

A CHAT WITH DENNY EMERSON

Could this Prominent Horseman be the Great Unifier the Morgan Breed Needs?

By Stephen Kinney

I was hanging out doing my thing at Grand National in 2018 when I got a call from our Executive Director Carrie Mortensen asking that I come to the AMHA booth in the coliseum. Someone wanted to meet me.

That someone turned out to be Denny Emerson.

I was more than aware of Denny's reputation. He's legendary in the larger horse world and we have Morgan acquaintances in common who had brought him to my attention quite often (his Morgan credentials date back to the 1950s). I also knew Denny makes prolific posts to Facebook on all kinds of subjects and has throngs of followers, me being one of them.

I will confess that, given what I knew of him, I may have been a bit intimidated. Knowing he was a sport horse guru I was curious (perhaps a little apprehensive) about his thoughts on the pageantry of the Morgan horse that takes place in multiple rings and many disciplines at Oklahoma every October.

But soon, there I was, babbling a mile a minute with one of the most famous equestrians on the planet.

We quickly found a common vocabulary. I must have told him I lived in Maine. He had, at one point, worked at Puckerbrush Riding Center, home of the vaunted Gray sisters, Marshall and Lendon. I started out riding with the Poulin brothers, Mike and Tom. The Grays and the Poulins were all involved in putting Maine on the map in the Olympic sport of dressage. And these mutual connections were a great conversation starter.

Also, it was clear Denny had been reading *The Morgan Horse* magazine and it was interesting to hear his perspective on a subject I hold dear.

But, if I had any concern we were going to have a challenging show horse versus sport horse kind of exchange, I was quickly put at ease. Denny graduated from Dartmouth with an English degree. He is cerebral, analytical, and a communicator. His appraisal of the horses he was seeing at Morgan Grand National quickly moved me to think that here, in this person, with his dual backgrounds in Morgan horses and eventing, we may have the great unifier that I think our sometimes splintered breed so fiercely needs.

Since the time of that conversation in October, Denny has actively reflected many of the themes of that day in his varied posts to Facebook. I have been downloading them and saving them to a

folder on my desktop in preparation for our chat that follows.

You started attending “the National”—New England Regional—in 1953. Have you been attending since?

DENNY: There were gaps. I showed there in '57 through '61 and then I got involved in eventing. I would try to go and catch at least a day pretty regularly. For the last 10 years I have a bunch of friends—Ted Nipoli, Jeannine Myers, Judy Barwood, Barb Ackley—and we all get together and have lunch and watch some classes and try to see who can get close to what the judges saw. It's been a fun thing to do.

Another thing our little group does is we go to visit different farms. We've been to Nancy Caisse's several times, we've been to Ivan Beattie's, we've been to UVM. Recently we went to Newmont Farm. We try to make it a day, visit horses and take pictures. But nothing prepared me for Oklahoma. That's an extravaganza.

Was 2018 your first trip to Grand National?

DENNY: It was my first time there. I met my friend Ted Niboli and we flew from Manchester,

New Hampshire, to Oklahoma City and went for four days. You go once and you wonder why you haven't done it every year. The quality, the passion, the number of horses—it's mind-boggling. I had read about it, but reading about it is not the same.

What motivated you to finally attend the show at Oklahoma in 2018?

DENNY: Your magazine. I just thought it looked like something very exciting and beautiful that I wanted to see. Plane travel has gotten more and more a pain. I've said several years, 'Gee we've got to go out there.' So, this year we went. The magazine is the premier horse breed magazine of any of them. It's annoying to me...I think we, the breed, we have to ask people to support the whole breed, not just their little piece of it. I think we need to ask people if you support the breed you have to support the magazine even if you don't like some horses that have high knee action. They have to ask not what's in it for my bloodlines, but what can we do for the breed? We have to start thinking that way. To me the magazine is the glue that holds it all together. To be a member and not get the

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Denny and High Brook Rockstar (© Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

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magazine—I just don't like it. To have that resource and to choose not to avail yourself of it for philosophical reasons, to me that does not make sense. You're not just doing it for yourself. You are doing it for the Morgan breed.

Wow, thank you for such supportive words. What did you notice about Grand National that stood out for you?

DENNY: A lot of things. There was a 13 and under hunter pleasure class. There were 24 of them. They were walk, trotting, and cantering at the same time. That arena is big, but not that big. I thought—there's a bright future if we have kids who can ride like that. That was a highlight for me. I thought If I could have ridden a fraction that well at their age, I would have been happy. I loved the hunter classes. A lot of them are the rockstars of the horse world, their necks come up out of their shoulders and they have those big eyes. It was like eye candy. So, the little kids and the hunter classes were the things that impressed me most.

If we had to segregate the world of equine performance, you are from the sport horse world and you were attending a show horse event at Grand National. You have made comments since about the viability of the show horse sector and the need for the sport horse, family horse, endurance horse, and so forth, sectors of the Morgan breed to shine their light more brightly. Would you elaborate on that?

DENNY: To me, I was very, very pleased to see such a strong showing from all over. We were sitting in the audience on different nights in different sections. We met people from Oregon, from Texas, from the Canadian provinces, from California. I didn't realize, being a provincial New Englander, how diverse a cross section comes to Oklahoma. That gives the Morgan breed a solid, economically sound core. I think it's vitally important for a small breed—and I would put Morgans in with Saddlebreds and Connemara Ponies—as opposed to the Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds, which are big breeds—then you should have a core. I was very gratified how strong that was. So, what are the pieces around the periphery of this core that could be strengthened? Ivan Beattie was the guest speaker at a Vermont Morgan meeting one time and he made the point that if you have a big breed and you gain or lose 100 it doesn't make much difference. But if you have a small breed and you can up it by a hundred, you are making a big leap. So, let's take carriage and combined driving, 4-H and Pony Club, dressage, eventing, jumping, more of the Western world,

the other pieces that aren't what I would call the core show pieces and try to figure out through various means how to increase the Morgan participation in those affiliated disciplines for uses that Morgans can do. So, you hold together your core and then you have an outreach to expand around the edges for the viability of the breed ongoing. To me that's the challenge.

Saddle seat riding is one piece of a big mosaic. The mistake—and I bought into this at one time—is to denigrate the core as a means of elevating the fringes. I think we have to embrace the core and support those who are holding the breed together and increase the other uses of Morgans at the same time. I think that was the epiphany I took away from attending Oklahoma. It was an eye-opener. I had been starting to come to that. Thank God I went out

there. To see that, and to see the passion and the beauty of that, it made me come back much more optimistic.

You have also made a comment that the Morgans you saw in Oklahoma were not the same as the Morgans of old, in fact they were....would you complete that thought?

DENNY: I said they were not the same, they were better.

But 'better' needs to be explained. One of the things that I think has always been a little bit of a tricky sell, for us to sell the Morgan, is the idea that many of them are not much bigger than ponies. I'm six feet, but I'm slim. I can ride a smaller horse and not feel uncomfortable. But there is a real substantial difference between a 14.2 hand horse and 15.2 hand horse. The Cavalry Manual said that optimum size

for a fit trooper was somewhere in the 15.1 to 15.2 hand range. The Morgans we are seeing today are in that range, but to me they still look like Morgans. Graycliff Tony GCH is as spectacular a Morgan as has walked the planet. As I said, I went to Newmont Farm. She [Margaret Gladstone] had a Mizrahi colt and that youngster was high headed, buoyant, came bouncing out. It could go into the show arena, the dressage world, eventing. And these horses that are being bred are big enough for the American population.

So, you raise a question that is often on my mind as we edit articles on everything from Morgan history to Morgan bloodlines. If you are a Morgan breeder you are invested in maintaining Morgan character in the horses you breed. But if you are a breeder of anything—horses, sheep, dairy cattle—you also have it as part of your purpose to improve on the product

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Denny and High Brook Rockstar (© Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

from one generation to another. How do we in this breed balance these two purposes? Can we maintain Morgan character and still produce horses that can compete in the marketplace for contemporary equine sports?

DENNY: A breed can't stand still. It either goes forward or it goes backwards. It can't stay static. We have to let the breed grow a little bit if it's going to stay in size with the average American. We know Americans are getting bigger and heavier. I think that if we stick to a standard that was established 200 years ago and the human population has changed, which it has in terms of height and weight, if we can't let the standard change a little bit, we have a problem. We've got to have a horse people want to ride and are comfortable sitting on. I lived across the road from Dana Wingate Kelley. It was hard for Dana to sell his horses to anyone except people who wanted to drive them. You take anyone who wasn't a small man or woman, and they weren't comfortable riding a smaller horse. I think our ability to let the breed grow from a 14 something hand horse to a 15 something hand horse is vitally important to the survival of the breed going forward, so we give people a product they want. Nancy Caisse would say, "my mother would always say, 'I wanted a horse with a bumper'—you know with a neck up in front of you that would pop you back into the saddle if you happened to lean forward." You look at her horses like Orcland Vigildon, Cornwallis, Sealect—they had that uphill neck. Graycliff Tony GCH, Minion Millennium a lot of these horses today have that same beautiful uphill neck. But



Denny and DRF All Eyes On Me (© Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

my point is, they still look like a Morgan. If you look at them from 200 yards away the 14.3 hand Morgan of 1950 should look the same as a 15.3 hand horse of 2019. They will still look pretty much the same.

You take the paintings of classic Morgans by Jeanne Mellin Herrick, the proportions shouldn't change whether it's 14.2 or 15.2. I don't think they have to say the standard is for a horse that's 14.1 just because Justin Morgan happened to be 14.1.

So, breeding of Morgans, like breeding of all livestock, has evolved and that's a good thing?

DENNY: I was in Germany 35 years or so ago. The trainer I was riding with was named Walter Christensen. He was the coach of the Swedish Olympic team. I asked Walter about the improvement of the German Warmblood post World War II. I asked him how have you seen the Warmblood evolve? Walter said that after the reconstruction of Germany, after everything had been bombed out and they rebuilt the highways, he said the biggest cause of the evolution in change was the use of the horse trailer. Prior to that

the only way you could breed a mare was to ride her or drive her to a stallion. He said once you had a horse trailer you could haul her 200 or 300 miles. My first broodmare, Bay State Tuppence, I could haul to Townshend in Bolton, Massachusetts, and breed her to Orcland Vigildon. This was in 1958. Then, of course, the next huge change was shipped, cooled semen. And then the next huge change was frozen semen and the internet so you could shop on line all the stallion options and say I want to breed to that one and get semen from a horse that is 1,000 miles away. So, you have the ability to make changes to the breed through quantum changes in technology. There is a downside to that in that all the people are breeding to the same 10 stallions. At some point you have to broaden the base or there will be things that you have to fix, that you will not want to inherit. It would be interesting to have some well qualified geneticists to look at Morgan pedigrees and talk at a show or a convention about hybrid vigor and things like that.

I am thinking of a comment you posted to Facebook about seeing get of Minion Millennium at New England. You called their gaits "slinky." And said that if shod and trained in the traditions of the sport horse world they could compete in Europe. Are we breeding Morgans with the athleticism needed for upper levels of dressage?

DENNY: A word that I heard used by people I talked to out in Oklahoma was the word "scope." They said the really great show horses, that the ones

who could really sit down and get the job done, had scope. Scope is power—to be able to sit down behind, lift the forehand and extend while lifting. For the park classes the knee comes up. Sort of like the jumpers want the knees up by the jowl when they're over jumps. In dressage, Robert Dover talks about 'a circle of energy.' If you took that same lift that in show horses goes up, and you took that same energy and put it into energy that goes out, over the back and forward—I think that is the kind of athleticism I saw in the horses showing at Oklahoma, whether they were park horses or hunter pleasure horses. I think you are talking about the same potential energy—the energy of power and lift. The horses in Germany are 16.1 and have been custom bred to do this for decades. You perhaps could not beat them. But, that weanling colt at Newmont Farm, Newmont's Captivator, who is by Mizrahi, he came bouncing out into that yard. He hasn't been trained to go any specific way yet—up or out. You have the sense that there was the potential to go anywhere with that energy. You sure could have a beautiful, beautiful mover in dressage.

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DENNY EMERSON, RÉSUMÉ OF A HORSEMAN ≈ FOCUS ON PROFESSIONALS

Victor tripped going into his last training gallop and mildly sprained an ankle just before the competition. That same year Denny and Victor Dakin won the National Three-Day Event Championships in Radnor, Pennsylvania. In 1977, Denny and Victor finished in the top ten in a tough field of riders from all over the world at Ledyard International.

Denny successfully completed several other three-day horses throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, one of which was a horse named York, who was the National Three-Day Champion in 1979. York was then named USEA's 1979 "Horse of the Year."

In 1982, Denny placed fourth at the US National Three-Day Event at Chesterland, riding Farnley Rob Roy, and from 1982-1984, and again from 1991-1992, Denny served as the United States Eventing Association president. He also served as the United States Equestrian Team's Vice President of Eventing for seven years, and was a member of the United States Eventing Association's Executive Committee, and the Chairman of the Breeder's Committee of the American Horse Show Association. In 1992, Denny won the Bromont CCI event on Epic Win.

Denny competed in his final advanced Three-Day Event at Groton House Farm in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, in 1999 at the age of 58, and would continue eventing for another 12 years, until 2011.

In the mid 1990s, Morgans once again made an appearance in Denny's life when Charlie and Charlotte Ross brought two of their Morgan stallions, Taproot Command Pilot and Taproot Flagship, to Denny for training as event horses. Around this same time, Denny and May purchased a facility in Southern Pines, North Carolina, so that they could train year round.

ON TO ENDURANCE

While at a competition in 1998, Denny bumped into Lana Dupont Wright, the first woman to ride in Olympic Three-Day Eventing. She told him that she was going to be riding in a 100-Mile Endurance Race in Bethune, South Carolina, and that she had an extra horse if he was interested in giving it a go. Always up for an adventure, Denny of course said, "Sure." Although he had competed several times in the three-day 100-Mile Ride at GMHA, which consisted of riding two days of 40 miles, and one day of 20 miles, he had never attempted to cover 100 miles in a single day. So, he rode Lana's little 14'1 hand Arabian named Zion. The day of the ride was cold and rainy, and he was already battling a bad cold, a combination that ultimately led to hypothermia, but he persevered. Not only did he persevere, it was challenging enough to spark an interest in trying to complete the brutal Tevis Cup in the mountains of California. Knowing that Arabians were the predominant breed in

this particular competition, he started searching for an Arabian to start this new adventure. It wasn't long before he found Rett Butler, an Arabian actually located in California, who had already done the Tevis Cup. Denny thought to himself, "I am only 60, I think I better do the Tevis Cup."

So, Denny started commuting back and forth to California to ride as much as he could in the tough California mountain terrain to prepare for the Tevis Cup. He quickly realized that riding in the mountains of California was totally different than riding in the mountains of Vermont or North Carolina. The terrain was very rocky, mountainous, and precipitous. At some point in 2003, Rett developed a stone bruise. Although Rett recovered, Denny contemplated bringing him back to Vermont. However, 2004 was the 50th anniversary of the Tevis Cup Race, and Denny knew that if he brought Rett back to Vermont, they would probably never get back out to California to compete in the Tevis Cup. So, he decided to keep Rett in California with Tammy Robinson. Denny continued to travel out to California to ride Rett in different races, still preparing for the Tevis Cup.

In 2004, Denny and Rett did indeed complete the arduous 100-Mile Tevis Cup Ride. There were approximately 250 riders that year, and Denny and Rett finished 75th, making Denny the only rider to have ever won both a gold medal in eventing and a Tevis Cup buckle in endurance.

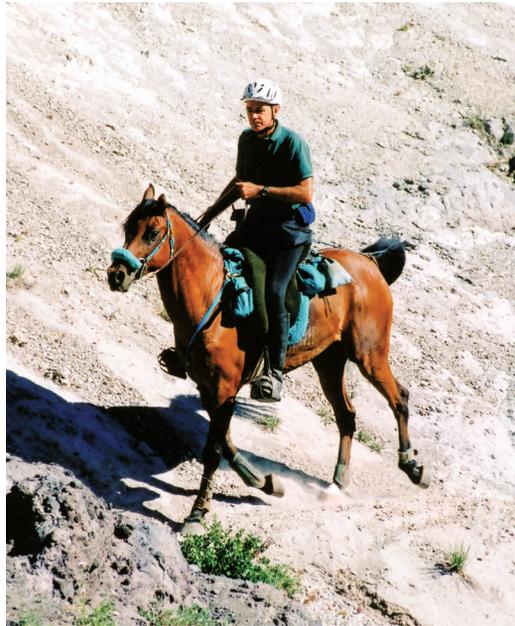
When asked about his experiences during the Tevis Cup, Denny talks about how the first 70 miles were riding while the sun was up, but the next 30 were in

darkness using only glow sticks as a guide throughout the rugged mountain terrain. Although there happened to be a full moon that night, it only seemed to accentuate the rim of the canyons, a reminder that just one misstep would result in disaster. It seemed endless, and he ended up actually riding a total of 21 hours, in addition to two one hour holds. To receive the prestigious Tevis Cup Buckle, it is required to finish within 24 hours from the start.

Having successfully overcome another huge personal challenge by completing the 100-mile Tevis Cup Ride, Denny once again started to circle back to Morgans. Admittedly, the Morgan has always been Denny's favorite breed. It was the breed that he had grown up with, and during all those years of Three-Day Eventing he had assumed it was doing just fine because it was America's breed.

In the meantime, just shy of his 70th birthday, Denny marked 50 consecutive years of competing at Preliminary level or above in Three-Day Eventing while at the Stoneleigh-Burnham Horse Trials. However, a freak accident on cross-country left him with a broken C1 vertebra, similar to the injury that Christopher Reeves had sustained several years earlier. After many long months

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Denny rode the Arabian Rett Butler to earn his Tevis Cup buckle in 2004.

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Years ago, your friend Lendon Gray trained a Connemara pony, Seldom Seen, to upper level dressage to prove the point that dressage was for all breeds. What do we need to do to get a few of our athletic Morgans into the hands of international dressage trainers? Is that even a possibility?

DENNY: So, you take young horses like the ones our top show stables are breeding that are going into the main ring at Oklahoma. The chances of getting those into the hands of dressage riders and event riders are slim. One, because they are more valuable in the hands of show trainers. And, two, because the event riders, and dressage riders, and reining riders aren't thinking in terms of Morgans. And the people who are breeding those really lovely ones aren't thinking in terms of eventing or jumping or dressage, so that's the problem right there.

In the 1980s Margaret Gardiner gave the breed a gift. She privately sponsored a carriage driving pair of Morgans to compete both in America and in Europe under the direction of Larry Poulin. And it made the breed more of a name in the world of carriage driving. Is there a role for a private sponsor like this to popularize the Morgan in other disciplines?

DENNY: Charlie Ross, of Taproot Morgan Farm, sent me two Morgan stallions in the '90s to event. Charlie was trying to promote the use of Morgans in eventing. Taproot Command Pilot was starting to make a name for himself when Charlie got sick and passed away. That was an example of how one breeder with money was trying to promote the breed in other disciplines. The big one, when I was younger, was when Cecil Ferguson formed a friendship with Alois Podhajsky who took Parade and Broadwall Drum Major on tour all around the country as part of the demonstration being done by the Spanish Riding School. It put the Morgan front and center.

What steps, even baby steps, do you think those who love Morgans could take to promote the Morgan sport horse, the Morgan family horse, the Morgan endurance horse, etc, to a wider audience?

DENNY: Let's say we have our nice central core of show Morgans

and that's in good shape. And let's say we want to increase the visibility of the Morgan in dressage and we find a Lendon Gray. Or we find a reining guy. Or a young eventer. We have a base. And then to do outreach programs from that. Because the other part is that our base is already breeding these really great horses. Take that wonderful base that we know we have. If we had a person of means who could sponsor a Morgan in some other facet of the horse world that the breed can do and do well—that would be more than a baby step.

As your eventing career wound down you returned to the Morgan breed and now own three of them. What are your plans and hopes for those three Morgans?

DENNY: That's what I'm doing with my horses. High Brook Rockstar, I've done dressage with her locally, I've done 15, 20, and 30-mile trail rides. Catch A Cloud, my rescue, is a beautiful thing and she might make a distance horse of some sort. She is an ambassador. The one I just got, DRF All Eyes On Me, I'm hoping to do some dressage with. I'm promoting them a little bit outside the horse show world.

Any final words?

DENNY: You know we go to Oklahoma and we see these big show stables and each is run by one or two people who have clients supporting them. What I hope is that we can broaden thinking about the well-being of the entire breed. I think when I was a kid and you had Robert Lippitt Knight, Ted Davis, the Annis family, J. Cecil Ferguson, the Orcutt Family, Dana Wingate Kelley, you had the Brunks and the Greenwalts out in the Midwest, Fred and Jeanne Herrick, Darwin Morse. We could probably call them the first families of Morgandom in



Denny and High Brook Rockstar (© Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

their day. Those people were supporters of their own bloodlines, but they were also custodians. It's gratifying to see that some of the major trainers have taken on that role today as we come into the first quarter of the 21st century.

Also, I'll repeat this, I think the magazine is a way forward. It's the one single thing that is tangible that holds it all together. It is like a good announcer at a horse show. It is the glue that ties the show together. A good magazine is the glue that ties the breed together. ■