

The Seed Corn Concept

By Denny Emerson



About 30 years ago, I was training for two months at a dressage barn in northern Germany, in the tiny village of Tasdorf, near the city of Neuminster. The owner and head trainer at Stall Tasdorf was named Walter Christensen, and

although he was German, he was the coach of the Swedish Olympic dressage team.

I asked Walter about the various German warmblood breeds of horses, and he explained that originally various types of warm-

ABOVE: The famous artist's image of original Morgan type (photo © Denlore Photography).



bloods evolved in the different areas of Germany. If you were in one geographical area you might see Holsteiner horses, in another section there would be Hanoverians, or Oldenburgs, or Westphalians, or Trakehners. These were all lumped under the designation of “warmblood,” but they had generally different pedigrees and they had distinctive regional types.

This regional differentiation came about because in those days the mares and the stallions had to be close enough so that you could ride or drive one to the other for mating, so certain features became somewhat fixed. The big change began after World War II. As the German roads and highways began to be repaired and reconstructed it became possible to use horse trailers to transport mares further distances to be bred to higher quality stallions.

Simultaneously, there was far less demand to use horses for farm work and transportation, and a far greater demand for lighter-boned and more refined horses for sport. The new emphasis led to the importation of Thoroughbred stallions from England and Ireland to cross with the heavier German mares to create lighter and more athletic modern sport horses.

The big revolution came about when it became possible to breed using fresh cooled semen, and later, frozen semen. Once that happened, the differences between and among the various German breeds became more blurred.

Walter explained that the normal breeding formula was to use lighter stallions on heavier mares to create better athletes for modern dressage and show jumping. What began to happen, though, was that because most buyers preferred the lighter and more refined horses, there were fewer and fewer of the old fashioned, broader backed, heavier mares to use as foundation breeding stock. Walter called those older type mares “seed corn mares.” He explained that the only way to replenish the supply of seed corn mares was to breed an old-fashioned type of mare to an old-fashioned type of stallion, but most breeders did not want to do that because the heavier type horses were not as readily saleable on the open market, nor did they fetch as high a price.

All of this led to an inevitable and gradual lessening of the differences between the various German warmblood breeds as the seed corn mares began to disappear from the general breeding population.

How any or all of this may or may not relate to the modern Morgan breed is up for question. There has always been just one Morgan breed, with every horse descending from one original stallion, Figure, who was foaled in 1789 and died in 1821. In the 200

years since Figure founded the breed, there have been any number of subtypes within the breed, but not to the point that a knowledgeable horse person couldn't look at a Morgan horse and know just by looking at it that it was a Morgan.

What happened in Germany, and, to a larger degree, what is happening in the various European countries with warmblood breeds in general, might create a template for what could happen within the Morgan breed. Does the modern Morgan breed need to preserve seed corn stallions and mares so that the distinctive Morgan type does not disappear? All breeds of horses change and evolve over time to reflect the needs and wants of each new generation of riders, drivers, and breeders, as well as evolving competitive disciplines. What happened to some of the German breeds could just as easily happen to the modern Morgan horse

if usage becomes of supreme importance while type becomes less of a breeding consideration.

If losing traditional breed traits in horses is troublesome, that old saying “You ain't seen nothing yet” is much more pronounced when we talk about changes in dog breeds. The gestation period from breeding to

whelping for dogs is only about two months as compared to 11 to 12 months for horses. Because so many more generations are packed into shorter time frames with dogs than with horses, a dog breed can get transformed out of all recognition in 20 to 30 years. As just one example, I talked to people who say that the modern collie has little in common with the collies in the 1954 television series, *Lassie*.

The substantive changes in the various European warmblood breeds that have taken place during the 70 years or so since the end of World War II is ample demonstration of how dramatically breeds can change to the point that the original breed virtually disappears. With longtime friends, every year I personally tour Morgan farms in the New England area where I live. Unlike many contemporary breeds of horses, livestock, or domestic pets, I have firsthand knowledge that the Morgan breed has “seed corn” stock for outcrossing. But once the seed corn is gone, there becomes no place within a breed to get it back. Which leads back to old Figure, and what he gave to the Morgan breed. Is this something to treasure and to preserve? How modernized should the Morgan breed become? This isn't a hypothetical question, because it is actually affecting other breeds before our eyes. I am personally a fan of the highly athletic and functional modern Morgans I have met, but should we be giving a place in our herds to preserve, as Walter Christensen suggests, the “seed corn” blood of our breed? ■

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