

# Revelations from My First Travels to Grand National

By Denny Emerson



One October evening in 2018, my friend Ted Niboli and I were sitting in the stands of the Oklahoma Fairgrounds Coliseum watching that night's classes. I fell into conversation with those sitting in the same section. In the seats in front of us was a family from Calgary, Alberta, and beside me, to my left, a mother and daughter from Miami, Florida. The next evening my neighbors in the stands were two women from San Diego, California, and a girl in riding clothes from Bangor, Maine. If you take a map of Canada and the United States and draw two straight

lines, one from Calgary to Miami, the other from Bangor to San Diego, they form a giant "X" across the country, each line representing about 3,000 miles.

That visual image summarizes the immense draw exerted on Morgan horse lovers by the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show® and, to me, a Vermonter with a parochial view that assumed the center of the Morgan universe to be New England, a pivotal moment in my comprehension of how far the breed has come.

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**ABOVE:** "The National," then. "Morgans are still Morgans, just as much so now as when I first saw that brown Morgan stallion trotting toward me in Northampton, 70 years ago next summer." Pictured is George Gobel famously winning the trotting race in 1958, driven by Harry Andre for owner Connie Barton (photo © W. Patriquin).



Sixty-five years earlier, in July of 1953, my mother drove Jack Baker and me the 23 miles south on old Route 5 from our house in Greenfield, Massachusetts, to the entrance of the Three County Fairgrounds in Northampton, Massachusetts, home of “The National,” as New England Morgan was known in those days.

Jack and I went down into the fairgrounds and the first thing we heard was yelling and cheering from the old bleachers set beside an oval racetrack where a half-mile harness race was in full swing. We watched a brown stallion far in front of the other horses, driven by a man in white and green silks. The pair flashed by us on their way to the wire. We later learned that we’d watched Ted Davis and Upwey Ben Don.

In those days, New England was the epicenter of the Morgan universe, but sitting in that coliseum in Oklahoma City 65 years later I was struck by two competing realities. While much had changed, most of what made the 12-year-old me fall in love with Morgans hadn’t changed at all. The obvious and outward differences are many. I talked with some of my contemporaries about this and these thoughts are a compendium of their ideas and my own.

It starts with some simple facts. The Oklahoma show is bigger, richer, better organized, more professional, more user-friendly, less weather dependent, and is more of a destination event. At Grand National there are lots of adjoining indoor rings, a huge trade fair, food booths, music, something for every taste and discipline. The class list is enormous, maintaining such old standbys as park saddle, park harness, equitation, English and Western pleasure, and in-hand, while adding reining classes, dressage tests, show jumping, carriage driving, and the increasingly popular Ranch Division.

Most of the riders and drivers of 50 or 60 years ago were not

as polished as they are today, good horsemen, but more rough and ready. These modern riders have had lessons, and it shows. I watched a big saddle seat equitation class of kids 13 years old and under and I guarantee you that they rode better than most adults did back in my day, and that’s just one example.

In the 1950s, the typical Morgan horse was a smaller, chunkier, little breed than now, averaging perhaps 14.1 to 15.1 hands high, with thicker necks and less refinement in the throat latch, and less freedom of movement out of stifles, hocks, and shoulders. Today’s version is slightly taller, perhaps 14.3 to 15.3, higher headed, prettier horses with more ease and range of motion. Say what you want, most of these changes have taken place without the sacrifice of the distinctive Morgan look.

My own history with Morgans, Arabians, Thoroughbreds, warmbloods, and Irish crosses has mainly been with outdoor sports rather than aimed toward the show ring, but going to Oklahoma was an eye-opening experience for me. I came away with a strong sense that it is the show world with all its financial resources that is holding the Morgan breed together—an economic hub of the wheel from which other spokes emerge.

To grow the breed, to sustain its viability into the future, the key is to preserve that central show ring core while developing more sport type Morgan uses around the edges. We can use horses with exactly the same breeding as those performing victory passes in the main ring in Oklahoma City and ride them

on 100-mile trail rides, perform dressage tests, herd cattle, go on fox hunts, and drive in marathons.

Morgans are still Morgans, just as much so now as when I first saw that brown Morgan stallion trotting toward me in Northampton, 70 years ago next summer. ■



Grand National, today. “These modern riders have had lessons, and it shows.” Pictured is the parade of 2015 equitation world champions led by Ada Johnson riding King-Lehr’s Friar Tuck (photo © Howard Schatzberg).