

≈ AMATEUR ROUNDTABLE ≈

ADVICE THAT KEEPS THE AMATEUR RIDING AND LEARNING

Compiled by Kim Oplotnik

Do you ever struggle to connect or compete with your horse? Do you wonder if you'll ever be skilled enough to bring out your horse's full potential? Every equestrian faces challenges, even the best riders.

The horse and rider relationship is a constant learning process, and even the most experienced equestrians use training and instruction to advance their skills and knowledge.

No matter what discipline you ride, good horsemanship is

fundamental to success.

The Morgan Horse asked some of the amateurs we know to share advice, what they've learned along the way, and what keeps them motivated to become better. (And no, John Huse, we were not at the bottom of the barrel when we included you in the panel.) Their wisdom and experience follow. We hope you'll find helpful tips and tricks to encourage confidence, elevate horsemanship, and strengthen the connection with your horse.



CAROL FLETCHER-CHURCHILL

Carol was first introduced to the Morgan horse in the early 1970s and says she, "never looked back." Her many talents range from riding saddle seat, hunt seat, and Western. She also has served on AMHA's Board of Directors representing the western region, is a Grand National Show Committee member, and is the most recent MGN chair.

I think the advice that always sticks in my mind is to "never stop riding!" If you make a mistake right in front of the judge, keep riding like you are having the best ride of your life.



JEANNE FUELLING

Jeanne has been riding and loving on horses since she was a toddler. She was introduced to the Morgan breed when her dad purchased Browns Cover Girl for her 4-H project and has never considered another breed since. She has owned and shown Morgans in many divisions including English pleasure, park, classic, roadster, Western, and pleasure driving.

The best horsemanship advice I have ever received is to always remember the reason I am there, every single time I put my foot in

an iron to ride. And that reason is simply for my love of horses. My parents instilled that in me as a child. At heart, I am the same horse-crazy kid that rode her pony every day despite rain, snow, heat, or bugs. I am confident that the majority of amateurs are there for that same reason, but it is so easy to get pulled into the stress of competition. We spend monumental amounts of dollars and time to be our best and I do not know anyone who does not want to succeed! I have learned over the years how important your mental game is when you are in the show ring. I used to have more of a fixed mentality, and I now focus on having an open mindset, knowing that I will grow and learn from every experience whether it is good or bad. When I do settle into the saddle, my goal is to breathe deep, connect with my horse, and give him the confidence to give me the ride of my life!



LEESA GALATZ

Leesa's entire life has been Morgan-central, as her family founded Vegas Valley Morgans in Las Vegas, Nevada. Except for a several year hiatus for medical training, Leesa has been actively involved in breeding, raising, and showing the VVM-prefixed and owned horses. Leesa says she has, "had the good fortune to be able to train with a wide variety of trainers and instructors over the years, and I learned something from everyone I have ridden with."

One of the most important aspects of horsemanship I learned very early in my riding career was how important it is to take care of your horse in the interest of their health and cleanliness. My

early instructors taught me how to properly groom and tack up a horse, understanding how all the pieces of equipment function and why we use them. I learned how to be safe around a horse, and how to diligently care for the horses and the equipment. Today, I am often in a situation where I have support in these tasks, and I am grateful for that and understand what a critical role it plays in my success.

There are so many aspects of riding that I have learned, but one of the concepts that stands out among all others is turning and riding the corners. Everyone I have ridden with has communicated that to me in one way or another. The more horses I ride, the more I understand how important this is. A horse must bend through the corners to come out balanced and square on the straightaway. This applies to both riding and driving. In the show ring, whether your horse is on the rail, and especially if making a pass off the rail, the corner is critical. A bad turn leads to an awkward straightaway. Executing a corner requires a combination of both hands and legs while keeping your weight centered and back, so you facilitate rather than interfere with the turn. While the concepts are the same, this feels different on every horse. Riding is a lifelong learning process; this is why it's so much fun. Every ride, I'm going for the perfect corner, I can feel it when I get it right.



DR. JULIE HOAG

Julie can often be found having a lunge line lesson during down time at a horse show or studying her favorite bloodlines. Preparation is constant for this Morgan aficionado who has been showing and breeding under her Libretto prefix for more than 30 years.

I have always been overly tentative, and I have always lacked any confidence in myself.

Multiple times I've had people watching me from the rail who have said "...you know if she would just get out of her mind, she could be a great rider..." But it is true, if you continually focus on the mistakes you're making then you're focusing on the wrong things. Jessica Cavanaugh is an expert at keeping me on track by telling me what she wants me to do rather than what she wants me to stop doing.

A story that has become a sharable lesson: one year at Grand National, Jessica was instructing me from the rail. I count on that. Mike Goebig was standing next to her, and after the class I heard him say to her, "If you need to give your rider a lesson during the actual class, maybe she isn't ready to show." Now, Mike is one of my all-time idols, so that kind of stung! But I realized I had become completely dependent on listening to her while I'm showing, and it was distracting me from simply riding my horse the way I know we can. For the championship, I completely ignored her and focused on proving that I belong in the arena, and by God, I actually won it!

So, I think the best advice I've been given is yes, work hard all season at home. Learn your horse. Listen to your horse and your trainer, but when you get to the show arena the time for practice is over. Go out there and show people what you can do—you need to leave your insecurities at the gate.



DR. JOHN HUSE

John and his wife, Patti, have been involved with Morgan horses since 1989. Their first horse, Granada's Candida, led to the establishment of Spring-Mill Morgans, LLC. John can be found showing in classic pleasure driving, pleasure driving, park harness, as well as Western pleasure divisions because, as he says, "I have no rhythm, so posting is out of the question."

It is difficult to say what the most important training advice is but if I must choose one it would be to breathe and relax. If the rider is not relaxed then trying to do all the cues, et cetera, will be much harder and the rider's tension will be conveyed to the horse, mak-



LIZ GOLDMANN

Liz has been riding horses for 70 years with a focus on carriage driving for the past dozen. "I've been lucky to have several skilled trainers coach me along the way from my first up-down posting lessons to winning world championships," Liz says. "These teachers have helped me with all the basics and then the finer points for decades."

The best piece of advice I have ever received is, "If what you are doing isn't working, do something else!" Because my skills are long-standing, but not the best they can be, I always try to do what my instructor tells me to do, emulate their ways, use the aids and cues correctly. Sometimes all the trying doesn't get me the results we are aiming for, so I have learned to trust myself and figure things out for myself. I seem to learn best when I receive a healthy dose of coaching, then spend time driving by myself to apply and adjust my trainer's instructions to my own abilities and relationship with my horses. After a lifetime of doing the work, my greatest pleasure is when my teacher says, "That looks good. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it." My Morgans have all been homegrown pets bred by my supportive husband, Lou, who is hands-on with the foals and then cheers from the background as the kids grow into themselves. We've been lucky to cherish our homebreds and plan on a couple decades more enjoying the best of all horses, our Morgans. Special thanks keeping me in the driver's seat to Dallas Bolen of Sunchaser Morgans in Oregon, trot on!

ing him tense. No good will come.

From my point of view as an amateur, sportsmanship and perspective is a major thing. There are no “losers” in the arena (the losers never entered). I have not won every class, but I have never lost because I always learned something in the class.



JERRI MONROE

Jerri showed American Saddlebreds in her early years and was introduced to Morgans in 2010 by a friend who had her mare at Cottonwood Creek Ranch. The show ring bug hit hard after taking lessons at CCR. Since then, Jerri has partnered with several Morgans and finds being a member of the Morgan community the biggest reward of horse ownership.

The most important horsemanship advice I have ever received has been to be respectful of the bridle. Be aware that it is a powerful tool that should be used judiciously. As a saddle seat rider, I feel it is incumbent on me to understand the purpose of each bit and how to use them effectively. When a correction needs to be made, do so purposefully but with respect for your horse’s mouth. If your horse responds appropriately, reward them by giving back. If they do not respond, try another method.

I have been so fortunate that my trainers (Kelly Kraegel and Melissa Swain) have shared their knowledge and expertise with me in this area. I have so many more tools to use thanks to them. They are terrific at letting me in on any changes they have made to the bridle or bits so I can make the necessary adjustments. I continue to be a work in progress and strive to keep my horses happy in the bridle.



TAMARA MORAVEC

Tamara came to Morgans from a background showing Saddlebreds. “I’ve completely fallen in love with the Morgan’s versatility, intelligence, and temperament,” Tamara shares. Tamara’s versatility shows up as she competes in classic pleasure saddle and harness, English pleasure, and Western pleasure divisions.

pleasure divisions.

“Keep your concept” has been a key piece of advice I’ve received. This translates to remembering the overall picture you are trying to create: a happy horse that is a pleasure to ride or drive. This is tied

closely to “do less” and “get out of their way”, and remembering this advice during my rides prevents me from nagging my horses with my aids.



HANNAH KELLEY NICOLETTI

Hannah is a third-generation horse lover, tracing back to both branches of her family tree, meaning Morgans have always been a huge part of her life. Hannah started as a walk-trotter, stepping up to classic, pleasure, and park

horses as a junior exhibitor. Hannah, now an amateur, is beginning to show horses who carry her family’s Victory Lane prefix.

Some of the best advice I’ve been given as a rider is how to feel your horse. Each horse has a different feel. I’ve had the opportunity to ride horses in almost every division throughout my career, and each horse is different from the next. Knowing how to properly feel how each horse responds to you has had the biggest impact on how I ride. Some advice I’ve gotten recently, while stepping into the Western Pleasure Division, has been each ride is an opportunity to learn, no matter how it goes.



DR. ROXANNE ROGERS

“Roxy” was an equitation student of Sandy Sessink’s in the late 1990s and came back to the Morgan show scene ten years ago after completing medical school. Most recently, she can be found juggling the Yin and Yang of transitioning from pleasure driving and English pleasure to Western dressage and working Western divisions.

Dressage lessons have taught me that quality of movement while executing a pattern trumps all else. Exactness is also important, but not at the expense of quality. A favorite comment to receive from my dressage trainer, Elizabeth Jones, is, “Great transition! If I would have blinked there, I would have missed it.” This balances out another piece of sage advice from Elizabeth, “Sucks to suck.” Which suggests, in a nutshell, if you don’t want to feel the agony of defeat, work harder. And more leg, more impulsion, can fix a myriad of things.

John Hufferd has taught me to take my time. He has made me acutely aware of my surroundings. I watch everybody else’s move as

TODAY’S MEMORIES RECORDED FOR TOMORROW’S HISTORY

a class reverses before I make my move. John has instilled in me to be patient and be smart, to feel the horse and stay calm. If you bust out a fancy bold pass and then mess it up and put yourself in a bad spot you would have been better off just to wait and do it nicely.

All areas of horsemanship advice, pleasure and dressage and working Western, are relative. I take Elizabeth's voice into an English pleasure class and the patience John demands benefits a ranch or dressage pattern. And, in the back of my mind, I will always hear Sandy Sessink telling me, "Attitude is everything."



KATHERINE SCHAFER

Twenty-five years on the Morgan circuit has made "Katie" realize that her happiness resides in the barn with horses. You will find Katie showing primarily in amateur and ladies hunter pleasure, but she loves all seats and believes that the horse (and trainer) should, "tell you what division is best for you to maximize potential."

The best horsemanship advice I've received thus far, like many good pieces of advice, applies to both horsemanship and everyday

life, and is a simple concept: Look where you want to go.

Horses, when you are on their backs leading them, or driving them, are very perceptive to where your focus is, particularly Morgans who have an innate desire to please. When riding, horses can sense the shift in your weight as you look left or right, straight down a rail, through a corner, or directly down at them. There is a constant feedback loop from horse to rider and rider to horse, subtle shifts in weight and pressure, on the stirrups, the reins, the horse's forward momentum, and to perform best both horse and rider should be in harmony. In situations where a horse is confused, stuck, or scared the first instinct of the rider is often to look down at them, or at the item that is scaring the horse, perpetuating the cycle of fear or confusion for the horse. Instead of looking down at your horse, or at the scary thing, if you look past it, where you want to go, it will redirect the horse's focus, and remove some of the scariness of the object, allowing them to also move past it. For every ride or interaction with a horse this concept still applies, not just when scared or stuck. If you are in a class of 25 horses, planning your lines by looking where you want to go helps set the horse up for success by providing them with direction and confidence in what can sometimes be chaos.

The same advice applies to everyday life. If you make a mistake, beyond learning from it so you can prevent it from happening again, there is little value in dwelling on it and overanalyzing it. Instead, learn from it and move on, look where you want to go and it's so much easier to see the path to getting there. ■



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