Our guest editor offers a clinic about converting one-time show horses to use as carriage driving contenders.

By Jeff Morse

Many of my most competitive carriage horses had prior careers in the show ring. Obviously, the great reward for raising and training a young horse yourself is that you have a say in how everything he learns is taught and in how he is developed physically. Having a horse I trained years ago come back for more training is like putting

Gaitwood Garmisch began his show career as a two-year-old park harness horse before becoming an amateur English pleasure horse ridden by his owner Dimity Webster. He is shown here at age seven (Photo © Bob Moseder).
on an old glove. The fit is so personal and so familiar and, I believe, appreciated by both of us. But what if you have to begin with a horse trained by someone else? What if you have to start with a horse that has been trained for a non-sport horse discipline?

We are very fortunate that the essence of the mind and structure of the Morgan horse is one of versatility. The breed became a breed in the first place because it could easily perform, not just one job well, but many jobs well, each requiring different skills. Breeding stock for the Morgan horse was selected for centuries with this essential versatility as its backbone. Today, this means when you buy one Morgan, you actually are buying several horses because the Morgan is genetically predisposed to learn and perform well for careers in multiple disciplines.

While I do get my share of Morgan babies that come here to be trained from scratch, by far and away, most are older horses that have learned another discipline before carriage driving. The majority of those come from the traditional Morgan show ring and the saddleseat training tradition.

I love good park and pleasure show horses. My best carriage horses were park horses first! For me, it is just athleticism used in a different way. The trick is to change the horse’s view of how the world works. Fortunately, how life works for the sport horse has several built in rewards which make it fairly easy to convince the horse it is worth his while to try the sport horse way. The primary reward for the horse is that we are making his life easier. In the sport horse world we are, at the core, guiding the horse towards balanced self-carriage, an efficient way for the horse to get its work done.

Efficiency has been an integral part of equine survival and hence a significant part of its natural selection process. From an evolutionary standpoint, the horses that failed to make the best
use of their caloric intake are not with us anymore. What does this mean for trainers? I do not see many truly lazy horses but almost all of them, even in the Morgan breed where we have a strong “eager achiever” component, are wired at their core to not work any harder than they have to. Show the horse an easier and more efficient way to get its job done and most horses will appreciate that as a reward and be willing to ‘go there’ with you.

The willingness of the Morgan horse is the characteristic that endears its handlers to the breed. This eager willingness, while a huge asset when balanced with a working efficiency, can be counterproductive until the horse achieves the discipline to conserve its energy for its work. It is not uncommon for Morgans to have gotten their enthusiasm ahead of their understanding of the work they are asked to do. It’s hard to fault enthusiasm but when misplaced or misguided, it becomes its own worst enemy.

Self-carriage, at the core of sport horse disciplines, is for me, expressed in its simplest form as the separation of labor and management. The horse does the physical work while the handler makes management decisions about when to go, where to go and how fast to go at the same time guiding the horse to the most efficient way to get the job done. Forcing, supporting, and holding is all work that is handed to me by the horse when he makes management decisions! Bad things start to happen when the roles of labor and management are performed by the wrong part of the human-horse team. The most difficult horses to work are the ones that are confused about their role.

Here’s a simplistic example of these misplaced roles: when the horse trots faster than asked for and I hang on his mouth to keep him from going faster, I end up doing the horse’s job because he is doing mine. Our roles have crossed. What should be taking place is I give the horse an instruction via my aids…whip, reins, (seat/leg if riding) and voice…to travel the speed I wish and he responds by going that speed without question, doing all the work to achieve and maintain it. I want to be in the position of offering him pure instruction and I want him to be in the position of doing pure work.

Many of the older horses sent to me have been allowed to make way too many management decisions and have forced their handlers to do way too much work. Well before the finer nuances of any sport discipline can be learned by the horse, the horse absolutely must understand his proper role. My training job is to establish or re-establish those roles.

There is no precise answer to the question: how long will it take to teach the horse to perform well at a discipline he has never been taught. Too much depends on his aptitude for learning and cooperation, on how he was first taught to perform anything. Every horse has different genetic predispositions and a different life history. It helps to remember that, just like humans, the first way he is taught to do anything will be what he reverts to in times of high anxiety, especially as he is in the early stages of learning his new sport. Much depends on what he already does well and on what physical and or mental damage may have been done. He may have already learned things that will make his transition quite easy. He may have developed physically and mentally in ways that might hinder his performance in his new job. The answer is, as is often the case in the horse world: it depends. I will say 80 percent of what you hope to achieve will be accomplished in the first 20 percent of the time it takes. The last 20 percent may take longer than you expect.

The first obligation of a trainer for any discipline is to...
evaluate the horse for discomfort. In any career, an uncomfortable horse will not deliver his best performance. In the sport horse disciplines, relaxation is one of the early and primary building blocks. If the horse is uncomfortable physically or mentally, he cannot relax sufficiently. The German Training scale used around the world refers to this as Losgelassenheit or, roughly, “looseness.” How can a horse in distress be loose?

When evaluating performance horses, my eye goes first to the mouth. Anxiety from mental and physical distress is most plainly expressed by an overly busy, anxious or gaping mouth or sometimes even in a tightly clamped mouth. That expression of discomfort may have nothing to do with his teeth or his biting, although those areas should most definitely be ruled out as the sources. Unfortunately, I’d say 80–90 percent of the horses sent to me for training have not had good dental care.

Next I go to his feet. For sport horse disciplines, mainly we want a simple but high quality shoeing job. Good shoeing begins with a good trim. Learn to spot unlevel, uneven trims. Learn to spot a low heel and excessive toe. Learn to spot angles that support the horse from the ground up. If possible, try to learn the shoeing history of the horse. Has he had a long history of shoeing that accentuated his natural action? Has he spent a lot of time with extra traction on his shoes? Has he had his shoes pulled and spent restorative periods barefoot? A wise vet once told me the single most effective thing you can do when evaluating a horse is to sit on the ground. Study his feet and legs. As part of the equation for determining how long it will take to achieve your goal, factor in as much as 12 months or more just to change his feet to allow him the proper support. Proper support means the rest of his body can adjust and develop with less pain from stress because the parts are being used as they were designed to be used. A simple but often overlooked concept. For instance, it is not unusual to see minor heel pain in the front foot from a slightly unlevel trim result in pain in the neck and atlas which then causes the back and other structures to compromise in order to move.

Talented body workers and chiropractors can read the physical and mental status of the horse and give very useful information about what needs to be addressed in learning a new job. Too often the horse presented for training has learned or been forced to rely on his equipment for his balance. This can be seen in horses that spent years being held in position by draw reins, running martingales and overchecks. These are not bad devices! But without intelligence, tact and care by the trainer, horses can easily learn to depend on their support for their balance, especially when they have been forced into position by them. For those horses that have relied on them, removal of these devices will cause the horse to be lost for a while as he learns perhaps for the first time about balance and self-carriage. They may have developed physically around them. It can be months or years before they physically re-develop around self-carriage.

Space limitations for this article prevent discussing the multitude of scenarios for every horse that is presented for training after learning another discipline. The story of one such horse should help illustrate some common problems and how one might approach their solutions. One of the Morgans that prompted me to write this article is a teenage stallion that came to me after a dozen years or more in draw reins, twisted wire bits, a tongue tie, running martingale and a check rein, a bustle, long feet and performance shoeing for the saddle seat discipline and who had lived in a stall with little or no turnout for a good part of his life. I was now going to try to ask him to perform in self carriage in a simple snaffle, on a light rein, in short feet with a plain shoe. His view of how the world works was about to change significantly.

So what was in his Plus Column? He had been a show horse all his life. This meant he had been exposed to life on the road and had seen about all there was to see. I probably did not have to worry about him being spooky or being upset by life going on around him. He understood the repetition and patience that develops in a show stable routine. He had stood tied for long periods of time both while being prepared for work and for cooling out. He had worn blankets and boots and leg wraps. He had been bathed, clipped, shod...
and vetted many, many times. Those things did not excite him. For him, it had become just the way life is. What I am getting at is that he was an excellent horse for general handling. It also indicated that he was capable of relaxing. All he needed to do was be convinced that he could relax while he worked!

He also had been a driving horse for an amateur driver. He already had three very important skills needed to become a carriage horse: he had learned to stand obediently to be hooked. He had learned a flat footed walk and to stand quietly in a line up. These things can take a long time to learn or re-learn if spoiled. Teaching him was made so much easier since I could always return to these three things and pretty reliably get some degree or relaxation from him because he already understood it was safe to go there when asked. To illustrate: if he became confused by anything I asked of him or when I asked him to halt, he would readily stop and “park out.” In sport horses disciplines, we are expecting and training a good square, balanced and relaxed halt, not “parking out.” However, this behavior is still a plus. Why? Think of the other behaviors he could have given me: leaping through the air, bolting, dancing in place, etc! At least he stopped and stood still. Parking out is an easy habit to break by simply asking the horse to step up as he halts. Most horses can learn a square halt is a new safe place. It is, after all, a less tension filled movement than parking out.

He had a great work ethic. He had been taught, above all else, to go forward. His problem was that he had also learned that if a little forward was good, more forward was better. Somehow I had to get across to him that to go forward and how fast to go forward were management decisions that were not his to make. I appreciated his work ethic and his enthusiasm, now I just had to convince him that he did not have to work that hard.

I had the chiropractor, the body worker and the farrier all work their magic on him as best they could. The conformation of his neck and back were altered from being asked by his equipment and his handlers to work with an elevated and compressed neck and a hollowed back. His dental work was checked and redone by a vet. It all helped and started him well on the path to his new career.

I long lined him for 5 months. He already knew how to drive so until he had learned some more basic lessons I felt no need to drive him. He had been long lined a lot in his previous life. His understanding of the routine made it easy for us both except he now had no martingale and no draw rein and no check. He was very strong in his mouth. In fact, his mouth was almost dead and remember: his answer to everything was Forward! How could I convince him not to work this hard when all his life he had been allowed to believe this was the right answer? I had to be able to control him. I used a leverage bit, a mullen mouth Liverpool…with it I had enough control to at least hang on to him in his eager forward trot. His tongue had been tied, and had worn a twisted wire bit. He had become used to a lot of pressure in his mouth from the draw reins. I chose a mullen mouth which is a simple bit that offers a lot more tongue freedom than he had ever had. With
so many other new aspects of his new life calling for his attention, it would be some time before he would come to appreciate its benefits...or even notice them but at least it was a kind bitting choice. Reluctantly I added a flash nose band to encourage him not to evade my instructions by opening his mouth. I could now at least manage his forwardness so I could stop and steer and control his speed with a reasonable amount of pressure from my hands.

Without his overcheck and because he was forward and had been worked for years in draw reins, he would easily work behind the bit and over rolled in the neck. It was not the frame of a lovely working sport horse. We have no physical way to push or pull or force a horse out of this position, a position, by the way, which he was forced into by his equipment in the first place. The best we can do is to stay out of his way as he explores the path to that new way of carrying himself. If he wants to plow a trench in the ground with his nose, let him. He will not stay there long because it is not an efficient way to work in self-carriage. Be willing to let your hand follow even the slightest offering down and forward, even at the expense of speed and direction (within reason, obviously). You have to allow him to explore before he will find the position most efficient for his conformation, his understanding of the job, his strength and suppleness etc. But rest assured he will find it eventually.

Here it will help to remember the ultimate goal: an efficient horse. And to have complete faith in the concept of efficiency as a reward. I have three simple and related rules for horses I work. In no particular order, they are: the horse is not allowed to speed up or slow down from the speed they are asked to work (that's a management decision the horse is not well equipped to make). They must look to the inside around the turns (in its more complex form, this is about bending and balancing through the entire body). They can have as much rein as they ask for (freedom to stretch and reach). Each of these statements is the briefest articulation of much deeper and more complex concepts but the horse doesn't care about these details. He can understand these three rules. Let's keep it simple. After all, one of the tricks of training is to make it easy for the horse to guess the right answer.

So, having faith in the reward of efficiency, I gradually managed to get him to understand my three rules. Uncurling his neck was the most difficult for him. Traveling with his neck long and low was something he had never done while wearing tack. In his mind, it could not possibly be the right answer. Everything he had been taught went against it. For over a decade, his equipment had pulled him by force into the exact opposite position. At first, he incorrectly understood my offering hand as permission to speed up. That's what it had always meant to him. As he began to test his freedom from the draw rein, the overcheck and the running martingale, he ever so gradually and tentatively began to explore longer and lower. He began to uncurl and stretch. He was beginning to discover life was easier that way.

After five months I hooked him and drove. He reverted back to his show horse days. He rarely had been driven cross country but...
thanks to his exposure at show grounds it did not take him long to adjust to his new surroundings. I am fortunate to live on a big hill and have learned to use it as a training aid for forward horses. On his first trip up the mountain, he thought he would charge forward up that hill like the ever forward horse he had learned to be. He was a flatlander. His entire life had been spent on level ground. The hard work up the hill was a humbling experience for him. After about three days on the hill, he began to understand that energy management might be a good idea. This is part of becoming the efficient horse. Don’t waste your energy! Don’t work harder than you have to.

A big part of creating mental comfort is allowing the horse to actually be a horse, to have time to walk, graze and run at liberty with other horses. This horse had been a stall kept stallion. He was not used to being turned out, let alone being turned out with other horses. I began by turning him out in a large ring with a six-foot fence with a horse in a smaller paddock right next to it. He lasted 15 minutes before screaming and running the fence. Gradually he lasted longer and longer. The time came to turn another horse out with him. He tried seriously to beat this horse up. I tried a different horse. Same result. For the time being, the side by side turnout arrangement would have to do but it was less than ideal.

He was an easy stallion to live with. He was kind, gentle and non–aggressive. He showed his studly behavior only once in a while but in my opinion he did not need to be left entire. Good stallions make great geldings. Once gelded, he began to settle almost immediately. Another step accomplished in relieving his mental discomfort. He was a happier, less anxious horse as a gelding.

After six months, I was still having more difficulty with his mouth than I would have expected after so much work. I wrote it off to his previous experience which I could accept as a believable excuse for his current behavior. He was way too strong and I was beginning to wonder if I would ever be able to drive him on a light rein. Had his mouth really suffered that much damage? We had encouraging moments when I could offer him some rein and he would not zoom forward, but they were too fleeting and unconnected to be fully appreciated by him as an easier way to work. I should have known something was wrong. When you hear yourself say “That’s just the way he is.” about less than good progress or prolonged poor behavior, it should be a strong signal to look deeper for the source of the problem.

About this time I met a dentist from the Standardbred world who was also a very good horseman. His job depends on fixing horses with all kinds of mouth problems to lop off mere 100th’s of seconds of their racing time. He found minor mouth issues that had been missed by my vet and by whoever had done his teeth all his life. The next day I drove my horse in a plain mullen mouth snaffle on a light rein. What a dramatic improvement! His mouth was not hard from damage but from pain! He had been literally gritting his teeth and bearing it. Lesson learned: teeth are best done by dentists that work on performance horses all day, every day. It does not take much of a mouth issue to keep a horse from delivering his best and it will affect how he uses the entire rest of his body.

One issue kept nagging at me. There is nothing healthier for a horse than being turned out with other horses. I really needed to get this horse so that he could be turned out 24/7. With fingers crossed, I turned him out with the oldest, most experienced... and most valuable...horse I have. Old horses have learned how to manage the horses around them pretty well. It worked. Another building block of comfort was now in place. He began to conserve his energy when he worked. He began to wait for me to drive him rather than taking me for a drive. His mouth was becoming increasingly responsive. His suppleness and balance was improving. He was developing better physically for the job. He was finally gaining a new view of how his world worked. It was time to go to a show and test him.

Shipping and moving into new stabling with a new herd of unfamiliar horses was not a big deal for this experience show horse. He actually was quite relaxed which would allow me to have his full attention. I have long believed in the benefits of taking new or young horses to shows once or twice for the experience without the pressure of competition. He was just there to work. Both horse and a handler will learn a lot by lowering the anxiety and pressure of competition in the enervating environment of a horse show.

The first time out at the show I expected him to revert to his previous behavior. I was not disappointed. He screamed like a stallion calling for his herd. He was heavy in the mouth and very forward. But he was controllable so I made him work pretty hard that first day. If nothing else, I wanted him to think about conserving his energy. By the end of the week, he had grasped that the new rules he had learned at home applied at the show. We schooled through obstacle courses after the classes were finished. He was flawless and more importantly: tired, relaxed and content. He showed me that he had turned a big corner in his body. The next time out this time I met a dentist from the Standardbred world who was also a very good horseman. His job depends on fixing horses with all kinds of mouth problems to lop off mere 100th’s of seconds of their racing time. He found minor mouth issues that had been missed by my vet and by whoever had done his teeth all his life. The next day I drove my horse in a plain mullen mouth snaffle on a light rein. What a dramatic improvement! His mouth was not hard from damage but from pain! He had been literally gritting his teeth and bearing it. Lesson learned: teeth are best done by dentists that work on performance horses all day, every day. It does not take much of a mouth issue to keep a horse from delivering his best and it will affect how he uses the entire rest of his body.

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The issues with this driving horse are illustrative of the kind that I often see in horses presented to me for carriage training that have previous histories in other disciplines. His type and particular combination of issues may be more extreme than some. Nevertheless, the process of building your new sport horses should proceed in a similar way. Work with the good things already in your horse’s plus column and work on the issues in his minus column. Most of what will be in the minus column will be closely related to mental and physical discomfort.

Morgans want to give us the right answer. In 40 years of training driving Morgans, there have been only three that I have written off as beyond restoration. One was too physically damaged. One was too psychologically damaged and one was too affected by genetic issues. The basic goals for “teaching an old horse new tricks” are exactly the same: The horse must be physically and mentally comfortable and the roles of labor and management must be crystal clear to both you and your horse. Establish that much and you can build any kind of sport Morgan you wish.

Your Morgan can indeed have several careers.