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FLYING ARROWS AND POUNDING HOOVES—MORGANS IN MOUNTED ARCHERY

By Heather Dilts-Baiano

A CHANGE OF PACE

For many show horses, retirement comes with fields of well-earned freedom, relaxation, some light riding, and long, lazy days. After over a decade of successful showing in sport horse classes, including the 2012 Grand National Low Working Hunter classes, and becoming Grand National Reserve Champion in the Hunter Hack Finals class, retirement felt right for my Morgan, Northline Rainmaker. It lasted barely a year.

Within that time, I found myself looking for something to pacify “Raine” as he was simply unhappy, depressed, and starting trouble over the fence. One night after a frustrating ride, I sat at my computer scrolling through equestrian events. I saw a video of

a young man galloping his horse down a wooded path, shooting arrows and hitting targets with ease. Wait. Mounted archery is a sport?

Quickly I googled mounted archery in my country and found the national association. The kind person I corresponded with was from my province and put me in touch with another person in my area. This person, Kendall Goddard, President of the Golden Horseshoe Mounted Archery Club, became a mentor and coach for Raine and me on our journey in mounted archery. I say journey because I had no idea the hard work and long hours of practice headed our way, but my Morgan proved to be the perfect partner for this adventure.

ABOVE: Hannah Stern and Asgaard Jubilee Mist (photo © Douglas Herring).



Hannah Stern and Asgaard Jubilee Mist (photo © Douglas Herring).



Airianna Rich and Agate Babydoll.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Mounted archery is an art form as old as our partnership with the mighty horse and takes dedication, perseverance, and a special partner to do it well. Some horse archers start as ground archers, where others start out as riders. There is a discussion where some believe it is harder to learn to ride than to learn archery, but as with any art form, it takes time to do it well.

To understand why Morgans are so suitable for mounted archery, one must understand the basics of the sport itself. There is more than just a bow, arrows, and a horse that make the sport work. I learned there are three main international associations covering this ancient sport, the International Horseback Archery Alliance (IHAA), the World Federation of Equestrian Archery (WFEA), and the World Horseback Archery Federation (WHAF). Each of the associations has their own standards and missions, but all wish to promote and develop the sport worldwide, as well as exhibit its endless benefits for both horse and rider.

Once a country joins IHAA, the country's mounted archery governing body becomes an affiliate organization of IHAA and appoints a representative. The IHAA has representatives all over the world. The WFEA was created from the original Kassai system by Lajos Kassai. He created the system, taught it to his students, then traveled the world certifying tracks and judges. These judges are called WFEA judges (they can be considered representatives), and they can certify other WFEA judges and tracks all over the world. The WHAF mission is "to utilize horseback archery as a means of sport, education, and cultural preservation." The association created a Horseback Archer's Charter to organize the sport and properly preserve the ancient tradition of horseback archery. Each country also has their own national organizations.

I then found myself in the depths of discovering different bows, arrows, draws, and tracks. Horse bows are used in this sport, they are smaller and lighter than regular recurve bows. Arrows are lightweight, with quivers being a choice of hip, back, or shoulder, among others. Saddles are a personal preference too. From different cultures and ancient wartime strategies come the various types of tracks (where the horse runs) and draw styles (the way you load and release the arrow). Each style of draw and track have their own pros and cons. There is the thumb draw, the Mediterranean (three finger) draw, Slavic, and pinch draw, among others. For tracks, there are just as many styles as draws, some emphasizing speed and accuracy, others emphasizing various distances with different types of shots, but all use various strategies from ancient times.

So, what makes the Morgan breed such an ideal mounted archery partner? What does the Morgan have to offer this sport? I gathered fellow Morgan mounted archers from the United States, Canada, and Australia to help me answer these questions.

QUALITIES OF THE MOUNTED ARCHERY MORGAN

No matter the country, all mounted archers agreed, a willingness to please, smooth gaits (which make it easier to shoot arrows and line up shots), as well as a steady and level-headed temperament were all qualities Morgans bring to the sport.

Leah Borders, from the United States, who rides Let's Get Byzy, says the mounted archery Morgan needs to be "brave, willing, forward, adventurous, and eager to please." These qualities seem to be found in Morgans in large amounts and suit the requirements of going to strange places, going down different tracks, keeping calm while arrows fly, and keeping focused on their job. The demands of mounted archery don't seem to cause Morgans to bat an eye, thanks to the "let's do this" attitude of the breed. The natural intelligence of Morgans shines through as well, but you better think quick and know how to keep things interesting for Morgans. As Airianna Rich, rider of Agate Baby Doll (owned by Susie Weiss), also from the United States says, "They are super smart and intelligent, so they pick the idea up quickly."

A fellow mounted archer, Melissa Guest, from western Australia, seems to agree. She rides her Morgan, Hodgson Park Buckingham, "Buck," in displays and rallies. Guest says, "I am 72, but Buck and I still enjoy horse archery rallies. We mix it up with Working Equitation and lots of bush riding. You have to with a Morgan, the more variety you present them with, the happier they are." Guest also mentions Buck can get bored after doing several runs, so she has learned to keep his interest by mixing activities. This isn't too difficult as it proves how talented this versatile breed can be.

Another quality Morgans have in abundance which serves them well in this sport was mentioned by U. S. resident Hannah Stern, owner of Asgaard Jubilee Mist. She says, "They also have a natural curiosity and are very interested in any new activity... as anyone who has tried to fix a fence with a Morgan in the paddock will tell you, they are always trying to 'help' with anything and everything!"

Canadian Max Souter, owner and rider of "Acorn," brings up an interesting point. "I think the qualities are the same as those the U. S. Cavalry was looking for when they selected the Morgan as a mount, the perfect light cavalry horse that will go through anything, work with an eagerness, be solid, bombproof, and hardy, and not be high maintenance. I thought right away Acorn would come to it naturally and I was right. It's almost like taking the pinnacle of cavalry breeds in the United States back to where it all started, it just makes so much sense," Souter says.

MOUNTED ARCHERY TRAINING TECHNIQUES FOR YOUR MORGAN

For most, training involves introducing the Morgan to the equipment (bows, arrows, targets, and tracks), getting the horse accustomed to the sound of shooting arrows and hitting targets, and the motion of shooting. Borders says mounted archery Morgans need to get used to objects swinging above their heads and within their line of sight. Such objects would include bows and arrows being removed from quivers. All this training occurs before the archer even sits on the horse. Once the Morgan is accustomed to the sights and sounds of archery, the archer mounts up and repeats the process in the saddle, gradually working from a standstill, to walk, trot, and canter (gallop).

Rich advises, "Just take your time and be consistent. Introduce the bow and arrows and quiver on the ground. They need to be



Heather Dilts-Baiano and Northline Rainmaker
(photos by Breanne Amatangelo & Kirstyn Smith).



Melissa Guest and Hodgson Park Buckingham.

confident and comfortable with the equipment. Then, fire near them until they are desensitized to it. Then, so as not to take any chances, again introduce the equipment once mounted.” By the time all this training has taken place, a strong bond and trust will have formed between Morgan and archer, a bond that will only continue to grow. Part of the mounted archery equation is being a good archer, the other part is having a good horse. To Souter, it is important to have a horse trained to be sensitive to leg and body aids, as well as a horse that is not easily spooked. Souter says his training with Acorn was “lackluster.” His Morgans were so easy to desensitize to the equipment and noises he did most of it in one day. Morgans are simply easy to train. Souter says he finds Acorn and his younger brother to be two of the “smartest horses I’ve had or worked with.” (Souter is in the process of DNA confirmation of Acorn’s parentage for registration purposes.)

Morgans are smart and very enthusiastic. Even if the archer is trained to be an expert archer, the horse needs to be solidly trained to accept archery equipment and to run without any rider direction. Stern agrees that developing solid, steady gaits and navigation “with guidance from the seat and legs” is incredibly important. Stern advises, “Morgans have a tendency to give 110 percent in everything they do, and that extra enthusiasm can translate to extra speed very quickly if rein contact is removed. So, taking the time to really lay down foundations and make sure your mount is solid and responsive before adding the archery element is key.”

CONFORMATION AND OTHER ATTRIBUTES NEEDED FOR A MOUNTED ARCHERY PARTNER

For many mounted archers, they don’t have a particular ideal conformation in mind, but a smooth, steady-moving Morgan is desirable. Although Souter prefers a medium to smaller-sized horse with a shorter back, the Morgan’s mentality is far more important to him than conformation. Stern believes Morgans

with strong hindquarters, steady gaits, and the ability to balance themselves without contact would be beneficial, as there is little guidance from the rider.

Needless to say, a Morgan with correct conformation will avoid interfering and have a smooth way of moving. Bravery and willingness are also needed on the Morgan’s part, and many hours of ground archery practice are necessary on behalf of the rider. Horse and human must have unbreakable trust in each other because, for most of the time, the reins aren’t being held as the rider is looking around and shooting at targets.

Stern believes the Morgan’s natural curiosity lends itself well to accepting new stimuli (like bows, arrows, and targets) and new activities with ease. She says, “Morgans are so people-oriented they really want to be there with you figuring it all out!” Stern adds that a Morgan who is curious and accepting of new stimuli will have an easier time acclimating to the excitement of a competition atmosphere.

SKILLS OF THE RIDER

Any riding skill level can take part in mounted archery and there are levels of competition for everyone from walk-trot to canter. The key to success, however, is practice. It may surprise some to hear ground archery is necessary to be a better archer in the saddle, but techniques can be perfected on the ground before you attempt them on your Morgan. “Of course, you also need to devote lots of time both in and out of the saddle to hone your archery skills, too!” Stern concurs.

It is a common and accepted theme for mounted archery that trust in one’s horse provides a huge advantage. Souter says, “The clearer you can keep your mind for the shot, the better your accuracy is, and a familiar horse is one less thing to plague your mind while you’re galloping down a track not looking where you’re going. This ties in well with confidence in your own riding and shooting abilities too.”

The archer needs a balanced seat in the two-point position, a good seat, and solid leg aids. The archer must also be able to ride without reins or be comfortable with very little contact through the rein while riding. Although she has never competed in mounted archery, Borders used to archery hunt. However, this doesn't mean she found adding an equine partner easy. The challenge of hitting a target while moving is real.

WHAT DOES MOUNTED ARCHERY OFFER BEYOND THE THRILL OF BULLSEYES AND SPEED?

Simple answer? So much. For the rider, the sport of mounted archery offers an increased self-confidence, improved riding ability, a continuing increase in hand-eye coordination, speed control and balance, as well as spreading cultural knowledge.

My fellow horse archers explained the benefits they've experienced. "I would have to say [the benefit of mounted archery is] increasing the trust of your horse," Borders says. "You have to trust them to not veer off or stop or bolt because your hands are full with the bow and arrow."

Rich adds, "Confidence, at least. I find it is just fun and another great way to spend time with my Morgan."

"What I enjoy most is that it's like a meditation for me," Stern says. "It is an activity that really keeps you immersed in the present moment, where you are striving for calm and focus, both in your shots and your riding, as you fly along together."

It's not just the rider that benefits from participating in mounted archery, the horse develops as well. Morgans love having a job, especially if it fosters communication that leads to strengthening the rider/horse bond. Additionally, being a "war pony" can be a breath of fresh air for some Morgans needing a change a pace from the show ring.

About this "exhilarating and exciting" sport, Guest says, "This can be a game changer for both rider and horse." She says it is beneficial in so many ways as it develops very balanced riders who no longer rely on the reins, instead using seat and legs, which takes pressure off the horse. "The rider has to concentrate on shooting those arrows into the target, the horse has his job to do."

TIME TO RIDE

Horseback archery has been used for war, ceremony, and hunting throughout time. Now, this ancient art form has been revived for sport, demonstrations, reenactments, and for simple enjoyment. It is an activity for all ages to experience with their Morgans. As Souter says, "Come on out and try your cavalry horse doing what cavalry horses are meant to do! I'm telling you through experience, your horse was meant to do this!"

By participating in mounted archery, I discovered a different type of connection with my Morgan than what I had in other disciplines. This sport is empowering for both horse and rider, making you strive to be a better rider, a better archer, and a better partner. Though the work is hard and practice unending, the bounty is immense. "Morgans are the horses that can do it all," Stern explains. "It's all about your journey as a team, which can be very rewarding." ■



Leah Borders and Let's Get Byzy.



Max Souter and "Acorn" (photos by James Barbu).