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THE MORGAN BREED ON OTTO-PILOT

An enthusiastic owner puts a charismatic stallion in the thick of open Western competition.

By Stephen Kinney

When, in 2022, Westwind Otto began competing nationally in reined cow horse events, the palomino Morgan stallion attracted a legion of fans, especially through the inexhaustible promotional efforts of his owner and breeder, Bryan Blatt. In 2023, he has been captivating the attention of judges in the high stakes Quarter Horse-dominated sport.

“Otto is now consistently placing in shows,” Bryan says. “He’s

putting his game together. We’ve had some great scores and second and third place finishes.” The season, to date, climaxed with the Open Bridle Reserve Championship at the Utah Reined Cow Horse Futurity on Labor Day weekend.

Reined cow horse competitions are scored events. All horses start with a base score of 70, with deductions on elements for penalties. Otto’s trainer, Jared Ashcraft, says, “[At the Utah futurity]

ABOVE: Jared Ashcraft & Westwind Otto (photo © Rockin’ Horse Photography).

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Jared Ashcraft & Westwind Otto (photo © Rockin' Horse Photography).

we were tied for first place. But in the fence work my cow fell, the other guy's stayed up. That costs a half a point. And cow work is the tie breaker."

Bryan's hope has been to prove a Morgan horse can compete and win in National Reined Cow Horse Association (NRCHA) sponsored events, thus reestablishing America's oldest breed in the larger working Western and ranch world. He says he chose the sport because, "I thought it was a better competition to show the capabilities of the breed. Reined cow horse competition is a combination, it adds cow work to reining. It shows off more of the skills and athleticism of the horses themselves. And it's a fast-growing sport."

Bryan acknowledges that for Morgans to get in the door,

"They have to be cowy. They have to have that sense that cannot be taught to them." He believed from the start that Otto had that. "I thought I had the one and it turns out I was right," he says, adding "...a performance horse has to be a smaller horse. They can't be a 16-hand horse, 14.2 or 14.3 hands is better. A short, coupled back to give athleticism, and the power comes from the butt end. I thought Otto was ideal."

The big name, high-earning trainer Zane Davis was "...open-minded enough to take a Morgan when others wouldn't," Bryan explains about Otto's start last year. Zane focuses on younger horses and the mature stallion is now in training with his friend, Jared Ashcraft.

"I'm a young, up-and-coming trainer and I rely on these



Bryan Blatt & Westwind Otto.

horses,” Jared says. “If he was not going to win, I could not have afforded to take him. I’m brutally honest. I told Bryan in the beginning that this was going to cost a lot of money and we were probably going to get your butts kicked. I mean, that happens to lots of Quarter Horses as well. It’s a tough sport. But I could feel this horse had something to give.”

Jared knew the horse of a different color came with a bit of a stigma attached. “It has felt like a side show. I had heard comments before about what was Zane doing with that horse. And now I’m having the same comments. But the truth is the horse is dang good. People are watching. People are loving him. I’ve had a trainer say to me ‘you’ve made no excuses for that horse. You’ve never said that he’s just a Morgan. You take him out and try to whoop us with this horse.’”

Jared comments that Quarter Horses have been specifically bred over generations for this sport, but sees the Morgan bringing inherent advantages, especially good bone, good feet, and trainability (though he acknowledges that “too smart” is not always a plus). While the Morgan, or any other breed, is unlikely to overtake Quarter Horses in Western sports, he says, “I’ve told people if I was looking for a ranch horse, I’d have one of these any day.”

Bryan, who calls himself a “marketing guy,” says, “my idea is to keep this breed in this market.” He is buoyed by the fact that Kaecee Dollard is aiming two Morgans purchased from his program,

Westwind Tuff Cat and Westwind Uno Mas, toward reined cow horse competition. And Bryan has plans to promote others himself. “It’s my goal to have a number of these horses compete as reined cow horses. I’d like to see other breeders and owners get involved. We can make a market in this area.”

Jared says, “I may be the only cow horse trainer to have three Morgans in his barn. They are the only three Morgans I’ve ever swung a leg over. All three have a natural stop. They are very easy to ride and train. I’ve had many people tell me they are impressed with what we are getting done with this horse. I love this horse, and everybody loves this horse. Otto has a home here as long as Bryan wants to leave him.”

Bryan is in it for the long run. He says, “...2024 won’t be the end of his career. There is a horse in the National Reined Cow Horse Hall of Fame, Morgan cross, and that horse was campaigned until he was 20 years old. We can run Otto for years.”

Which brings us to the subject of 2024. Westwind Otto is qualified for open bridle competition (“those are the big dogs,” Jared notes) at the NRCHA World Show, held in February of next year. “It is our premier event,” Jared explains. “He’s the only Morgan I’m aware of in history to qualify for open bridle at that level, meaning he’s beaten the right number of horses and won enough money. And that is an accomplishment on its own.”

“That’s why I say, ‘Believe in the Breed!’” Bryan declares. ■