



~ FOCUS ON PROFESSIONALS ~

WE ARE MORE ALIKE THAN WE ARE DIFFERENT

Erin Van Steenburgh started in the show ring, advanced to a respected dressage rider and instructor, and now, also, specializes in therapeutic riding. The more she diversifies, the more it all becomes one in her eyes.

By Kim Oplotnik

As the sun rises upon New England showgrounds, you can find Erin Van Steenburgh schooling her dressage riders in the sport horse arenas, far from the hustle and bustle of the performance ring. But Erin lives her own kind of hustle and bustle; a kind that has made her one of the Morgan breeds' best kept secrets.

ABOVE: Erin Van Steenburgh and Syndicat Legaltender (photo © Dave & Andy).



LEFT TO RIGHT: Erin with her family; and with sister Christine Nava Moulthrop (photos © Andy Illies).

Erin has cultivated her own niche in the Morgan scene, becoming a driving force in the dressage world. Her work with humans and horses teaches, promotes, and heals. She does her work quietly and unconditionally. In this interview with Erin, we learn about the soft-spoken leader of Furnace Brook Farm.

Your family has a longtime involvement with the Morgan breed. Can you tell us about that?

My sister, Christine Nava Moulthrop, worked for Ann Anderson of Hobby Knoll and that began my family's involvement with the Morgan breed. My parents built our farm, then called Timber Hill Stables, in 1989 for my sister to run her business. I was in high school at the time and my sister became my trainer. I helped her and worked for her on weekends, during the summer, and at horse shows. We had a small collection of great Morgans (Syndicat Legaltender, Tedwin Timberlane, Van Lu Magnum Force) and she had clients' horses, as well. We were at all the shows and I was very active in the Youth of the Year program, winning the national Youth of the Year Title in 1994.

My sister met Fred Nava when my parents hired him to do the excavation work at the farm. They eventually married and built a new Timber Hill Stables in Kingston, about 15 minutes away. Fred became the chairman and then, manager of the New England Morgan Horse Show. I ran the Youth of the Year contest for more than ten years, my father, Curt Collins, worked security for more than 20 years, and my mother, Phyllis, still scores dressage. My sister, of course, became an integral part of running the show as chairperson and my nephew, Stephen, was a huge part of the grounds crew. I actually met my husband, Darren, at NEMHS, he was a member of the grounds crew for 10 years! My son, Collin, was born during the show (it was announced at the show) and my daughter, Ellie, is now showing under the direction of Christine. Somehow we are all involved, with the exception of my brother and his family.

I also took over running the dressage division at the Massachusetts Morgan Horse Show in 1997 and still run it today. My mother scores and my Dad does check in. It is definitely a family affair.

How was Furnace Brook Farm born?

While in college, I began a camp program at Timber Hill during the summers. I loved it! My sister eventually moved Timber Hill to Kingston in 1994. I took Syndicat Legaltender (Regal) to college with me and began to learn dressage. I continued to run my camp program at my parent's farm and started teaching lessons when home on breaks. The business grew, my passion for dressage grew and by the time I graduated I knew that I wanted to continue to teach, run camps, and continue dressage training with Regal. I remember sitting at my parents' table brainstorming names for the farm and settling on Furnace Brook as there is a brook running behind the barn called Furnace Brook.

What horses were instrumental to your learning? Specifically Syndicate Legaltender.

I can honestly tell you that Regal was instrumental in the direction my life took. I went to Bowdoin College in Maine and was studying prison reform when I took Regal to school with me and started dressage. I had always said I would keep the horses a hobby—well, that all changed! I fell in love with dressage, but more important, the training journey with Regal changed everything. We bought Regal when he was four from Ann Anderson. Christine and I showed him in English pleasure, pleasure driving, in-hand—we had quite a bit of success, but by age ten we felt he needed a new career. I wanted him to stay with me rather than move to Kingston, so he came to college. A college friend was a dressage rider and suggested I try it. I knew absolutely nothing! Thankfully I had good instruction!



LEFT TO RIGHT: Erin and daughter Ellie with Gus the dog and Syndicat Legaltender (photo © Andy Illes); Ellie and “Regal” with Sarah Hall.

I had never boarded somewhere before and there was a sense of freedom in just concentrating on Regal and our training. We had what I would like to call a mad love affair, but many would say it was an unhealthy attachment to one another! My poor mother would stress anytime I went away, as Regal would often break out in hives or colic. He was a sensitive horse who thrived under the obsessive attention. We worked hard but we had fun trail riding and just hanging out together. He was an incredible athlete with the best work ethic I have ever experienced in a horse. He impressed every dressage instructor I rode under and I felt he just truly embraced the versatility of the Morgan. He did it all and he did it well. I only wish we started the dressage work when he was younger and that I had more dressage knowledge when we started—I know he would have made it to the upper levels.

Once he was retired, he taught many of my students the basics of dressage and I have video of my five-year-old daughter trotting on him—such an emotional and special moment. He passed away at 31 and I miss him everyday, but feel so blessed to have had the privilege of owning him.

With Regal retired, I purchased Cannequin’s Letter Perfect as a four-year-old, halter broke gelding. He was the first horse I broke on my own and trained through first level. I eventually sold him to a student who went on to win the AMHA Dressage Seat Gold Medal with him, as well as the First Level Junior Exhibitor World Championship. “Harvey” was so different from Regal—he taught me a lot about patience and perseverance. He was super sensitive and emotional and just much more difficult than Regal, who was so level headed. Harvey winning in OKC was a major professional and personal moment for me.

Who were your Dressage mentors?

I have been fortunate to have very good dressage instructors/mentors. My first instructor with Regal was Sue Jaccoma, who had

ridden under Robert Dover. She was so upbeat, fun, and positive. In my first lesson, Regal was in a big fat snaffle hand galloping around the indoor and she is yelling, “Don’t worry he is going to be awesome!” Luckily, I didn’t know any better or I may have given up! Sue was so good about giving me very specific exercises to work on the basics. She was the best teacher I have ever had. She broke concepts down, kept you moving forward, and always stressed not to worry if it wasn’t perfect, just keep practicing and it will get there. And it did.

After Regal and I won the Training Level World Championship in 1996, we moved to New York so I could be a working student for Lendon Grey. Regal’s work improved considerably under her instruction and for me the best part was being able to ride so many different horses. Lendon was extremely generous with her horses. I thought I would be mucking stalls but my main job was to warm up horses for her. She also gave me a second level schoolmaster (UVM Rosanna, a Morgan owned by actress Glenn Close) and a Prix St George schoolmaster to ride daily and learn on, as well as a daily lesson on Regal. I learned so much from all of those horses and was able to feel movements I was working on with Regal.

What lessons did you take away from each?

I think the biggest lessons I learned from Sue was in how to teach. I use so many of her exercises with my students to teach major concepts like contact, rhythm, and straightness. She was so good at breaking down concepts and giving you tools to improve. I also so appreciated her positive upbeat demeanor and try to give that to my students. She made everything fun and educational at the same time and also always had you feel like you were progressing and moving forward.

I loved the way that Lendon cared for her horses. Every one of her horses, including Idocus, who became an Olympic level horse, was turned out everyday and was also trail ridden once a



LEFT TO RIGHT: Erin and Regal at New England (photo © Bob Moseder); Erin with Audrey Robinson and Graycliff Carvaggio at Grand National.

week. She was so focused on the well being and happiness of all her horses. I also loved her openness to any breed—she believed a good horse was a good horse. I learned so much about caring for a top level horse and how important the horse’s mental health is to their success.

What are the virtues of the Morgan breed as Dressage horses?

I think Morgans make great dressage horses for the obvious reasons that they are athletic, hard working, and generally want to please. Their uphill conformation can make collection natural for them. Morgans are so smart and I think many of them thrive on the constant progression of dressage—there is always more to learn and more to work on. For an active minded Morgan I think this can be very good in keeping them focused on the rider. For some Morgans, getting out of the routine of “walk-trot-canter, reverse, walk-trot-canter” can be beneficial to their happiness. I also think that the Morgan size makes them a great dressage partner for a junior or amateur rider, as opposed to a large warmblood that can be physically difficult to ride.

Morgans have been said to be wonderful in the collected movements, but lack the extensions of Warmbloods. Would you agree with that assessment?

I think it depends on the individual Morgan and its conformation. A more sport type Morgan may be able to extend well. However, if we talk about Morgan conformation as based on our breed standards, I believe that collection is certainly more natural to the Morgan than extensions—much like Spanish horses. However with correct training you can certainly improve any Morgan’s extensions.

How does the Morgan mentality and the breed’s famous memory mesh with dressage training?

In a broad sense, I think Morgan’s have great work ethics and

love to work which is certainly beneficial regardless of discipline. Of course, all Morgans are individuals—some are more laid back and some are more spirited in personality. I think the more laid back Morgan will make a more suitable lower level dressage horse or at least one for a junior rider or amateur rider. However, if a spirited disposition can be channeled correctly then great things will happen.

As for their memory, this is something I deal with all the time in training and at shows. I always laugh when my “dressage” horses hit the main ring for the awards ceremonies and start having flashbacks of their show days. They start trotting level, flagging their tails and showing off—I love it! On a more serious note, as many of my dressage horses have been former show horses, you do have to have a lot of patience in your training as they figure out what you are asking them to do. For many, you are asking them to do something completely different from what they have always known. One of the things I love most about dressage is that every horse gets it eventually, I believe it improves every single horse both physically and mentally. They learn quickly that it is good for them.

What is the most advanced level you have reached with a Morgan?

Regal and I competed through second level before soundness issues forced his eventual retirement. Having my children, growing my business, and focusing on clients’ horses became the priority for so long. Now that I have more time since my kids are older, my energy and time is being focused on developing my therapeutic riding program.

What defines a good dressage rider?

I think a good dressage rider has to have good basics—a strong supple seat, independent aids, and good feel (the most difficult concept to teach!). Because we have to ride tests, a good dressage rider needs to be prepared. I insist that my students know their

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TOP TO BOTTOM: Scenes from therapeutic riding sessions.

tests. You have to know your test in order to prepare your horse properly for each movement and to have success. I always stress the importance of setting your horse up to succeed. You have to think quickly and react quickly to each step the horse takes. Honestly, I believe these qualities make a good rider regardless of your discipline—we are more alike than we are different!

What are some of the exercises you like best to prepare your riders for the challenges of dressage?

I start every student who comes to me on a lunge line and they work on the lunge line for a long time. We focus on developing muscle, balance, independent aids, and a strong, supple seat. Dressage requires the rider to have an effective seat. We do a lot of no stirrup work at all three gaits to work on the rider's seat and to lengthen their leg. A basic concept in dressage is contact and we work a lot on learning how to feel and maintain contact through various connecting exercises—spiraling in and out, leg yielding, changing the length of stride to get the horse forward to the rider's hand. We are constantly stressing that the connection should come from the energy generated from the hind end into the hand not from pulling back with the hand. We try to always make sure our students understand why we are doing something.

What three top qualities do you look for in a dressage horse?

I am basing these qualities on the fact that I am almost always purchasing a Morgan dressage horse for a JUNIOR rider.

1. Disposition
2. Three, good, clean gaits
3. Uphill conformation/strength of hind end

Where do your students come from and how do they find you?

Most of my students start in my camp program and my lesson program, where all the horses used are Morgans! They will then lease a horse and many will eventually purchase a Morgan. I have an open barn in my town twice a year through our recreation department which brings people in. I donate lessons to local schools and fundraisers which also spreads the word. I think most of my business comes through word of mouth. We try very hard to provide an inclusive fun environment where people can define their own experience—whether it be lessons, camps, leasing, owning, or showing—all are welcome.

Where do you and your riders compete? Do Morgan shows offer divisions for dressage horses?

At this time, we compete at three local dressage schooling shows, the annual New England Dressage Association's Spring show, the New England Morgan Regional Show, the Massachusetts Morgan Horse Show and the Grand National. I will only send a horse to OKC if I truly believe they will win—it is so expensive and a lot of stress on the horse, so it has to be worth it. Of the 15 times I have had a horse at the Grand National, 12 of those times they have won a world or reserve world championship. I have had two students win the AMHA Dressage Gold Medal and one student win the

reserve in the dressage gold medal.

What drew you to therapeutic riding?

I have always had an interest in therapeutic riding but didn't know much about it. A former student of mine became a PATH certified instructor and encouraged me to get my certification. She mentored me and I received my certification in June of 2016. Since then, I have mentored one of my students who is now certified. During the teaching hours for my certification, I fell in love with it. I love to teach and with the therapeutic lessons you feel you are really making a difference in the lives of these children and their parents. It is so rewarding. I was also at a time, personally, where I was looking for a change. I had become tired and a bit burnt out with the showing and all the issues that come with it. It can be both physically and emotionally exhausting. My daughter is now at the age where she wants to show and I want to enjoy it with her and Christine—I found balancing being a trainer and coach to my clients and being a mom to be very stressful at horse shows. I was really at a point where I needed a change in my life and the therapeutic riding became the obvious choice.

Tell us about your therapeutic program.

Right now I am at a point of transition within my business. We still provide traditional lessons but I am taking on more of the therapeutic lessons and giving the traditional lessons to Kristi Haines, who has worked with me for almost 13 years. I will be graduating five students who actively show this year and then only have three more active competitors who will graduate within two years. I hope to have a full therapeutic program at that point. Right now, we are providing therapeutic lessons to approximately 15 students with varying challenges from Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy, anxiety disorders, ADHD, developmental delays, stroke patients, and autism. We also are in partnership with a non-profit in which a former student of mine provides Equine Assisted Psychotherapy for children who have suffered trauma. We have built a sensory room for students to regulate themselves before handling the horses and are working to continue to improve our facilities to meet our clients' needs. We also have an Occupational Therapist who provides hippotherapy one day a week. We have not even started advertising or reaching out to organizations because I want to be sure I can handle the influx, but the word is getting out and people are contacting me consistently. I am working on gathering volunteers and making sure I have suitable horses and equipment. There is such a need for these services. It is very exciting and a little scary too!

What do the riders achieve from the horseback experience?

Therapeutic riding does so much for these riders. From a physical sense, the riding works leg muscles and helps to strengthen core muscles which improves posture, walking, and even speech. I have a student with cerebral palsy who is not

walking on his own. His mother was told by a specialist to get him on a horse as quickly and as often as possible. A horse's hip movement is the same as our hip movement when walking. Even with a rider passively sitting on a walking horse, the rider's hips are activated and moved much like if they were walking on their own. Muscles are activated and you hope connections are made in the brain to help this rider's body learn to walk. I see the positive changes every day.

From an emotional perspective, therapeutic riding offers a rider a sense of freedom and helps build confidence. Many of these kids can't go play on the town basketball team. This gives them a place to come and be a part of something. They can interact with peers who share their love of a horse. Horses are so wonderful—they don't care what you look like or what challenges you might have. They are just happy to have some attention and a treat. One of my biggest goals in developing my program is to create an environment that is supportive and accepting to everyone regardless of what their challenges may be. It is so important for people to feel like they are a part of something. It is also so important for parents to have a place that is accepting of their child and supportive of what both the child and the parent is going through. I want to help give them some hope and joy that their child can participate in a sport and can be part of a program.

Is the Morgan particularly useful in the area of therapeutic riding?

Morgans make great therapeutic riding horses. Their size is ideal for having side walkers and to not be too scary for the rider who may be afraid of being up high. I think their stocky build can be helpful as well. Morgans are friendly, enjoy attention, and are so kind to children. (I swear they know when a child has challenges) I also think the former show horse can make a great therapy horse. They have been exposed to so much at horse shows that they are really unfazed by equipment we may use or even a rider who may be loud verbally or noisy with their body. One of my best therapy horses is Cedar Springs Beausoleil, a former show horse whose owner is generously letting me use him in his retirement. The work is easy and many of these show horses still want a job and love the attention.

What has kept you in the Morgan breed?

I love the Morgan breed and I love the Morgan community. I have grown up within this community and it is like a second family. Growing up showing, competing in the youth contests, to eventually becoming a professional to now starting a therapeutic program I have felt supported by this community. I really feel like people want to help and they want to see you succeed. As I said about the program I am developing, people want to be part of something and I have been so fortunate to be part of this amazing breed and its people. Regardless of what discipline we choose to participate in we are all united by this amazing horse, who through its versatility, can satisfy so many needs and provide so much joy. ■