

~ PHOTO ESSAY ~

# Dodo Knight

## *The Persona Behind the Pictures*

By Stephen Kinney

When, in September of 1982, I sat down in a fairly shabby office in Hampden, Maine, to start my new job at the regional publication, *Northeast Horseman*, an envelope on my desk became an immediate object of curiosity.

It was nearly bursting with eight by ten custom prints and multiple contact sheets from an unknown equine photographer, also from Maine. Her name was, memorably, Dodo Knight (her father thought her a “rare bird”). In the late 1970s and into the ’80s, a revolution in equine photography was taking place. What had been traditional livestock photos—technical captures of conformation and movement—had morphed into art, especially by the inventive photographers published in Arabian magazines.

The Arab photographers—Jerry Sparagowski, Johnny Johnson, Scott Trees—were shooting images that riveted your attention and arrested viewers emotionally. They were fashion photographers, only their models had four hooves and flying manes.

The treasures in that envelope indicated Dodo Knight had not only mastered the new genre, but given it her own stamp. If the artistic photographs in the Arabian magazines had glamor and style, Dodo’s had, in addition, an intimacy. She took you to the field with a horse dancing in dew on a summer morning, triggered your impulse to touch a velvet nose, made you hold on tight to a stallion in flight. More than mere admiration of physical dimensions, her photos interacted with equine energy.

If I was overly anxious to try out my new titles of Publisher and

**ABOVE:** Dodo Knight meant for photos to tap the emotion of horse lovers. Here the blind stallion Windcrest Splendor babysits weanlings at Carlyle Farm.

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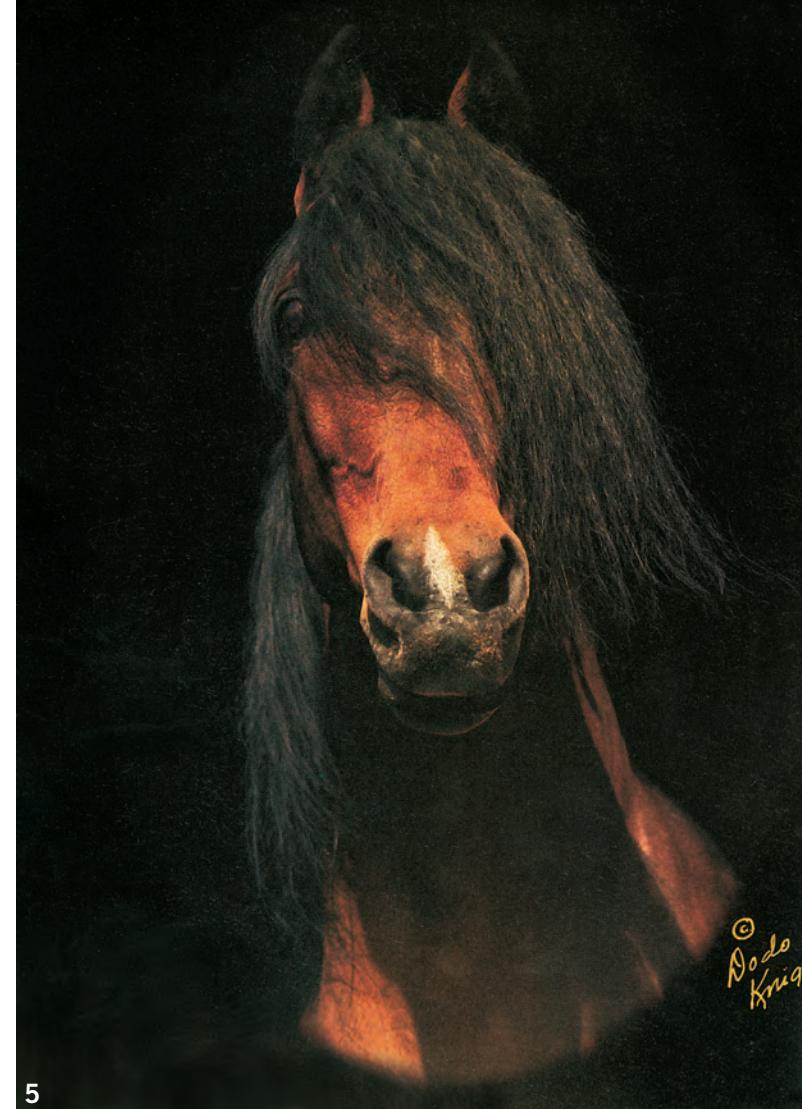
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### —MACHO MORGANS—

Many Morgan stallions are remembered by their Dodo photos.

1. Royal Fleetson; 2. Salem Command; 3. Windcrest Splendor;
4. Elm Hill High Hat; 5. Serenity March Time.

Editor, that bubble quickly burst. Instead my introductory encounter with Dodo Knight turned into a most humbling dressing down. Apparently the photos had been sitting on that desk for a number of months without response. “My contact sheets are my stock-in-trade and I just need them back,” I was told in a not warm and fuzzy tone. That was perhaps the least colorful of the statements she spontaneously unloaded on this unsuspecting stranger. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and a never dull collaboration.

*Northeast Horseman* became rebranded to fill a niche. Its successor, *Show Horse* magazine, aimed to be the first publication to unite the breeds shown in the saddle seat disciplines under one cover. The photography of Dodo Knight became a trademark for the fledgling publication. She was regularly dispatched to shoot front covers. She would visit our advertisers in the summer to capture images for the next season’s stallion promotions. Occasionally I tagged along on these never-a-dull-moment road trips. Her photos would be of multiple breeds, but in the Morgan world she was invited to Rum Brook Farm, Carlyle, Judy Nason Stables, Salem Farm, Elm Hill Farm in its twilight days, Nona O’Brien’s Limerick Farm, and Hillock.

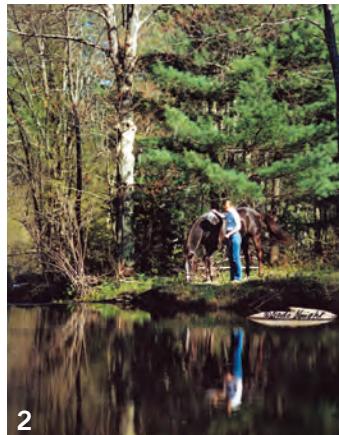
The Orcland Leader son, Elm Hill High Hat, was somewhat forgotten by the mid-’80s. In Dodo’s photo of the 25-year-old at liberty, he was trotting like a young park horse and it resulted in

him booking mares in his final years. Her headshot of Serenity March Time showed one bulging eye of the stallion eerily emerging behind a romantically wild forelock. Most photographers of the era would have airbrushed the mud off his nose. Dodo didn’t. When the picture appeared on the cover of *Show Horse* one reader said, “I just wanted to reach out and rub the dirt off that nose.” Dodo’s decision elicited the desired response. A candid moment of Maxine Snow’s blind stallion, Windcrest Splendor, babysitting two weanlings quite likely created a spike in tissue sales.

Her intensely charged photos were highly successful when used in Morgan farm’s advertising. John McDonald, then resident trainer at Elm Hill, says, “That photo did a lot for [Elm Hill] High Hat and the picture of Royal Fleetson got a lot of attention back to him which I really appreciated. That picture really *was* the horse I knew. The photo of Tedwin Top This with my main man hanging on for dear life—he really wasn’t that bad—but it is the photo that horse is best known for.”

About her mother, daughter Shannon Knight says, “She didn’t take photos of horses for money. She loved horses and used the medium to express how much the animals meant to her. It was an artery directly from her heart. She would have images that came back that were beautiful, but did not satisfy her because they didn’t portray her feelings.”

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### —PEOPLE—

Dodo saw special moments between Morgans and their people, not always when people knew she was taking a photo. **1.** Corrine O'Brien Nelson & Lorien Top Medalist; **2.** Judy Nason & Orcland Bellendon; **3.** Mike Blondin & Tedwin Top This; **4.** Peggy Alderman & Salem Dangerfield.

**H**er product elicited reaction, but at farm shoots her personality also produced emotional response.

At Judy Nason Stables she found an apple orchard in bloom as a potential setting. So, it became necessary to locate and hire a bucket lift to get her the desired angle. Four-thirty a.m. calls were routine to capture the light of the rising sun. At Elm Hill Farm the Means family nephew, John Spencer, wandered onto the property as we were getting horses ready early one morning—and in fairness, he was dressed like a hired farm hand. Trainer John McDonald looked on incredulously as Dodo instructed a member of the family from the manor to find a tractor and mow a hill side she might want to use as a backdrop. But John Spencer never questioned the orders and got the job done. On another shoot she laid under a pickup truck at the bottom of a hill and when she shouted “action” a herd of horses was stampeded toward her through a corridor of carefully choreographed humans as we all held our breath.

The pattern that developed was that I would recommend Dodo for a farm shoot, after which I would get a call from our mutual client with the question, “What were you thinking?” The

three days had been exhausting and demanding and difficult. There was usually a “never again” statement in the conversation. I learned not to panic. About 10 days later, contact sheets would arrive in the client’s mailbox and a second call would come in saying, “We are thrilled, and happy, and love our photos. She’s amazing.”

John McDonald recently recalled the process. “Total exhaustion, very intense, but the result was out of this world. She could create and then capture a moment. She was a complete and total artist.”

Nona O’Brien of Limerick Farm became a close friend, as well as client, of Dodo’s. Nona’s daughter, Corinne O’Brien Nelson, remembers photo shoots on the farm. “We called her ‘the general.’ She’d order us around. She would plot for days. She would have something in mind, but only in her mind. We’d set up platforms so she could get up above the horses and someone was assigned to guard her, sometimes holding on to her with a belt. And then you got the photos and you were like, ‘wow.’ She knew what she was looking for and that was the artist in her. My mother adored her.”

Dodo was not unaware of her unique personality traits. In a

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### —SCENERY—

Pretty images led to sales of stock photos. 1. The pasture at Salem Farm; 2. The Buckeye; 3. Kathy O'Brien Drake & Limerick Lancer; 4. Maxine Snow with Carlyle Day Dream & Carlyle Snafu.

1986 interview in *The Morgan Horse* she said, “It gets very intense on the successful shoot, and I have to go home for a week or so to recharge before I can do it again. And the horse farms don’t want me back for a year. But when I do go back each subsequent session is more productive and more rewarding than the last.”

Given the persona they met at farm shoots, it would have surprised those who hired her to know I also received calls from her in advance of her trips. She never got over her little girl awe that she was now cast as the chronicler of famous equines, visiting the horse farms of her dreams. Her anxiety would be palpable. Getting the actress out of her dressing room and on stage sometimes took handholding.

A few years into our friendship Dodo called me with news she thought I’d love to hear. “I’ve enrolled in an assertiveness training course and I think it’s going to make a big difference.” I paused to summon my native Canadian diplomacy before saying, “Dodo, your customers already find you, umm, intimidating. Are you sure this is a good move?”

“You don’t understand,” she laughed. “Assertiveness is a step down from aggressiveness.” Only Dodo would enroll in an

assertiveness training course to soften, rather than escalate, her public persona.

Dodo’s photos contributed to the art appearing in equine magazines at the time. They were noticed, enjoyed, and effective. But that was not her most significant professional achievement. She did not really make her living charging for farm shoots and having images in breed magazines. She was a successful and doggedly persistent stock photographer.

Every farm shoot came with a condition that the owner sign a model release allowing Dodo to sell her products. Traveling together we saw draft horses being turned out in the early morning and Dodo captured the one-ton creatures at play as fog was lifting off the grass. The doctor who owned them was not keen on signing a form, saying vehemently his word was good enough for his patients, it should be all Dodo needed. However, he got an equally fierce lecture on just how things needed to happen in her world and why, finally signing on the dotted line. Those work horses prancing like park horses subsequently appeared in draft horse magazines, on equine calendars, and in a farrier trade journal.

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### —LIGHT—

Dodo went to great lengths (and put her clients to great efforts) to capture dramatic light. **1.** On snow; **2.** Sunrise; **3.** A darkroom effect; **4.** Storm clouds; **5.** Through a flaxen mane.

Her obsession with sunrises, sunsets, scenery, lifting fog, as well as profoundly touching moments, was because she wanted her photos to appeal not just to the horses' owners, but to a wider audience. She needed pretty pictures.

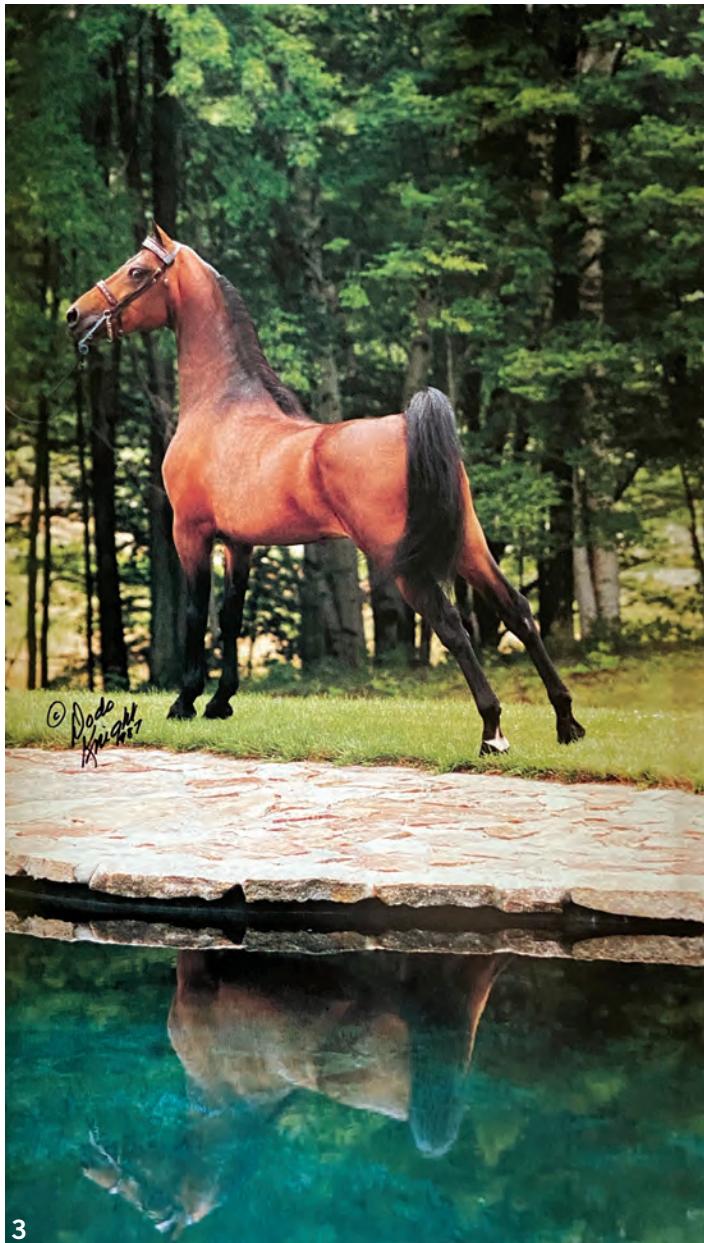
Peggy Alderman quickly came to understand Dodo's aesthetic goals. "I could spot a Dodo photo in a sea of little pictures just by the light. I started using Dodo in 1987 and she was my first exposure to an 'artist.' Dodo was all about the light and setting the stage. Her energy was infectious and we did some wild things. She would arrive the day before and we would scout locations to match horses and set a schedule. We would sometimes run to a spot she would notice at the moment. Looking through the proofs was almost more fun than taking the photos. I loved working with

Dodo. She saw things no one else did. She was all about the light."

Due to her sales of stock photos, Morgans appeared on calendars, in stationary stores, and coffee table books. She had a major contract with a greeting card company. She took photos at Limerick Morgans specifically for the "Day in the Life of..." series of photo books. Scholastic Book Club published the poster books *Crazy About Horses* (1990) and *Crazy About Cats* (1991) using Dodo's photos exclusively. Troll Book Club used a photo of Green Meads Galaxy taken on the beach in a poster offered to school children. "There's going to be a generation of children who grow up with that image who won't be satisfied with the Appaloosa down the street," she proclaimed.

Her photos of Morgans appeared outside of breed magazines, in the likes of *Horse Illustrated* and *American Farriers Journal*.

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1. Dodo in action; 2. Morgans graced calendars, coffee table books, greeting cards, and school posters due to Dodo's stock photography service; 3. Peggy Alderman selected a favorite photo of UVM Lexington to demonstrate Dodo's use of lighting, scenery, and reflection.

Animal groups such as the ASPCA, Morris Animal Foundation, and Tufts University Veterinary School featured her images in their publications and brochures. She did this to earn a living, but she was aware she was bringing attention to the Morgan breed and to the equine industry.

"I think it's high time the Morgans got some press," she said. "After all, they combine high spirits with dependability and the kind of personality you can make a pet of...I'm delighted to find my photos are becoming more and more popular in places that probably never knew before that there were horses who naturally carry their tails and heads high."

At one point Dodo counted 57 of her photos had appeared in 27 calendars or date books.

A white-clapboard country church in Lovell, Maine, was packed for the 1992 memorial service for Doralee [Shraybman] Knight—Valedictorian, Thornton Academy, University of Maine, 1959—after her battle with cancer. One tribute paid to Dodo that day came from a fellow citizen recounting how their rural area had been considered for nuclear waste storage. That was before the nuclear industry met the organizational fervor and community activism of Dodo Knight, her friend related from the front of the chapel. The titans of industry decided there would be less opposition in some other locale. Those of us who knew her unique personal drive to achieve specific end results did not need any elaboration on that testimony.

Dodo always got the shot. ■