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DEB & DOUG M'GONIGLE

Channeling Morgan disposition into the dressage discipline.

By Karin Weight



Deb M'Gonigle will tell you that the three most important attributes of a horse are “disposition, disposition, and disposition.” As a trainer, she always looks for a horse that wants to please, wants to work, and, as breeders, she and husband Doug always strive to produce a foal with that willing attitude. The Morgan horse is their breed of choice for many reasons, but especially because the Morgans they have worked with have, without exception, displayed a disposition that makes owning and training them so rewarding.

When you pull into Doug and Deb M'Gonigle's Mohawk Farm in northern Illinois, you realize that this is not a fancy outfit built to impress visitors. It is small, but well-organized for the well-being

of the horses in their care with roomy turnouts. It is neat, clean, well-maintained, and is invariably decorated according to the current holiday or season. “When we built our indoor arena,” Deb explains, “we could only afford one the size of the small arena used for the lowest level horses. Now we appreciate the small size. As our horses learn the more difficult movements in this constricted space, they find it easy to perform with great expression at shows.”

Enter and, unless Deb is out on the trail, you will probably find her working a horse, giving a lesson, grooming, or cleaning a stall. Doug works full-time as a tool and die maker but when he's home he'll probably be training a young horse or engaged in the daily barn chores. Deb states, “The two of us work as a team, supporting

ABOVE: Deb and Doug M'Gonigle with Forsite Renoir and Montana Jubilee at Morgan Grand National in 2017 (photo © *The Morgan Horse*).



LEFT TO RIGHT: Deb M'Gonigle and the horse that taught her so much, the unregistered Morgan mare Black Magic, at a county fair in 1980; Doug M'Gonigle winning Barrel Racing at the 1986 Jubilee Regional riding Moreeda Top Honor (photo © Jack Schatzberg).

each other in every way.”

Deb was not raised around horses, and neither parent had any interest in them, but she is positive that she was destined to have a life centered around dressage and Morgans. Raised in Wheeling, Illinois, she lived across the street from a cattle ranch and she remembers that at a mere four years of age she wandered to the ranch when they were hosting a rodeo. She was so fascinated by the horses that she never heard her parents desperately calling for her, and they were in a panic by the time they found her intently watching the goings on. Around this same time she discovered Marguerite Henry's *Album of Horses* at her grandmother's home and she dog-eared two pages: one displaying a Lipizzan and the other showing a Morgan police horse.

Some years later, a neighboring family bought their daughter a horse and Deb would go with her to watch jumping lessons. Deb was allowed to hang out at the stables observing lessons, grooming, and occasionally even having the privilege of riding. Deb's mother always discouraged her burgeoning interest, telling her that she would have to marry a rich man if she wanted horses. That disheartened the young girl but she never gave up her dream of someday having a horse of her own.

Deb's dreams turned into reality when the family moved to a small farm in Woodstock, Illinois, and a rodeo cowboy decided to buy a truck from her father. The cowboy didn't have cash, but Deb's father agreed to take two horses in payment. Deb says on the first day the horses came home, “My dad required a toughness and sense of responsibility in me. He said that no one else in the family wanted horses, that they were mine and mine alone. That

meant that no matter if I were tired or sick, I was responsible to take care of them, that if ever someone else had to feed and water my horses they would be gone the very next day. Well, there were days when I was sick, but nonetheless I would feed and water them and clean their stalls twice a day. Never once did someone else do my chores.”

One of these was Black Magic, a beautiful unregistered black Morgan with a white star. Deb enjoyed both of her new horses, but Magic was the realization of her dreams. Only 14.2 hands and barely green-broke, the young Morgan was willing to do anything her gutsy-but-inexperienced rider asked of her. Deb can only shake her head as she remembers jumping barbed wire fences and galloping down the highway trying to outrun cars. Her most fool-hardy incident was when the teenager, who had never learned to swim, rode her little mare down into the deep waters of an abandoned quarry. It never occurred to her that Magic had never been in water and apparently it never occurred to the young Morgan to balk. Somehow the mare's efforts kept both heads out of the water until she could clamber up the steep bank. “God looks after fools and children,” Deb says now, adding, “that horse taught me so much. She was my first teacher and a very good one too. She was forever saving my ass!”

Deb was a talented artist who had excellent instruction when she lived in Wheeling, but art at her new school in Woodstock was taught by a coach who had no training or skills in the subject. Deb met her future husband, Doug M'Gonigle, at that school. He shared her talent and the two of them were so proficient that they were asked to devise a new art program. The young teenagers

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ABOVE: The two stallions who are the foundation horses behind the Forsite prefix, Ravenscroft Renown (left) and Rapidan Imperial (right), Doug M'Gonigle, whip (photos © O'Connell, Howard Schatzberg).

conceived a curriculum from scratch that is still in effect at the high school today.

A city boy, Doug spent two weeks each summer at a Boy Scout camp where he used all his spending money on an optional horseback riding program. He was delighted to have a girlfriend who not only shared his love for art, but also had horses of her own. He spent as much time as possible learning riding skills on Magic

and her other horse. "I didn't have a fancy saddle or expensive outfits, so Magic placed better in events where the judging was objective. Doug was a daredevil dirt bike rider so barrel racing and other speed events were right up his alley."

Although Deb was serious about her art, she soon realized that her life's calling was to work with horses. She was able to get a job at a racetrack lay-up facility where the hours were long,



THE HOMEBREDS

TOP ROW: Forsite Renoir is a signature horse for Deb. She competes with him in both Classical and Western Dressage (photos © John Borys, Howard Schatzberg);
BOTTOM ROW: Forsite Renowns Corazon, the young horse Deb is bringing along (photos © John Borys).

the pay was minimal, and the work was hard, but she learned so much about horse care. She quit that position only when an opportunity arose for employment with John Krenger, who bred and trained Trakehners for jumping. There she learned to handle stallions, supervise breeding, and care for the mares and foals, all skills she would need when she and Doug started their own business.

Krenger leased part of his barn to two serious dressage riders, women who were taking lessons from Karl Mikolka at Tempel Farm, the former head rider at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. Deb traces fascination for dressage back to those two women who took her under their wings. Through them, she had the opportunity to apply for much sought-after lessons with Mikolka, and the knowledge she gained from him over the years was essential to her success.

One of Doug's friends told him of a Morgan colt that was for sale because the owners wanted a filly. The young M'Gonigles were captivated by three-month-old Ravenscroft Renown (Applevale Replica x Coldspring Alpha). Deb and Doug now had three Morgans: Magic, who was now a little long in the tooth; Renown, who was just a colt; and a nine-year-old gelding, Moreeda Top Honor, known by the barn name "Toby." Deb was ready to take serious lessons and Toby was the obvious mount, but he was a barrel racer who had no talent nor desire for dressage work. Nonetheless, she would just have to do the best with what she had, and although Toby was never successful she learned much from lessons on him. Patience became her password.

In the meantime, Renown was developing into a beautiful young stallion who met each challenge with enthusiasm. Because she had no access to an indoor arena at the time, Deb's lessons



LEFT TO RIGHT: Student Courtney Weller on Forsite Zephyr (photo © John Borys); Anne Sushko, far right, rode the M'Gonigle's veteran Morgan dressage competitor, Montana Jubilee, for her Century Ride. Anne was the first technical delegate and Jubilee was the first Morgan paired in a century ride.

were limited to days when the ground wasn't icy, which meant she could not ride much in the Midwestern winter. Nevertheless, by the time he was six and seven years old, Deb was showing him in dressage, Doug was driving him, and Renown was also winning classes in halter, Western pleasure, trail, hunter, equitation, and barrel racing.

The owners of Applevale Replica invited Deb and Doug to come to California. The successful Renown was his last living son and they wanted to copy photos of him. During their barn tour, trainer Doug Warnick brought Rapidan Imperial (Windy Hill Maestro x Lippitt Ethan Georgia) out of his stall and Deb says her first thought was "I want this horse," not realizing that she had said it aloud. "I didn't even know that he was a stallion, didn't know his breeding or his training, just that this was the horse I had always dreamed about." As it turned out, he was nine years old, had shown in park saddle without a lot of success, and was now being re-trained for Western pleasure but was not coming along well. Deb asked to see him turned out, and he displayed the fantastic, floaty trot that any dressage rider hopes for but seldom sees. The M'Gonigles were sure they would never be able to afford him, and though his price was very fair, it was still far more than they had available. They were told they could take him and make monthly payments. They leased Imperial for ten years before finally becoming owners of the horse they had competed and stood at stud with such success.

Shown at Prix St. Georges, Rapidan Imperial was the first of the four horses that Deb trained to the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) levels. Just like Renown, Imperial was shown

in many disciplines, and the two stallions represented the epitome of Morgan versatility. These two horses became the basis of the M'Gonigles's breeding program, and most of the Morgans with their Forsite prefix trace to one or both of them.

Since those early days, both Deb and Doug became involved in carriage driving, first self-taught and then taking annual clinics from Larry Poulin, who drove Kennebec horses to international success. At one clinic, Poulin put his arms over the necks of their two stallions and announced to one and all that "these are what driving horses should be."

Unfortunately, carriage driving opportunities have diminished in their area, but there has been an increase in dressage shows. Deb trains and gives lessons on many horse breeds, but she has become known as the local expert on Morgan dressage. Besides Rapidan Imperial she has trained and shown Montana Jubilee CH (Supreme Creation x Mortana Lila) through Prix St. Georges and homebreds Forsite Zephyr (Rapidan Imperial x Clonmel Goldn Trophy) and Forsite Renoir GCH (Ravenscroft Renown x Forsite A'Capella) through Intermediare I.

It is to be noted that although the M'Gonigles have worked with mares and geldings, their success has been with Morgan stallions. Deb explains that the stallions tend to have more power and more expression and that they lack the mood swings that can sometimes crop up in mares. "The Spanish Riding School only uses stallions in their performances. The old masters understood the inherent quality of stallions." She stresses that any one of their stallions can breed a mare in the morning and show that afternoon; good Morgan genes and careful training make them entirely

FOCUS ON PROFESSIONALS DEB & DOUG M'GONIGLE

trustworthy. Deb doesn't hesitate to allow her students to take lessons on her upper-level stallions to learn the feel of a correct flying change or canter pirouette, and invariably the students appreciate the obedient and responsive mounts.

There is nothing but praise about the M'Gonigle team from their clients and also from show officials. Jenny Carol, organizer of the National Dressage Pony Cup, says she always looks forward to seeing the M'Gonigles at the show as they are great competitors, willing to help show management, and encouraging to other competitors, especially the newcomers.

Anne Sushko points out that in these fast-paced and ultra-competitive days, Deb and Doug care more about happy horses and happy people than they do about high scores or blue ribbons. Anne is a USEF technical delegate for dressage who first met the M'Gonigles at a dressage show in Wisconsin. It was spring, and the few stallions at the show were full of themselves. She had been told to expect three more stallions, but as time passed they had not appeared. She asked the show manager if they had scratched, and he replied "No, one just passed by you on the way to the warmup." Sushko had noticed the attractive, well-behaved horse go by but had no idea it was a stallion. Sushko says she continued to see the M'Gonigles at shows over the next few years, always with incredibly well-behaved horses. She was impressed not just because of their obvious expertise at training, but also because they were always so pleasant. At one point she mentioned that she was waiting for her own horse to put on some years so that she could perform a Century Ride (a dressage custom when the ages of the horse and rider add up to at least 100 years). They mentioned that Montana Jubilee would turn 30 the year she turned 70 and offered to let her use him for the ride. Sure enough, she took some lessons on Montana and discovered the joy of riding a well-trained schoolmaster. She had never before ridden canter pirouettes or flying changes, but Deb and Montana gave her that experience and Sushko has since purchased her first Morgan.

Sushko noted that Deb and Doug "care for their horses daily, provide a well-rounded and diverse training program for every horse, and allow their horses to be horses rather than spend all their time confined in stalls. They depend on training, not gadgets, and want to share their love of the horse with each and every person they meet. They bring joy to many."

Lisa Isaacson is a longtime Morgan owner and dressage enthusiast. A few years ago, she purchased Sylrtomoros Royal Dandy (Anda's Royal Marshal x Sylrtomoros Coal Minersda). As she lives in Minnesota, she decided to have him shipped directly to Mohawk Farm where the new gelding could receive dressage training and she could take monthly lessons on him. Soon she decided that this horse would not work out for her: they didn't get along, his gaits wreaked havoc on her body, and he leaned on the reins. She wanted to sell him but Deb disagreed, saying "When you are ready, a teacher appears. Just wait and you will see that this horse will be good for you." Sure enough, after six months of training, Deb had transformed the horse and she gave Isaacson lessons on Montana, Zephyr, and even Renoir to improve her riding. Isaacson happily recounts

that recently her "miserably uncomfortable" horse now rides like a luxury vehicle, and she recently rode him 30 miles without the slightest soreness.

Courtney Weiler finds Deb to be "incredibly warm, welcoming, and knowledgeable." Weiler has taken lessons from her for two years and this year won the AMHA Open Competition Championship and the Morgan Dressage Association Award of Excellence for second level dressage on the schoolmaster Forsite Zephyr. She says that it is extremely difficult to find an instructor who is willing to let students ride their upper-level horses, "Deb wants to give you all the tools in her toolbox, and that is the kind of instructor I want and need." She is planning to show Zephyr third level this year and intends to continue up the levels with Morgans.

Asked what has been the most difficult circumstances that she needs to overcome, Deb says that her location makes training challenging. She and Doug had an indoor arena built so that the footing is always good, but it is not heated and winters in the northern Midwest mean that many days are so cold that it would be abusive to work a horse. She would like instruction on training the Grand Prix movements. Although she has managed to train passage, piaffe remains difficult without experienced eyes on the ground. Unfortunately, the trainers she would like to use all spend winters in Florida. By the time they return, the show season has started and its time to refine the levels where the horses are at rather than training them to move up to the next levels.

Despite the challenges, Deb has had unusual competitive success in dressage, accumulating a plethora of championships and high point awards, many at the FEI levels. She has made numerous passes in Oklahoma City sporting world championship tricolors, has won Morgan Dressage Association Awards of Excellence, AMHA Open Competition Awards, and United States Dressage Federation All-Breeds year-end championships. A strong proponent of showing smaller horses and ponies, she has ridden to championships at the National Dressage Pony Cup. Recently she has started showing in Western Dressage, resulting in even more Morgan World Championships. She attributes most of her success to the very hard work and perseverance that she learned as a teenager and the patience that came along a little later. Neither she nor Doug ever had anything handed to them and they have learned to appreciate that. But most of all, they appreciate their horses, those kind, willing, smart Morgans that they feel so lucky to have been able to work with.

In the future, the M'Gonigles plan to continue their work breeding sensible, sound Morgans that can be used in any discipline, but always based in the principles and methods of classical dressage. They are particularly excited about Forsite Renowns Corazon (Ravenscroft Renown x Forsite A'Cappella, a Rapidan Imperial daughter), a promising young stallion who was successful at second level in 2021, his first year of competition. They will continue doing whatever they can to make learning a pleasure for their clients and their horses, training outside and on trails whenever conditions permit, eschewing gadgets and shortcuts in favor of time and patience. Judging from their past experiences, their future looks bright indeed. ■