



Bigger is Not Always Better

By Denny Emerson

The place was the Mexico City Olympics, 1968. The individual medal round in Grand Prix Show Jumping was over the most massive course of jumps ever created, before or since. One of the fences had a front rail set at five feet, nine inches and a back rail at six feet, with a seven-foot spread between front and back. One observer was heard to say, “Put a roof on that thing and it could house a family of four.”

No horse and rider team went clear that day. American Bill Steinkraus clinched individual gold with one knock down on Snowbound. A hush descended over the huge crowd as the young British rider Marion Mould ventured into the arena on Stroller. The fences towered over them as they picked up a canter and headed for the first jump. Minutes later the crowd erupted in thunderous applause as Marion and Stroller finish in silver medal position, with just two rails down over a course described as “an exercise in survival.”

Stroller was a 14.1-hand pony. And, as John Greenall has been quoted, “The pony is the Morgan breed’s secret weapon.”

In the October 2023 issue of *The Morgan Horse*, author Bernadette Strang wrote about the size of sport Morgans in an article titled, “If They are Good Enough, They are Big Enough.” She

supported her theme that successful Morgans were not on the tall side with data collected by the Morgan Sport Resource platform she and her husband, Jack, maintain.

I think we have to be real though, because at some point limits *will* be reached. Some huge football or basketball player will never feel okay on a 14.1-hand pony, nor will the small horse deal well when saddled with enormous weight. There are, though, so many cases of smaller horses being absolutely capable of huge accomplishments that they support the “good enough is big enough” thesis.

In 1961, at one of the big Thoroughbred yearling sales, nobody bid the \$25,000 reserve on one tiny bay stallion, so the owner, E. P. Taylor, retained him to add to his racing stable. Two years later, the now fully grown 15.1-hand Northern Dancer won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness and went on to become a breed-shaping sire, to the point that you will hunt long and hard to find a modern Thoroughbred that does not trace back to Northern Dancer.

My friend, Lana DuPont Wright, was the first woman, back in 1964, to compete in the Olympics in three-day eventing. In 1998, I saw her at the Fair Hill Maryland three-day event and said, “I hear you’ve taken up endurance riding as another sport.”

ABOVE: Denny, his granddaughter Abby, and young friends, mounted on High Brook Rockstar, Catch A Cloud, Winding Up, DRF All Eyes On Me, the entirely average-sized Morgans that are mounts of choice at Tamarack Hill Farm today.



LEFT TO RIGHT: The six-foot Denny Emerson, at age 18 in 1959, riding the 14.2-hand Lippitt Raymond; and today hacking in Vermont aboard the 15.1-hand Winding Up.

“I have,” Lana replied. “I’m going to be competing down in Bethune, South Carolina, near your winter farm in Southern Pines, North Carolina, in about a month, and I have an extra horse. Do you want to ride him?”

“Sure,” I said, knowing precisely nothing about what I was getting into.

When Lana drove into our farm to pick me up, she led Zion off the trailer and my first thought was “I am going to die.” Zion was a tiny gray Arabian, scarcely over 14 hands, and I’m about six feet tall. But there are big little horses, like most Morgans, whose necks come up in front of their withers and who are therefore balanced, and Zion had that trait.

I didn’t die on that 100-mile trail ride, but around midnight, lost in a cold and rainy cotton field, with every muscle in my not-fit-enough body in spasm, it would have been a welcome release.

Some years later I would finish the Tevis Cup ride in California after 21 hours in the saddle on the 15-hand Arabian Rett Butler. Zion and Rett, good enough, therefore big enough.

Over many years in eventing, I’ve seen any number of top level horses 15.3 hands and smaller deal with the long and massive tracks at places like the Kentucky Horse Park, Badminton, Burghley, the world championships, and the Olympics. The general feeling is that what the smaller event horses may lack in sheer power they make up for in quick reflexes and lasting durability.

I read this description of the ideal U.S. Cavalry mount in a tattered early-1900s brochure: “The ideal size for the mount of the fully-equipped trooper, in terms of soundness, durability, stamina, and endurance, is 15.1 hands and 1,050 pounds.”

There are plenty of riders who get badly over-mounted because they drank the Kool-Aid that bigger is better. It’s a cliché to go to just about any dressage or hunter-jumper competition and see smaller or less experienced riders being tanked about by

17-hand warmbloods that they bought in Europe. We know the leading demographic of new participants in our sport are adult novice women. I believe many such overwhelmed riders would feel vastly more comfortable and at ease on a 15-hand horse with the accommodating temperament of a Morgan.

Sixty years ago, when I was working for Robert Lippitt Knight at the Green Mountain Stock Farm in Randolph, Vermont, some of the sons and daughters of Lippitt Sam were in the mid-15 hand height range, but many of those from the Lippitt Billy Ash and Lippitt Ethan Ash line were in that 14 to 14.3 hand range. I could ride the smaller ones but for me the Morgan sweet spot is right around 15.1 to 15.2.

I have the sense that the so-called “modern” Morgan is a somewhat bigger horse than those of 50 years ago, not such a bad thing because modern American humans are also bigger.

Smaller horses are more agile, quicker, less prone to veterinary issues, all the while retaining most of the strength of the bigger horses. I’m not alone in my thinking. Another comment in this magazine from a while back came from Eli Lapp, breeder of the multi-Park Harness and Saddle World Champion EKL Shakedown. He said, “From what I have watched, the talented Morgan park horses have the typier, more compact Morgan conformation.” While in 2024 a 14 to 14.1 hand Morgan might seem on the small side, I think all this commentary suggests breeding for excessive height on a Morgan will deprive the horse of some of the handiness and athleticism for which the breed is known.

In recent years I’ve had five Morgan mares. High Brook Rockstar and HD Waverly are 15 hands, Catch A Cloud is probably 15.1, Winding Up is a tad taller than Cloud, while DRF All Eyes On Me is a solid 15.3, and I like that range. Others may prefer smaller or taller, but, as they say, “A difference of opinion is what makes a horse race.” ■