskins, and I avoid a horse with long pasterns as this can be a weak point under our conditions. The most important physical trait to me is the horse's eye—if they don't have a big, kind, intelligent looking

eye I pass on them. I think we all prefer good conformation such as straight legs, pretty neck and head, but in reality, I have seen a lot of horses with questionable conformation still win because they have the heart to do so. Since we are talking about Morgans in particular, I would look for a flatter moving horse, as one with a lot of knee action [high stepping] won't be as efficient and usually won't clock as fast.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** I would say a balanced conformation is what I see first in a quality rodeo mount. They need to be proportionate from front to back. Their feet and legs need to be sound and correct. They should move properly: sound, straight, and smooth. They need good muscle, but not overly muscled. They need to be athletic and know where their feet are. Many horses are able to be competitive in rodeo events even if they aren't perfect, but the more qualities they have in their favor, the easier it will be for them. This in turn makes it more fun for the rider! A good mind that can handle the stress of traveling and rodeo events doesn't make itself known until you're actually out there doing it. Some horses can handle it, and some can't. If they can't, that doesn't mean they are bad horses, just that they aren't cut out for that particular lifestyle.

**LUCY RAY:** I want a stockier made horse with a strong hind end and one that naturally uses himself. He needs to naturally work off of his hind end. Good bone and superior foot and leg conformation are essential. This is a tough sport and you need a horse who is athletic and built to stand up to the requirements needed for speed events.

**AMIE TABOR:** Depends on the event. But a strong hip, good shoulder, and functional conformation are essential.

**What other attributes are important to be a successful equine rodeo competitor?**

**KATIE BOSTICK:** Above all, the horse needs to have a disposition you can get along with, one who can handle the stress, conditions, and travel involved in this kind of competition. They need to have a lot of heart and be tough enough to still give their all when they are a little sore after a long haul. And remember, a hot horse isn't always a fast horse, and a lazy horse isn't always a slow horse. Most barrel racing success is actually in the slow work. Once they're trained, we hardly ever run a pattern outside of an event, so they still need to be good minded. I still work all of my barrel horses on the ranch.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** The horse will be required to work off of its hindquarters to be successful, so this is an important trait to look for, too. If they have a body that is proportionally balanced and they naturally work off of their hindquarters, rodeo events will come easier for them. It can be difficult to find Morgans that work off of their hindquarters naturally as they tend to be a pulling breed, so they use their front end more for stopping and pulling themselves forward. The engine needs to be located in the hindquarters of a rodeo horse to get the take-off, turning, and stopping power necessary for maneuvers in rodeo events.

**LUCY RAY:** I think a lot of these attributes depend on what event you are focusing on. A good tie-down horse will have different attributes than a good barrel racer. It's not to say that one horse can't compete successfully in multiple events. Overall, I think that a successful rodeo horse needs to have speed and the ability to control their body. Dexterity is very important. In any timed event, the more efficient you are with movement, the better your time. As a friend once told me, a horse with "the ability to go from 0 to 60 and 60 to 0."

I also want a level-headed horse that will travel well. I have a Morgan mare who travels like a dream. She will drink anywhere and never ever turns down a meal, or something that might vaguely resemble a meal. I have a Quarter Horse mare who is pickier about drinking chlorinated water and can go off feed when she travels. I would much rather haul my Morgan because she causes me to worry a lot less on the road. To clarify, I don't think this is a breed specific attribute—but an easy traveling horse definitely makes life easier for me.

On one other note, your horse will be exposed to a lot at a rodeo, including loud speakers, loud music, other horses, fireworks, screaming children, etc. So, one that is solid-minded enough to be able to handle this environment is beneficial.

**AMIE TABOR:** Dedication.

**Are there special techniques to teaching a Morgan rodeo skills versus other breeds?**

**KATIE BOSTICK:** In my opinion, a lot of the foundation types are pretty naturally suited to these events, and the others can learn to



**TOP TO BOTTOM:** Moira Taber and LittleWood Willow Wind (photo © Kyra Germann, Rockin' Horse); John Pietenpol and Mossrose Top Of The World (left) competing in Ranch Rodeo.



Four Morgans and their riders represented the breed well in a sea of Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, and assorted stock horses.

be. The biggest problem I see with some people training Morgans and trying to switch over is that they tend to focus too much on riding the front end, whereas we need them to work from the hind end and drive up to be more powerful.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** Morgans generally catch on to things quicker than other breeds, so keeping them mentally fresh can be a challenge. They won't need to be drilled repeatedly on the same maneuver outside the competition arena. You may end up having to do more fitness riding outside the arena interspersed with short educational drills in the arena.

**LUCY RAY:** I don't think there is anything special in training a Morgan. In my experience, Morgans naturally want a job and any rodeo event can provide that job. Patience and thorough training are necessary to make a good competitor of any horse.

**AMIE TABOR:** Training them for rodeo events is about the same as for any discipline that requires focus.

**Describe the riding skills needed for rodeo competition.**

**KATIE BOSTICK:** Any reasonably fit rider with good balance and confidence can compete in rodeo events; there is a level for everyone. More importantly though, you need to be a good winner and loser. You have to be able to handle failure without taking it to heart, and you need to be able to keep working hard for each coming event when you are winning. Anyone can win on any given day, and if you dwell on things too much you aren't going to make it very far in this. You also have to be very dedicated to your horse, you can't be a fair-weather rider. If your horse isn't fit and being worked regularly, they will get hurt. It takes a lot of time and work to keep these horses sound and happy. You also need to be comfortable asking for help.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** In many areas of the United States, there are enough events and people around willing to help that you can start with beginner riding skills in backyard fun nights, practicing rodeo events, and work your way up. Go to rodeos in your area, talk to riders, and ask questions. It is beneficial to ride a variety of

different horses on different types of ground and terrain to begin training yourself. You will need confidence in your riding ability, as well as confidence in your horse. The horse is only going to run to the level of the rider. Your success depends not only on your horse, but also on you as a rider.

**LUCY RAY:** Bravery, ability to ride speed, ask horse to move off of your leg and seat, and coordination. There is definitely a place for every age and skill level of rider to compete.

**AMIE TABOR:** Better than most people realize. Rodeo never follows the script. Footing can be inconsistent. Environment is inconsistent. Rider needs to adapt to conditions and get the job done.

#### What benefits does rodeo offer beyond the arena?

**KATIE BOSTICK:** For youth riders, there are many rodeo scholarships, including some full-ride scholarships. I think with the kids this kind of competition fosters a lot of maturity and responsibility, while taking a little financial burden off the parents by giving them a chance to win money and pay their own way. There are many sponsorship opportunities at all levels, which can make it more affordable to own a horse and compete. In my opinion, it's a healthier kind of horse competition, as there are no politics. It's just you against the clock. The rodeo community also tends to be very tightknit and supportive of one another.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** Rodeo benefits in a big way in that you get a horse that has “been there, done that.” Rodeo horses are usually solid, trustworthy mounts. They are used to traveling, being ridden in a variety of arenas, surrounded by distractions of all kinds. However, they are also trained for a job and may know that job better than you do, so you may be left behind! You, and the horse, will benefit by finding a mount that fits the level you are currently at in your riding skills.

Rodeo benefits the rider with a new circle of friends, good people that share the love of horses. It's a great way to stay active. When not going to an actual rodeo event, you will be training your horse to make him better or at the very minimum, riding regularly to keep him fit.

**LUCY RAY:** Rodeo has done an excellent job educating audiences about livestock and agriculture and bringing a rural lifestyle to the public in a fun and exciting way. I don't know that I have ever been to a rodeo where the audience was not fully involved. I think that we can all learn a lot about marketing from rodeos. In addition, rodeo teaches competitors responsibility, determination, and sportsmanship. The entire industry is like a big family. There are significant scholarships and educational opportunities that can come with rodeo, as well.

**AMIE TABOR:** Rodeo athletes, both human and equine, have to adapt to conditions and yet turn out a money winning performance. That adaptability bleeds over into life, creating people that are focused and adaptable.

#### What do you want the Morgan community to know about rodeo competition?

**KATIE BOSTICK:** Mostly that there is so much opportunity out there! I feel it is a bit of an untapped Morgan market—even in times of a down economy there is always a market for a horse that knows the barrel pattern or one that can be roped off of. I hear a lot of people try to make it sound like there is a breed bias out there and the Quarter Horse people will discriminate against you for having a Morgan, and that just hasn't actually been the case at all for me. This community will welcome anyone who works hard and has a good attitude, so just get out there and try it! You don't have to settle for spending hundreds of dollars just to get a ribbon in return—there is big money out there if you want to work hard enough for it, and there are less politics you have to deal with.

**JANE PIETENPOL:** Morgan horses are competitive in rodeo competition, but like anything that's done with success, you have to work at it. Since there are fewer Morgans than the traditional rodeo breed, the Quarter Horse, if you don't already have a horse you will have to do some extensive searching to find one that will work for you. You may have to think outside the box in your training. In rodeo competition, it really doesn't matter what the breed of horse is, it's how you and the horse perform the tasks required. Get out and have fun with it!

**LUCY RAY:** I believe that there are segments of the horse industry, not specifically Morgans, that can be skeptical of rodeo and consider it somehow less prestigious than more traditional show ring disciplines. In reality, this sport requires superior horsemanship and extraordinary equine athletes. Competitors take exemplary care of their horses, because these animals are their partners.

One important aspect is that there is a place in these events for everyone from a rank beginner to a professional. There is a division for everyone, no matter their experience level. And there is tremendous financial incentive to compete, which definitely doesn't hurt! When is the last time you competed in an event that offered a new truck or trailer to the winner?

**AMIE TABOR:** Rodeo is the spokesman for our cowboy heritage and lifestyle. Our modern-day events evolved from working ranch skills and Sunday afternoon contests between ranch hands. It is a different presentation than the show ring, but it is a vital part of our equestrian community. Rodeo athletes value their equine partners.

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Our panel has recommended many resources for those wanting to learn more. You can find the following organizations with a simple online search: National Barrel Horse Association (NBHA); United States Team Roping Championships (USTRC); American Cowboy Team Roping Association (ACTRA); and the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA). For the higher levels, there are the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA); and the Women's Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (WPRA). ■