

# The Eventing Taproot Morgans

By Denny Emerson

One day, out of the blue, probably in 1990, I got a telephone call from Charlie Ross at the Taproot Morgan Horse Farm in Hinesburg, Vermont. Charlie and Charlotte Ross had been breeding Morgan horses and were looking for new ways to promote them to the sport horse market. At that time (and still today) eventing was a popular sport in New England, and in the United States in general, but very few Morgans were seen at most competitions.

Charlie had a theory that the versatile Morgan horse should do well in a sport which had three distinct phases of competition: dressage, cross country jumping, and show jumping. He asked me if he could send us two young stallions to be trained and competed to support his theory. One of the stallions was a powerfully-built bay named Taproot CommandPilot, a foal of 1986. The other, Taproot Flag Ship, was a chestnut, one year older, a foal of 1985. I had grown up with Morgan horses, had always been interested in them, and I was enthusiastic about taking the two colts to see where they might be able to go.

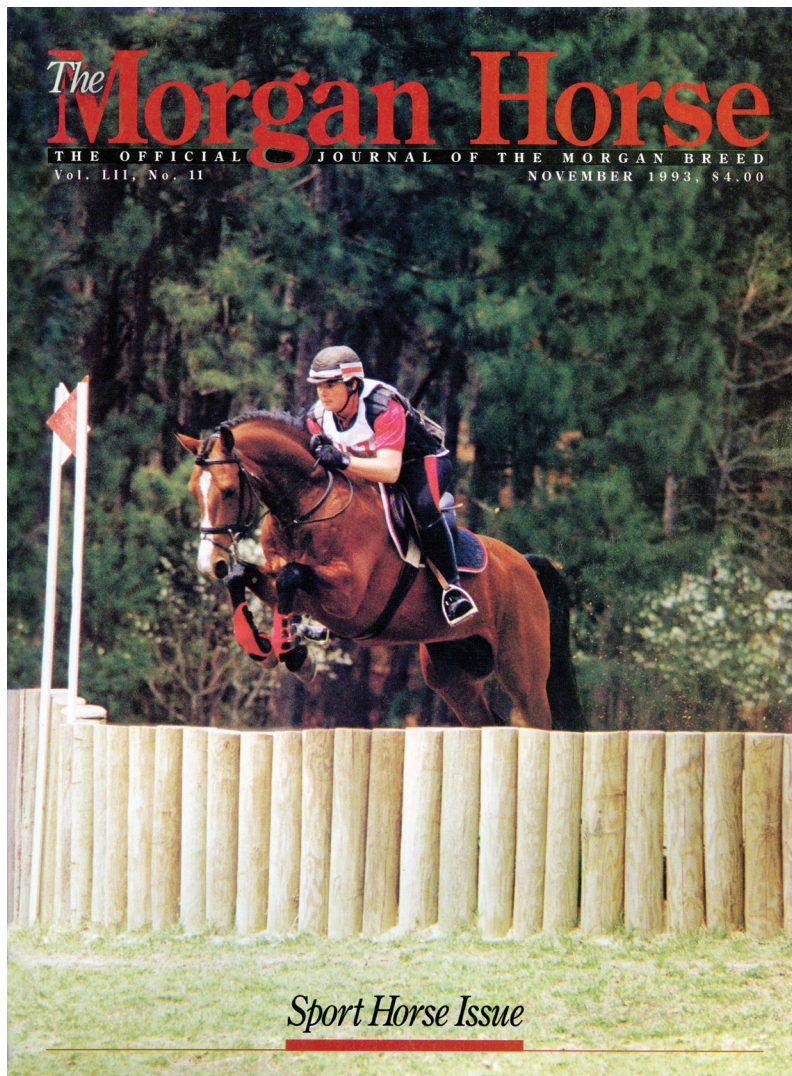
There was a lot they had to learn. For starters, they had to be trained on the flat in dressage. Then there were the many pieces

that comprised cross country jumping, such as ditches, drops, banks, into and out of water, angles, corners, plus the “normal” jumps (solidly-built verticals and a oxers). Finally, they had to learn about the intricacies of show jumping.

Both young stallions we’re quick learners and, like so many Morgans, had a natural inclination to be bold and careful jumpers. The first year we had them at our farm in Strafford, Vermont, we focused on general fitness and training them to understand the many intricacies of various types of jumping. I delegated to Lynn Holmes the task of bringing along Taproot CommandPilot, the more natural athlete of the two. Lynn and I shared the task of training Flag Ship. Pilot had a powerful and flamboyant jumping style, snapping his knees up past his chin in exceptionally good form, while Flag Ship, a good jumper, was more normal in his ability.

There are basically six levels of competition in the sport of eventing, starting with beginner novice, then novice, training, preliminary, intermediate, and

advanced. By far, the majority of competitors ride at the three lower levels, beginner novice through training. About 15 percent ride at preliminary or higher. Charlie and I had long and some-



ABOVE: Taproot Command Pilot & Lynn Holmes on the cover of *The Morgan Horse*, November 1993.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Taproot Flag Ship & Denny Emerson; The late Charlie Ross visiting Taproot Yankee Doodle in England.

times “spirited” discussions about the role of Morgans at the upper levels. Charlie was a very competitive personality and he felt that his horses should be able to get to the highest levels while I cautioned him that I felt Morgans were probably best suited to be solid competitors for the base of the sport since most of the upper-level competitors chose either full Thoroughbreds or Thoroughbred/warmblood crosses capable of more easily galloping at the higher speeds required for those levels.

As it turned out, Lynn and Taproot CommandPilot were able to become quite competitive at the preliminary level, jumping around courses of three foot, six inches at big events like Groton House, Bromont, and Green Mountain Horse Association. Flag Ship skipped around beginner novice and novice before Charlie needed him back at Taproot for one of his employees.

Both stallions made lots of friends for the Morgan horse, partly because they were both exceptionally pretty horses, and partly because they stood out as being different in type from most of the other horses in their various divisions. I don't know how far the two might have been able to go because both Charlie and Charlotte Ross's health issues prevented them from continuing to support their bold experiment.

All of this happened about 30 years ago, and it was one of the only instances that I know about when a Morgan breeder made a foray into a riding sport where not many Morgans had been given the chance to prove their abilities.

But, I think, looking back, that Charlie Ross was onto something. While the difficult upper levels of eventing may be better suited to the breeds more associated with galloping, Morgans can be ideal horses for the large majority of riders who, statistically speaking, compete at the beginner novice, novice, and training

levels. Morgans are good in dressage and it's hard to find a Morgan that isn't a capable jumper. Add to this the fact that Morgans tend to be sound, brave, and game.

I don't know if right now somewhere in the United States or abroad there is another Charlie Ross ready to support some of his breeding stock in the sport of eventing, but if there is, I am convinced that the modern Morgan can be ideally suited to a sport which takes advantage of so many of those versatile qualities that we've always associated with the Morgan breed. When I galloped around the Huntington Horse Trials on Taproot Flag Ship all those years ago, even though I was still heavily invested in upper-level Thoroughbreds, I was amazed at what a big ride I had on a smaller horse.

Those two Taproot Farm Morgan stallions from three decades ago gave a hint at possibilities that were never as realized as we might have hoped. I think that Charlie Ross was ahead of his time. He did not live long enough to see his dream played out, but the dream that he had could come true someday.

If the Morgan breed is to grow, some of that growth will have to be in disciplines and styles of riding or driving that expand upon the existing realities. What would it take? One reality, of course, would be the ability to support such an adventure financially. Another reality is for a Morgan breeder to share Charlie's mindset, that Morgan horses can excel in a sport where you don't see many Morgans.

The horses are out there. Whether the trainers and riders needed to produce them are also there remains to be seen. Right now, there are big Morgan breeding farms capable of sending a youngster or two to some good eventing trainer, and doing just that could open new doors for Morgans and create new opportunities. ■