



The Art of Trick Training, the Artfulness of the Morgan

*The Morgan mind and body totally engages as one man creates
a circus performer for his clinics and open house demonstrations*

By Jeff Wilson • Photos by Christian Anwander

I think our fascination with the horse begins with their aesthetic beauty: we see the exterior of the horse as art. Not only does the Morgan capture me there, with traits like upheadedness, but the Morgan captures me with its mind and heart—its interior.

We have evidence of the excellence of the Morgan mind from its role in American history. Whether galloping for the Pony Express or battling in the Civil War, whatever the task was, it was executed with a complexity that many acknowledged couldn't be equaled by other horses. I think that is an amazing testimony to the Morgan's heart, but how do we display our beloved breed's unique talents to the rest of the horse world?

Personally, I answer that question with two words: trick training. Trick training has been a rejuvenating experience for my love of the Morgan. By far it has increased communication skills, attention span and interest in working, for me and my horse! Morgans get excited about performing tricks and, in the Morgan way, are constantly reading my body language to see what I want next. Because it is all right there in their DNA makeup, it is easily pulled to the surface.

With my bright nine-year-old Morgan stallion, Black Willow Orion, I see how massive character and forward way of thinking are such obvious assets of our breed. As I walk into my round pen and let him loose, his listening ear and large eye focus on me, and his chiseled head curls towards me as I have him trot around; it is easy for me to do what I do. I take for granted the way he stays in tune with me, and how easily his brain handles what I ask.

An excellent trick under saddle that we perform is the Spanish walk, a dynamic walk with an exaggerated, high front leg lift. Orion loves to do it as much as I do, and one day I discovered how practical a maneuver it was. While riding him in a lane behind our facility which, because of all the sights and sounds around us, brought his energy level to its peak, he decided to get strong and potentially "jiggy" as we turned towards home. I decided we would walk home quietly. Instead of having an argument, we compromised, and using all of his wonderful energy, we walked home with the biggest Spanish walk we could muster.

As we all progress in our horsemanship endeavors, there is usually something that brings a real sense of accomplishment with every horse. I would have to say that for me teaching Orion to piaffe was that experience. A piaffe can be a very difficult concept to communicate to your horse because it's keeping his trotting energy at a high level while keeping him still in one place. When you love the energy of the trot as much as I do, it is the ultimate trotting experience. I was amused with how Orion gave his own dynamic twist to a trick I had taught him, the obeisance. The obeisance, or circus bow, is a very low bow where the horse leans back and lowers his entire front end with the head tucked down through his front legs which are stretched out in front of his body. It is a pose that represents extreme trust from the horse. I had Orion in side reins for positioning purposes, and for a moment I had to turn my attention away from him. He decided that it was free time and he would do what stallions love to do best in their free time, sniff manure. He maneuvered

around the ring, and whenever he found a spot he wanted to sniff, he simply lowered his body down to the obeisance position to sniff. That's thinking outside the box.

Teaching your horse to interact with you at liberty is a great experience. It will revolutionize your understanding of your own horse because at liberty your horse will be completely honest towards you and what he thinks of you. Your horse has a choice, to do what you want him to do, or to ignore you and "show you the hoof."

At the beginning with every new horse I work, my expectations are straightforward; do not run away from me (or fear pressure), come when asked, go in a specific direction, or stand at a particular spot. These behaviors ultimately build control so that later you can add a pedestal for the horse to stand on and then have them wave or smile. This type of control is very useful with the stallions that I use for breeding. Although at liberty, they are mannerly, recognize that I am there, and are respectful of the mares.

Last spring while working with a fashion photographer who wanted horses as a backdrop for photos, I endeavored to bring



*Blackwillow Orion rears for
his owner and trainer Jeff Wilson.*





View from My Saddle

shots that were unique. It was thrilling to be able to capture a moment with a foal lying in the model's lap, as well as being able to use my Morgans at liberty with the model. That group of people left with a great impression of how amazing our Morgans are.

Sometimes teaching tricks can bring some unexpected surprises, meaning the trick is on you. Probably the funniest moment for me involved a student teaching her Morgan, Black Willow King David, to bow. The lesson to learn here is to be careful where you put your cues. While teaching David to bow, she put the cue too close to his girth instead of down towards his belly. Thereafter, whenever he was saddled and the girth tightened, he bowed every time.

An apparent reason for teaching tricks to Morgan horses has to do with the Morgan brain. Like my border collies, a Morgan needs a job.

Another valuable reason for teaching tricks is the benefits in the relationship between horse and rider. I have been very fortunate to have learned important principles of horse communication that I call in my clinics "learning to speak horse." Working up-close with horses of various



Smile and the world smiles with you.

breeds and owners at all levels of horsemanship; I have come to see that the challenge for horses and people is the language barrier. There isn't enough dialogue between them. Do you *really* know your horse? When you turn your horse loose,

step back away from them, and begin to interact, then you start a dialogue. That is what I call trick training. A trainer can coerce or force a horse into doing all sorts of things, but you can't make a horse smile, or retrieve an object, or stand on a pedestal. The horse has to want to engage with the handler. For the horse, it really is about learning to trust the human. For the human, it's about learning to become a strong leader. The bottom line is always how do you get behind the eyes of the horse and build confidence in him towards humans? How do you assist someone to confidently understand the horse and human relationship? It is a language that has to be learned. We use trick training because it helps to strengthen the relationship between horse and handler as well as encouraging communication and to perfect obedience. Plus, it is just plain fun for the horse and the handler.

One of my primary goals is to showcase the Morgan breed through trick shows using Morgans from our bloodline like Black Willow Orion. With the amount of horse breeds being marketed today, I think people watching deserve to see what we see; a picture of athleticism, versatility, strength, beauty and exceptional intelligence. Promoting the Morgan to me is painting that picture.

Our facility hosts an annual Spring Open House. We invite the community to come and experience the Morgan horse, and we offer an entertaining, as well as educational experience to them. I am privileged to not only have Morgans, but to possess a bloodline that is exceptionally gentle. Match that with amazing techniques and you have a pretty successful package to show people.

In exhibiting the Morgan, what I want people to come away with is that Morgans are champions in heart, in mind, and in athletic beauty. I want people, whether owners of Morgans or not, to come away as proud of America's first breed as I am; and to discover the art and the artfulness that is the Morgan. ■

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