

A Stack of Cards

A young horse and a young rider building skills together.

By Denny Emerson



Twenty-year-old Maddie Meunier and the seven-year-old Morgan mare HD Waverly.

There's common sense in the old adage that "the old riders make the young horses, and the old horses make the young riders." An experienced rider with lots of knowledge and a calm attitude can educate and transform a green horse into a solid citizen, just as the old steady-Eddy horse will give confidence and security to the greener rider who is developing a rapport with horses.

There is, however, a way to circumvent this bit of wisdom, which happens when an experienced trainer can help the young rider teach the young horse, providing that both the young rider and the young horse have some talent, and both possess steady and reliable temperaments.

I'd bought Waverly in June of 2022 from the Miner Institute in Chazy, New York. She was still very green, and could be spooky and reactive, so I wanted to delegate those early rides to someone young and agile. Andy Cook started her, but then he entered the U. S. Marines' Officer Candidates School, and for a short period Ryley Dubois took over, but the lion's share of Waverly's schooling has been by Maddie Meunier, aged 19 when she first met HD Waverly, then a six-year-old, in December 2023.

In just eight months Maddie and Waverly have made the leap from pretty green to successful beyond our hopes in seven different spheres of training (trail riding, dressage, a tiny bit of working equitation, gymnastic jumping, show ring jumping, cross country jumping, and horse show classes), once again demonstrating the extreme versatility for which Morgans are famous. At the open

dressage day that began the Lippitt Country Show in August, HD Waverly was the high-scoring Morgan. Then she was the champion green horse in the Morgan classes a couple of days later. In her very first competitive 15-mile trail ride at the Green Mountain Horse Association (GMHA) on August 31, Waverly was champion with a perfect score of 100.

We use the analogy that training a horse is like stacking a full deck of playing cards, each card representing a week in a year. When you start stacking, the pile seems insignificantly tiny, but over time, layer by layer, the pile gains stature. Maddie and Waverly are in the stacking process right now.

Maddie describes her time with Waverly, saying, "I met HD Waverly on December 9th, 2023. It was right when winter started to hit central Vermont. Snow was coming in, there was already a foot on the ground, and snowbanks had piled up three-feet high. The days were cold, long, and dark. Sun rises at 7 in the morning and sets at 4:30 p.m. Waverly was standing huddled around in her field near the gate with three other Morgan mares eating all the hay they could get. I did not know her, and she did not know me, but over the next eight months our relationship blossomed.

"Over the winter months, between going out for hacks in the snow on the good days, riding in the indoor, working on flat work, and daily handling on the ground, I got to fall in love with this mare. She made getting up, throwing on as many layers as I could to stay warm, and trudging through the knee-high snow worth it.



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): Maddie and HD Waverly performing in cross country, distance riding, at a show, working equitation, dressage, and jumping (all photos by Denny Emerson).

I'd walk out and there she would be, standing at the gate with her ears pricked, nose poked out, waiting for a scratch.

"Not only did it make me absolutely adore her, but it also built trust. She was a confident, strong-willed horse at home, but when we started getting out on the trails she was a bit nervous and so was I. I had very little experience out of the ring before I came here. I had gotten out of the ring on trails when I was younger with my aunt, Brandy Maxfield, and Jamie Maguire, who is now the equine manager at the University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm, but I was timid back then and felt better in the ring, so I stayed there. However, by getting out multiple times a week, following a confident rider and confident horse, Waverly and I built up courage and trust until one day we were able to bravely lead the way.

"With all the riding we did in the winter months, by the time it turned spring we were a strong team. She knew I would never steer her in the wrong direction, and I knew she would always take care of me. That opened new doors to things we were able to do. We were able to go further on the trails and enjoy being out there; we also worked well in the ring, getting her more schooled in dressage and jumping.

"Waverly was started by Andy Cook and Ryley Dubois over fences and on the flat and I was able to pick up where they left off. We started our adventure into dressage, which was a little difficult for us at the start. Little by little we got to the point where we were able to nail a dressage test at the Lippitt Country Show in August 2024. When we took Waverly down the road to Huntington Farm's cross-country course to school over little cross-country fences, it was as if she'd done it a hundred times already.

"In between jumping and dressage we were also working on getting Waverly fit enough to do a distance ride. This was a totally new experience for me as well as for her. We built up our strength and confidence to be able to do the starter distance ride at GMHA in June and then the 15-mile competitive trail ride this August during Distance Days. We were ride champions in our event!

"Over the last eight months Waverly has changed me into a better rider, and I couldn't be more thankful. She has defined for me the adage that 'hard work pays off.' Our stack of playing cards that once was just a few sheets you could tear apart with your hand, turned into a stack you could barely cut through with scissors. She is a once in a lifetime horse that I will never forget." ■