

THE Morgan Horse in the West

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IN THE EARLY days of America, the horse Justin Morgan excelled in so many tasks and was so potent in the stud, that a breed fountainhead was established through him. He was only 14-2 hands high and weighed around 950 lbs., yet he out-pulled draft horses and outran Thoroughbreds. These qualities, together with a quiet disposition, easy keeping ability, and a fast elastic step and trot, were transmitted to his colts. This breed, in the early days before mechanized transportation, established trotting records and figured in many breed beginnings. It has even been said that their stamina was a factor in the winning of the Civil War when everything hinged on having horseflesh that was superior.

The Morgan horse is a truly American horse. Since the time of automobiles, the use of the Morgan has changed somewhat from the buggy horse of yesteryear to the saddle horse of today. This change required very little change in the horse, with the exception of developing a little more prominent wither to better hold the saddle. The Morgan of today still has the same breed characteristics. Breeders have preserved and maintained their bloodlines and conformation.

In correlation of the belief that Justin Morgan himself was sired by an Arabian, many Morgans have been found to have the one vertebra short in the back similar to the Arabian breed. Morgans are generally 14 hands to 15-3 hands tall, short-backed, short-necked, with short straight heads--sometimes dished a little, wide eyes, never Roman-nosed, and well-quartered with good feet and legs. They weigh between 900 and 1200 pounds in riding shape. Their colors are mostly chestnuts, bays, and blacks with some grays, and some palomino Morgans.

A year ago, my brothers and myself made a 4,500 mile trip to the middle west and east to see and compare some of the Midwestern, eastern and western Morgans. We found a great similarity, with the exception of size. In the west, where heavier work is required of them, Morgans are larger, but they all have the same characteristics. The same bright eye and elastic, willing, trappy, traveling walk that endears them to people who ride long distances. They are intelligent, quick, and active, with good disposition.

We have been using and raising Morgans for nearly 20 years, and have found that some horses in the same breed are better than others. All of our experience in obtaining this information has not been that of good sense and sound judgment. Everyone has his bad habits. Some fellows spend all their time racing their automobiles, building special motors, and increasing horsepower, etc., then racing and digging each other to see which has the fastest car.

There are three brothers of us, and our bad habits are similar to the car racers, except we do it with horses. We test them for sheer stamina and ability to carry weight and travel on the mountain. Horses with naturally good air and breathing muscles are a must.

Two registered Holstein cows sometimes produce vastly different amounts of milk. Two registered Morgan stallions sometimes are vastly different in strength and amount of work they can do. This job of finding out what different horses can do is intensely interesting, but sometimes costly. Nearly every horse owner, whether he owns Morgans or not, will tell you how tough and strong his horse is, and how far he can go today and again tomorrow. It is as it should be, because we all have pride in our horses no matter what breed they might be or what their size is.

But when it comes right down to it, not one man in a hundred has ever tried his horse long enough or hard enough to see what the horse can do. I may say the same thing about my car. I think it's pretty fast, but I have never really raced anyone to see. But with our horses we are forever trying them, trying to improve and condition them. We know the capabilities of each one. A man we rode with one day said, "I wouldn't even ask my horse to do that," but if you don't ask, how are you going to find out? We are not cruel, however, and never put a horse to any hard work without first getting him hard and in condition. We ride steady and regular, feed good, and groom and take care of our horses. By overriding and striving to outdo each other we have ruined several good horses. This has been costly to us, but not all was lost because I believe we have learned something new each time. No great loss without some small gain.

We have set up a breeding program which we think is sound. We require conformation, ability to perform in harness and under saddle, and an exceptionally fast walk in our horses, and they must be 15 hands or over. Our preference is 15-2 or 3. All of our present horses will pull their own weight in the harness. We are not too proud to work our prize stallions. In the summer time they do the cultivating and any other work that might need doing. We could have a national champion, and if he weren't a using horse, easy riding, elastic stepping, fast walking, we would sell him. On long hours in the saddle, nothing is quite as nice as a good comfortable fast walk and a horse anxious enough to keep moving at top speed without breaking into a trot. We are striving for short-headed, short-necked, short-backed, short-coupled easy keepers--but they must be big, and still have good action.

To me the big-and-little-horse question is no problem, but rather a matter of choice. Some say, unless the horse is 14-2 hands, like old Justin, he isn't a Morgan. I disagree--because I think the breed has made great strides in uniformity in the last 12 years. Even if some are three or four inches different in height they still look very similar. I think it's what they are going to be used for that determines the need for, or lack of, size. For me a horse has to be at least 15 hands, and some 15-hand horses are too small. My general definition of little and big horses is 14-2 hands, 900 pounds--15-2 hands, 1200 pounds. There are lots of variations and height does not always determine size. I had a stallion that was 15-2, and only weighed 900 pounds. I also had a stallion that was 15 hands, and weighed 1100 pounds --both in the same shape.

I list below my observations. The first thing that gets a little horse down is weight carried. If you don't load him much he holds up good. My two brothers are six feet and six feet two, respectively, and they weigh 215 and 200. Put a 200 pound man, 50 pound saddle, breast band, chaps, spurs, saddle bags with two or three cans of beans in them, rope, and maybe a rifle and scabbard, and before you know it you have nearly 300 pounds on the horse. Then point him up a trail at 9,000 or 10,000 feet elevation and ask him to hurry all day--and you wish he were even bigger. With that much load he sweats and puffs and you wonder why, so you get off and walk. At the end of 50 feet you can't get your breath no matter hard you try. At least you don't wonder about the horse anymore, know. With that much load, and crawling sharply uphill all day, the little 14-2,900 pound horse is scraping the bottom of the barrel to keep up. If he keeps up, he is good. The next day he will

likely drop out, because in keeping up to the larger horse he is working harder. The big horse works hard, but the little horse has to overwork to equal him.

Then again, take the same two horses with their 300 pound load and start across flat open country with six inches of snow, or up to 18 inches. The little horse is handicapped again because he is working more down in the snob, and his larger companion is more out on top of it. Besides that, the larger horse takes a little bigger stride and thereby expends less energy. The same advantage is held by the larger horse in muddy ground, in brush, or in almost any rough country. A larger horse steps through underbrush without changing his stride as much as the smaller horse. A smaller horse will change strides and try to pick his way around more, because he is, again, more down in the brush. The difference can only be four inches in the size and that seems very little. But at the end of a day of using a horse under the above conditions it means a big difference.

For another viewpoint, however, take the breeder who just uses his horse for pleasure once or twice a week, or shows him under a light English saddle for half an hour at a time. The 14-2 hand, 900 pound horse is plenty of horse. He keeps on less feed, and will provide all the service desired.

But another advantage the big horse has is in speed. Most little horses will start as fast as the big one, and keep up for a short distance, but the farther they go the more they get behind. This advantage really shot's up in chasing wild horses in taller sage or generally rough country. The bigger horse is working more up and over the underbrush, and not so much down in it. It's remarkable how much easier this makes running, and how quickly even a slower horse, that's a little taller, can gain quite a lead over his shorter companion.

All the comparisons listed have been conditions that mean something in my demands on a horse. These are the reasons I like big horses, and will continue to try and raise horses with a little extra size. One thing we have learned for sure, "You can't tell what a horse is by looking at it." Oft times the little doggy-looking horse can beat you at your own game--and do it easy.

There are several big ranches in the west that use Morgans implicitly. J.C. Jackson and Sons of Harrison, Mont., is one. His slogan is, "If you want a horse you can use --buy a Morgan." Also the L.U. Sheep Co of Worland, Wyo. uses Morgans exclusively. Roland Hill of the Horse Cattle Co., in California, has exhibited the champion stock horse, a registered Morgan, at the Cow Palace in years past. A Morgan horse will do any job you want him to do if he's trained for it.

Breed registrations are climbing at a healthy pace, and demand for colts and using stock in the Morgan breed is better than I can ever remember it.

We love any and all breeds of horses and enjoy seeing people raising and improving the stock in their respective breeds.