

Equitation, So Much More Than Style

By Denny Emerson



Riders in balanced, centered, and connected positions make their horses' jobs easier. Pictured here (clockwise from top left) competing in a variety of disciplines are Jared Ashcraft on Westwind Otto (photo © Rockin' Horse Photography), Daryl Kinney on Old Vermont Rebel, Emily Gill on Coulee Bend Kahlua (photo © Erich Linder), and Robin McGrath on Aikane's Sunflower.

Equitation has several meanings and definitions. At its most basic, equitation simply means the sitting on a horse by a human. Or it can mean a competitive class in a horse show where the rider, not the horse, is judged according to standards developed for that type of riding.

There are equitation classes in Western riding, hunter on the flat, saddle seat, and dressage, and each of these will differ in subtle ways from one another.

The truest definition of equitation is less about some stylized posture and more about the rider's ability to be balanced, supple,

secure, and able to be centered and flexible enough to let the horse move unimpeded beneath them.

There are certain riders, just as there are certain figure skaters, ballet dancers, and gymnasts, who perfectly combine stylized technique with supple athleticism. These gifted riders blend with the movements of the horse so well that horse and rider appear to become one entity, the mythical Centaur.

Many years ago, when I was just beginning my association with Morgans, the two riders that we all wanted to emulate were Pat Tataronis and Nancy Ela. They could win a park class, a plea-



Many of today's professional Morgan trainers got their start riding in "Big E" Equitation. They include (clockwise from bottom left) Mary Carlton, Nikki Rae Woodworth Cruz and Alyssa [Wick] Dayton (photos © Howard Schatzberg).

sure class, and a Western class one weekend at a horse show, and then go up to Vermont a month later and win the 100-Mile Trail Ride at the Green Mountain Horse Association. Pat and Nancy provided clear examples of how style and function can coexist.

I've been impressed with the riding skills of some of the younger Morgan riders that we watch these days. A few years ago in Oklahoma, there was a saddle seat equitation class for children 13 years old and under that was so big they ran it in two sections. Those children rode better than most of the adult riders did back in the day. They sat tall in the saddle, their eyes and chins were up, their shoulders were open. They kept their legs underneath them, with heels down. Their arms and hands created straight lines, elbow to bit. They rode effectively and they looked balanced, secure, and at ease while they did it.

I am well aware that there are those who scoff at equitation as just "trying to look fancy." Many of the scoffers, however, have

terrible posture. They may ride with their heads tipped forward and down, their shoulders hunched, their backs rounded, and their legs shoved so far out in front of them they protrude beyond the shoulders of their horses. Riders like these who negate equitation have little sense of how their own bad riding makes the horses they ride struggle to move in balance.

It is key to keep in mind that equitation judged in an arena is only a small glimpse of a much broader picture. For example, when Jared Ashcraft works cattle with Westwind Otto, Jared's superior riding ability contributes to the success of that partnership.

When I've been an observer at New England Regional or Morgan Grand National, I've seen many riders whose position and ability to blend with their horse enhances the performance. Some contemporary trainers, in fact, got their basis competing in equitation. This would include professional trainers like Nikki Rae Woodworth Cruz, Mary Carlton, Ryne Swope and his former coach, Kelly Kraegel, and many others.

When Jenny Kimberly with Baymount's Lorenzo and Robin Vose McGrath with Aikane's Sunflower were on the trail at the GMHA 100-Mile Trail Ride, part of the reason that they were able to win was because they were balanced and secure enough to allow their horses to best find their way over those endless hills. When advanced eventing star Daryl Kinney was schooling Old Vermont Rebel over cross country jumps a few years ago, Daryl's ability to see those perfect distances made Rebel's job so much easier.

Whether we see it in a show ring, in a cutting arena, out on the trail, or in a show jumping round, good riding is good riding. We can call it equitation, or we can call it anything we like, but no matter the time or place, the best ones make it look easy. And we know that saying, "If it was easy everyone would do it." ■