



*Lori Ann Shwing*  
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# JEFF WILSON'S EMOTION-PACKED EQUINE HIGH WIRE ACTS, ALL ON THE BACKS OF MORGANS!

*"I ride Morgans because I love to trot. If you love to trot it's not too long before you look at Spanish trot and piaffe and passage. I'm a movement junky." - Jeff Wilson*

**A**s a horse trainer Jeff Wilson defies easy categorization. What we do know is that he puts on exhibitions, the equivalent of equine high wire acts, with his Morgan stallions Del View Catskill Valiant and Black Willow Orion, that bring the house down. He has performed at venues like the 2010 World Equestrian Games (where he represented AMHA in breed exhibitions), Equine Affaire in both Massachusetts and Ohio, BreyerFest and at Horse

By Suzy Lucine  
(with additional reporting  
from Stephen Kinney)

World Expo in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

His highly original equine entertainment acts combine classical dressage with some elements of Western reining and a handful of what might be referred to as "tricks"—"I do have some tricks I added for entertainment value. But you could call piaffe a trick if you wanted to. The public embraces the higher elements," Jeff comments.

Let's take an example. He has mastered and includes in his

**LEFT PAGE:** Jeff Wilson and Del View Catskill Valiant with Oliver the barn owl at BreyerFest (photo © Lori Ann Thwing).

**ABOVE:** Jeff Wilson and Black Willow Orion perform the Spanish trot (Photo © Rein Photo).

performances the “terre-a-terre.” Don’t feel alone if you don’t know what this movement is. It’s rarely, if ever, performed today and it’s even hard to Google. But Jeff supplied us with an online reference from *Dressage Today* which tells us: “It is... a very collected two-beat canter in which the hind feet and front feet move together to form an almost rocking-horse-type movement...”

*Dressage Today* continues, “For a brief moment the horse is carrying all of his weight on his hind legs with an extreme coiling of his haunches. His front legs simultaneously leave the ground. When his front legs return to the ground, he takes a very light and balanced step before he executes the movement again.”

In really simple terms, it is a canter in which every step is accompanied by a leap or a levade like motion. It’s intense. It’s rare. It’s complicated.

And for most performers that would be enough. But Jeff Wilson does it with only one hand on the reins. “Why?” You may ask. (And what you are about to read is correct). Because the other hand is busy hosting a bird of prey that Jeff includes in his act—either a falcon or a barn owl, depending on the moment and the theme of the performance.

“The elements of my act are originality,” Jeff observes. “A way to showcase the Morgan in a new and inventive way. Old World Dressage. Take the terre-a-terre. A canter, but it’s a rear within every stride. Nobody does that. It’s an old, old dressage move. Moves like that are powerful, people have never seen them. I always run into the fact that a lot of people don’t understand what they are seeing, but they are entertained. Whatever you do you have to be entertaining, you have to tell a story, you have to lead people along.”

**M**y life is about celebrating Morgans,” says Jeff from his Black Willow Morgan Farm in Delhi, New York. “Since childhood, every path I’ve taken has been with Morgans. From riding around the farm to showing locally, to performing in front of international super stars in the equine world, and to teaching horse enthusiasts of all ages and breed affiliations.

“I also raised my children with Morgans,” Jeff continues. “Alixandra and Aaron are married now and have Morgans of their

own, and Andrew is still at home helping me.”

Jeff grew up on his family’s dairy farm in Delhi, with cows and horses. He cut his teeth on Morgans that were born and raised on nearby farms. Ferruccio ‘Pooch’ Passuello’s Delmaytion Morgan Horse Farm was on one side, and Aubrey and Evelyn James’ Catskill Morgan Horse Farm was on the other side.

One of Jeff’s aunts, Lois Ray, was his 4-H leader. He was the only member of The Ghost Riders club who showed a Morgan in 4-H shows. He also showed at open shows in the area, and at the New York State Fair. And whenever the opportunity arose, Jeff was on one of his Morgan’s backs riding all around the farm.

Early mentor and lifelong friend, Coby Holowacz introduced him to the Morgan show world when she took him to the New York Morgan Show in Syracuse in 1976 with his horse Warner Crest Dandy.

When Jeff went out on his own and purchased a farm, he named it Black Willow Morgans after the willow trees growing on the property. Jeff and his wife, Kim, and their three children, turned the 60-acre property with a 30-stall barn into a family run breeding and training facility.

Jeff enjoyed his friendship with the James’ niece, Glenna James, who bred Morgans with the Del View prefix. When Glenna retired, she gave her breeding stock to Jeff.

This Morgan breeding program has been small but successful for 35 years. There are almost 40 Morgans registered with this prefix.

Christina Koliander, then managing editor of *The Morgan Horse* magazine, wrote a feature story on Black Willow Morgans in the July 2006 historical bloodlines issue. During the interview for the story, Jeff told Chris that he was captivated by the Catskill bloodlines. “They have

a beauty all their own,” Jeff said. “Anyone who has had one will tell you that. Besides being easy to handle, they have beautiful fine heads set on big front ends and their own graceful way of moving.”

When Jeff put time in the training pen with different Morgan bloodlines and breeds of horses, he realized the uniqueness of the Catskill Morgans and decided they were the lines he wanted to use in his own breeding program.

“It’s kind of like the feeling that you have when traveling



Jeff Wilson and Warner Crest Dandy at the 1978 New York Regional (photo © Equus Studios).

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Jeff Wilson and Del View Catskill Valiant performing a jambette (photo © Rein Photo).

the world to discover, only to find that whatever you were searching for was right at home,” said Jeff. “For me, home was the Catskills, and what I was searching for was the Catskill Morgans.”

“I have known Jeff since he was a teenager,” said Coby Holowacz of Vintage Valley Farm in Delhi, New York. “I gave Jeff and his sisters riding lessons.

“Early on, it was obvious that Jeff was naturally gifted with horses,” Coby explained. “He is extremely dedicated to his horses, and he does whatever it takes to make horses and their situations better.

Obviously you don’t get the equine vocabulary that Jeff enjoys without being coached along the way. Jeff is quick to acknowledge mentors!

“If a mentor is one who has seen you in your best moments and in your worst moments, and still believes in you, that person has to be Coby Holowacz, a friend of probably 40-plus years. We live a few miles apart. My intro into the horse world as a young rider and an early trainer was because of her influence, guidance, and support.

“I’ve worked with some great people. Matt McLaughlin. He ran the Lipizzaner show in his youth. He’s a dressage purist. Dianne Olds-Rossi. She is a piaffe and passage master. Her husband was a stunt rider for Tom Mix. Look her up. You’ll never see a Friesian in the same way again. A legend. I did a lot of natural horsemanship through Kenny Harlow, one of John Lyon’s first graduates from his school. Probably the other influence was Allen Pogue. He’s a trick trainer out in Texas. He’s an amazing horse behaviorist. “Imagine A Horse” is his business name. They’ve all been at my farm working with me and I work with them. I love to learn. There’s so much cool horsemanship out there.”

Then Jeff adds this, “Eitan Beth Halachmy. How many times do you birth a new discipline in your lifetime and he’s been instrumental in giving us two, [Western dressage and Cowboy Dressage®]. Cowboy Dressage® is now his trademark, his brand. He’s a visionary. It’s brilliant. I follow him—the way he’s teaching dressage to Western riders.”

“The rest,” Jeff adds, “has been riding the feet off the horses I have.”



ABOVE: Jeff Wilson and Del View Catskill Valiant perform to a large audience at the 2010 World Equestrian Games (photo © Allison Wolff).

For years, Jeff competed with his Morgans, as did his children, in the horse show world. Then he wanted to find something different that would make his Morgans stand out in a unique way from other breeds. Combining his training and showmanship talents, along with his Morgans’ athletic and mental abilities, he developed the acts he performs today as a derivation from what he terms “Old World Dressage” which means, among other things, that his horses execute some movements you won’t see at the Olympics.

A big break came when Jeff was nudged into the spotlight at the 2010 World Equestrian Games where he represented AMHA in breed exhibitions. These did not come in the main ring at the Kentucky Horse Park event, but in a venue off a bit to the side. That didn’t matter, as is attested by pictures from the performances, Jeff played to packed audiences.

Jeff worked one of his horses in long lines, illustrating the baroque dressage movements used when Morgans were paired with

Lipizzaners in an early American tour; movements like Spanish walk and hind leg walk. Jeff also repeated some of these athletic and artistic movements while riding on his other Morgan’s back. “Both Jeff’s horses and he were stellar ambassadors,” remembers Julie Broadway who was AMHA’s executive director at the time. “Their performances were entertaining and crowd pleasers, plus he constantly made himself available to the attendees to meet his Morgans and talk about their great traits.”

“After exposing the largest all breed equine audience in the world to Morgans, I realized I could take my Morgans anywhere and perform with them in a way that would set them apart from other breeds,” Jeff said.

In July of 2016, Jeff and his Morgans performed in BreyerFest’s Celebration of Horses. Exhibitions were held in the covered arena at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, all day for three days. During the day, Jeff performed in the covered arena, several times with a heart-warming theme honoring the military. Then

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**ABOVE:** Jeff Wilson and Black Willow Orion at the 2012 Equine Affaire in West Springfield, Massachusetts. Orion is sporting a military logo clip (photo © Twilight Imaging).

**Not only does Orion command your attention when he arrives to perform, but with his distinct Morgan presence, his bright orange color, the military clipping, and the moves he performs, I don't believe there is a horse in any breed in America that can do what he can do."**

on Friday and Saturday nights, an equine variety show was held in the Alltech arena. These were full-scale events, including performances in spotlights before packed houses of 2,000 to 3,000 people. Here, Jeff first introduced working with birds of prey into his act.

The act was called "The Sport of Kings and Cowboys." Jeff was riding "Valiant," and with the help of two falconers, he worked with Prince Ravi, a Saker Falcon, and Oliver, a barn owl. The act began introducing a king riding with his falcon. It ended with a dramatic reveal as the king of the West, the cowboy, with his barn owl.

"Valiant is rock steady," said Jeff. "And audiences love him for his Morgan charisma. He is a rock star performing high level dressage moves. He has lots of athletic and mental ability. He also doesn't flinch with the falcon or the owl landing on my arm, or flapping during a performance."

The incredible synergy of two species coming together was inspiring to watch. In their initial training sessions with a falconer, the bird of prey sat on Valiant's neck and walked up and down it, which Valiant tolerated in good spirit. Wearing a special glove, Jeff learned how to manage the large birds.

"This was the hardest act I've ever done. If you think horses have a mind of their own, you should try birds. It is also the most beautiful show I've ever done." When the falconer came to his farm to work with Jeff and his horses, she was really impressed with the Morgans accepting the birds so easily, and how Jeff quickly developed a bond when working with them.

"We chose Jeff Wilson as one of our performers for BreyerFest after I learned about his act with Morgan horses from an article I saw in a magazine," said Kathleen Fallon, Vice President of Communications at Breyer Animal Creations. "We thought his act would be a wonderful and different type performance for our growing audiences at BreyerFest.

"Both Jeff and his horses worked so hard during the event, performing during the day and in the evening." Kathleen continued. "We love it when performers can combine people working with animals, plus his military tributes were very popular and well-received."



ABOVE: Jeff Wilson and Del View Catskill Valiant at the 2013 Horse World Expo in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, performing with the Marine color guard in the form of Iwo Jima (photo © Sharon Connolly).

Jeff is philosophical about what it takes to brand yourself, your horses, and your routines. “The horse world is filled with remarkable talent. What are you going to do to reinvent yourself, to make yourself stand out against everyone else? I’m blessed to have some good people around me who have marketing brains and they understand that marketing is emotion. If you’re going to do a one-horse act, it’s got to be big.”

The military theme has given Jeff a feat of imagination around which he could organize a performance. “At Horse World Expo in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, we performed with a Marine color guard. If you perform with a Marine color guard the emotion is there already. I turned the lights down on the Marines and played taps on my violin (*yes, while mounted on a horse*) and when the lights came back up the Marines were in the form of the iconic image at Iwo Jima.”

For the military tribute act, Jeff worked with long time friend and clinician Dana Boyd-Miller, a professional clipper and clip artist for Andis Company who spent two days body clipping Orion with military logos all over his body; a clip that has only been done one other time with Orion. “The crowds were stunned,” he said. “Orion became larger than life to everybody, including the service men and women. Nobody saw that coming. He raised the level of emotion so high that folks referred to him as ‘The Veteran’s Horse.’ Not only does Orion command your attention when he arrives to perform,

but with his distinct Morgan presence, his bright orange color, the military clipping, and the moves he performs, I don’t believe there is a horse in any breed in America that can do what he can do.”

For a little more context Jeff describes the elements of the act he calls “The Sport of Kings and Cowboys.”

Here’s how that performance evolves: “I come in at passage holding the bird in one hand. I move into piaffe. Then I move into a school halt. A school halt looks like a levade. The whole rear end

of the horse is lowered and he still has one foreleg on the ground; that all happens with me holding a bird. Then move into the canter, a pirouette, then into tempi changes.”

Let’s put that in perspective. What Jeff is describing is a flying change of

lead every other step, while riding one handed, accommodating a bird on his raised left arm.

“From there it’s a Spanish walk, then he rears to a pedestal and I fly the falcon to the falconer. That’s the ‘king’s part’ of the act. The show is called the ‘Sport of Kings and Cowboys.’ After I fly the falcon to the falconer, the spots go down on me and I change into my cowboy outfit and I do things with the barn owl as a kind of symbol of the West. We have a little poetic script that goes along with it. As the cowboy I do some spins and some reining moves. Big rear. And then the terre-a-terre. I have a two-tiered pedestal in the ring that Valiant climbs on, then we have the barn owl fly under Valiant’s legs. That is our climax.”

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**“I do have some tricks I added for entertainment value. But you could call piaffe a trick if you wanted to. The public embraces the higher elements.”**

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**ABOVE AND BELOW:** Jeff Wilson and Del View Catskill Valiant with Prince Ravi, a Saker Falcon, and Oliver, a barn owl, during his act “Sport of Kings and Cowboys” at 2016’s BreyerFest’s Celebration of Horses (photos © Jennifer Munson, courtesy of Breyer, Lori Ann Thwing).

**I** am so proud of my Morgans,” Jeff continued. “They have so much athletic and mental ability to offer. They can perform the high-level dressage movements, such as a passage, piaffe, and pirouette, as well as working Western movements. Then they have been trained to do the dramatic entertainment type movements. They will do the Spanish walk 15-20 feet with me on their back or at liberty.

“Morgans are happy the more you work with them,” Jeff explained. “During a typical work session, they get better and better.

A “typical work session” for Jeff involves some pastoral settings. It may come as a surprise, but much of his training is carried out on the trails, not in the arena.

“I do a lot of training on the trail. When you are riding in nature horses are so much more expressive and the arena becomes so stale. In a good Spanish walk, the horse is walking. It’s easy to get a horse to pick its feet up, but not so easy when it’s walking. So when you are heading toward home and you add the element of leg lifts, the horse will naturally add the ingredient of forward, because it feels animated. There’s your Spanish walk. You’re always looking to bring the best that the horse can bring up. If you don’t have forward in the Spanish walk you get a droopy leg lift. The same is

true for teaching passage or piaffe, where you are trotting in place. If the horse isn’t thinking forward it will all fall apart. He’ll stop moving. What makes all those movements great is the element of forward, the energy you can pull up.”

“I have found the Morgans so full of movement, and easy to train. They are very people oriented. To me they are super stars, whether I’m doing Cowboy Dressage®, using them for lessons, or sharing training techniques in clinics.”

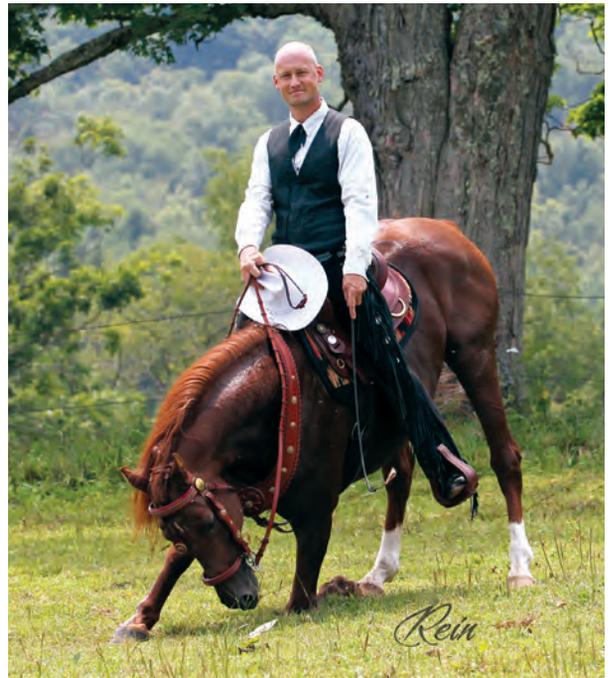


**“This was the hardest act I’ve ever done. If you think horses have a mind of their own, you should try birds. It is also the most beautiful show I’ve ever done.”**

**C**oby Holowacz is very proud of the success Jeff continues to have with his Morgans, as well as admiring him as a horseman and showman.

“Jeff’s also a very good self-promoter,” Coby says. “This lends itself to promoting the type of horse the Morgan really is, showcasing the breed’s elegance and performance abilities.”

Jeff says, “I’ve had the opportunity to do the most amazing things with my Morgans right beside me and under me. From a clinician teaching Cowboy Dressage® at large expos around the country, to performing acts like the ‘Raising of the Flag at Iwo Jima.’ I’ve been able to perform with vintage clothing and an antique silver parade saddle and become the cowboy in ‘A Tribute



Jeff Wilson and Black Willow Orion (photos © Rein Photo).

# THE PRODUCT THAT SAVED BLACK WILLOW ORION'S LIFE

By Jeff Wilson

I hope after everyone has read this article they will immediately go out and purchase *SayWhoa*. I heard about *SayWhoa* but didn't have a bottle on hand when I had one of my biggest crisis moments ever. Luckily someone traveled three hours to bring me a bottle. *SayWhoa* clearly and dramatically saved my stallion Orion from colic at the 11th hour.

For me, like most horse owners, colic is something you fear because there are oftentimes no answers to why, how, or what to do. We all immediately think drugs, mineral oil, and hydration. Sometimes colic leads to surgery, many times it leads to death. It all depends on how "lucky" you get. I've watched my fair share of horses die from colic.

When I first heard *SayWhoa* was proclaimed to stop colic in its tracks, I had the same thought all of the industry has, "Yeah right! If that were true it would be everywhere." But as I have learned from the world of how regulations work, it is very hard to make a claim and state what your product clearly does if your product isn't funded through a drug company.

In researching this all-natural product, I have been exposed to a huge community of top trainers and performers who use it and consider it a colic-miracle. Check it out [www.saywhoa.com](http://www.saywhoa.com). For me, it will always be on my shelf, and, when it comes to your horse, you'll never experience anything more dramatic.

Here's the science from the product makers:

The colon pulls moisture out of the feed when it needs to—to rehydrate a dehydrated horse. Unfortunately, with an impaction, the colon does its job so well that it keeps pulling the moisture out causing the food stuff to stick to the lining. *SayWhoa* formula, through osmosis, brings body fluids back into the colon to equalize, in doing this the moisture supplies the mucosal lining which releases the impaction. *SayWhoa* not only rehydrates the gut, but also the ionic solution (calcium and other minerals) stimulates peristalsis, which are the smooth muscles found in the intestinal walls to start contracting and releasing which should start moving the impaction.

Initially, even after discovering the science behind the product, I still didn't buy it (literally or figuratively) at first. Then one of the biggest crises of my professional career began.

I was greeted by my horse, Black Willow Orion, as he emerged from the pasture one morning. He was looking at his belly and I could see his distress. His coat had begun to glisten with sweat. "OK, tough dude, you'll be fine." I murmured, trying to convince myself. But I knew, yes I knew, that hated killer, Colic, was paying us a visit today.

Orion just stood there, motionless, dealing with it. I snapped a lead to the 17-year-old stallion's halter. "Let's go walk around the arena."

Trying to keep my own guts from twisting, I hurriedly called my medical team. "It's Orion," I blurted, I had no words to downplay it. I was fortunate and grateful to have competent people willing to work

all day to evict that dirty, old rotten scoundrel, Colic, from the premises. But despite their efforts (and complications) of administering drugs, hydration, and oil, Orion's temperature dropped, his body turned cold to the touch, and his gut sounds on the right side remained deadly quiet.

By the end of the day, there was nothing more for us to do. Facing the next tier of care, I recognized that he and I were heading towards our last moments together. As surreal as it was for me, I prepared myself to do what was necessary—for him. I didn't think he would make a two hour trailer ride to Cornell, and I wasn't going to allow his suffering to escalate.

There is nothing you can say and do to make anything better in that moment. It was in that moment—with nowhere to run—that someone had the conviction to bring me, through a relay of good people, a single dose of a product called *SayWhoa* which is the focus of this article. We administered the bottle, in truth, without much hope of recovery as Orion was so far gone. Time had been against us. We waited, and by now there was a small crowd of concerned people standing with us awaiting the outcome.

Within 15 minutes of administering the product, Orion's temperature began to rise and, like turning a switch, his temperament returned. Within a half hour his guts sounds returned (strongly), and, after drinking a half-bucket of water, he strolled to the other side of the arena and began eating hay. Within 45 minutes he passed manure. Yes, a miracle occurred.

We all stood stunned, in disbelief, at what we just witnessed. The transformation, had it happened any other way, may have left some skepticism behind in us (we are all so marketed to), but we were unanimously

convinced. This product actually had done what it said it would do.

Keeping Orion actively moving continued on that day, maybe to make us feel better. Moving around me in a circle, Orion swooped in with all his big moves. He absolutely felt great. Hi Ho Silver!

Of course now I have fully investigated this product and I realize their tag line: "It's What You Do First." In my case, it became a last resort, but now at an early sign of colic, I would give this product. I now know several other trainers that won't be caught without it.

I hope and trust that one day this product will be on every shelf of every equine store in America.

All it takes is one dramatic temperature swing and all of us Morgan owners can face the same colic situation, so I'm "Calling all Morgan owners!" I am forever grateful to *SayWhoa*. I don't make a commission when you buy a bottle, or buy three. So I can tell you, go buy a bottle, or three. The makers of this product are very accessible and willing to help you through your emergency colic squatter eviction situation.

Check out this fantastic horse of mine's video on YouTube. Search "Orion the Star Morgan Stallion" and thank you *SayWhoa* for making this video not an "in memoriam." ■





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Jeff Wilson and Blackwillow Reliant; Jeff Wilson with his Black Willow Morgans (photos © Rein Photo).

to the Silver Screen Cowboy,’ and of course, become the king in the bird act.”

“I’ve also been able to bring promotion to important causes, my most favorite was the opportunity to ride in the famous—by invitation only—New York City Veteran’s Day Parade raising awareness for PTSD in combat soldiers.”

“My Morgans have traveled the East Coast and into the Midwest teaching dressage to people who want better horses regardless of the discipline they ride. This spring, I will again be a featured clinician at the Midwest Horse Fair in Madison, Wisconsin.”

“Everywhere I have traveled I have proudly showcased my Morgan’s brilliance against all the other breeds. I have met people who come up to me at every event and ask me what breed of horse I have. You would be surprised at the myriad of breed responses I get. One dressage trainer from Europe was truly captivated by one of my performances and exclaimed, ‘I didn’t know Morgans could move like that.’”

Jeff writes for monthly publications on how to improve your horse through the foundation of dressage in a practical, useable way. The response from readers gave way to a video series, Jeff’s

most recent undertaking. His “Welcome to the Trail Series” is something he is very proud of. It is an online video series that features, of course, his Morgans, and unveils his trails hidden in the Catskill Mountains. It is designed to be an online training resource for trail riders who desire to understand the biomechanics of their horses and learn to ride through trail obstacles successfully using Cowboy Dressage®. They can be viewed at: [www .CompetitiveTrailHorse.com](http://www.CompetitiveTrailHorse.com)

Jeff Wilson will continue what he is doing in the future because it allows him to realize his dreams with spectacular rides. He’s done everything he could imagine with his Morgan horses, and he wants to never cease giving people experiences with their horses (through his clinics) and keep on exposing his homebred Morgans to the world.

“My goal continues to be that, with the use of my horses, I will be a Morgan ambassador to the horse world at large.”

**“I am so proud of my Morgans,” Jeff continued. “They have so much athletic and mental ability to offer. They can perform the high-level dressage movements, such as a passage, piaffe, and pirouette, as well as working Western movements. Then they have been trained to do the dramatic entertainment type movements.”**

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You can watch Jeff on Youtube or follow him online at: [www .facebook.com/Jeff-Wilson-Cowboy-Dressage](http://www.facebook.com/Jeff-Wilson-Cowboy-Dressage) or at [www .JeffWilsonCowboyDressage.com](http://www.JeffWilsonCowboyDressage.com) ■