

Rick Gervasio

BY JENNY GREY



Rick shared a gentlemanly handshake with Daryl Hopson after winning the Open Western Pleasure Reserve World Championship riding Graywood's Belinda Breeze.



Rick likes to vary the training routine by competing in western trail and dressage.

In six short years, Rick Gervasio has established himself as one of the top western pleasure trainers in the Morgan breed. His talent is undeniable, living up to the maxim 'the harder you work the luckier you get'. His work ethic, deep level of experience with horses of all kinds and an innate understanding of his equine charges has put him at the top of his game.

Rick has never known a different life. He grew up in New Jersey where his father, Arnie Gervasio, was a Quarter Horse trainer. He worked tirelessly around the farm and rode the clients' horses but did not have much opportunity to show and never had his own horse. Nevertheless, he gained valuable experience that would help launch his career.

He left home at about the age of 20, apprenticing for other quarter horse trainers in North Carolina and Texas before making Florida his home. Rick learned from some of the best in the business. He spent two years with Troy Oakley; then moved on to Edgewood Farm, one of the premier quarter horse breeding facilities in the country. After Edgewood, he worked with Tom Chown at Willowtree Farm in Pilot Point, Texas. He believes learning from mentors is a critical part of becoming the best you can be. When Rick felt he had gained enough experience, it was time to establish his own training facility. He had no desire to move back to New Jersey with its cold winters so he chose Ocala, FL where he established Gervasio Pleasure Horses. He still spends a significant amount of time observing and learning from other trainers.

Ocala is in the heart of Florida horse country, favored for its temperate climate and the many equine and veterinary services the area has to offer. About twelve years ago he purchased a property that he describes as 'pretty run down' and transformed it into a beautifully landscaped horse facility. He even installed a fountain near the house on what used to be a swamp. This hard-working young man has created a very special place for his clients to visit.

He has a 14 stall barn by design. He really does not want his business to get any bigger, believing that additional horses would detract from what he is trying to get accomplished. The same goes for shows. It would be unusual for him to take more than six horses. "It's a number that works for me", Rick said. "I want quality over quantity." When working with Quarter Horses he would go to a show every weekend. Now that he is on the Morgan circuit, he finds the schedule much more manageable. He travels long distances but is able to come home between shows to work with the horses back at the farm.

He has trained national and world champions in five different breeds -- Quarter Horses, Paints, Appaloosas, Arabians and now Morgans. He was the high earner in the National Snaffle Bit Association for two consecutive years. In 2000 he won the Circuit Championship in Senior Western Pleasure at the prestigious Tom Powers Futurity. He has won every major western pleasure futurity in the country on several different breeds. He began showing Arabians in 2004 and was enormously successful. His winnings included the East Coast Open Western Pleasure Championship with GF Jullien's Joy. His barn is now almost exclusively dedicated to Morgans. He enjoys Morgans for their willingness to please and their work ethic. He also likes the way they set their heads and how they look in western tack. Rick has always been a western horseman. In this era of specialization he is able to focus on what he does best.

Rick has flawless credentials. In addition to major wins riding the non-Morgan breeds, he has quickly established himself as one of the top trainers in the Morgan world. In 2012, he not only won his first Open Western Pleasure World Championship with Stacey Resler's Hollybrook Touche, but also the Four-Year Old Western Pleasure Championship with Lori Sargeant's TFF Selene and the Futurity Western Pleasure Three-Year Old World Championship with his own horse, Step Right Up. Selene also earned a fourth place position in trail, which is pretty amazing for a four-year old. Rick does train hunters occasionally and does an excellent job but leaves the showing to his amateur hunter pleasure riders.

We have outstanding Western trainers in the Morgan world but most of them have been showing with the breed for many years. It is quite unusual to see a trainer of Rick Gervasio's caliber come into the ring as a new face and almost immediately establish himself as a star. The first Morgan that Rick showed was Graywood's Belinda Breeze in 2007. At that time she was owned by Betsy Marsted. He showed exclusively in Florida that year but people were already asking, "Who IS that?" Belinda Breeze is by Mary Geisler's home-bred stallion, Spiceolife Right Answer. She had a vested interest in this lovely mare's career. Mary remembers, "I was so excited to see them at Citrus Cup -- to see her look like that was overwhelming! I just had to find out who he (Rick) was." She introduced herself and before too long, became a customer herself. Spiceolife B Cool made his successful Western pleasure debut with Rick in 2009 and was sold shortly afterwards. Mary now has another offspring of Spiceolife Right Answer in training and is very excited about his prospects. Righteous, who is co-owned with the

Stone Pine Farm, made his western pleasure debut as a four-year old last year and was undefeated in his championships at the Bluegrass and Summer's End shows.

Mary observed, "Rick was born with a gift. It's something that can't be taught. He can always bring a horse forward and make it better. The horses love him." Mary describes Rick as very business-like and dedicated with a great work ethic. "There is a true art to letting a horse find its center of balance. He takes the natural ability of the animal and makes it his own."

This reporter was fortunate enough to visit Rick's Ocala farm recently and take a western lesson. There is no substitute for watching an expert at work in his daily environment. His horses are fit, supple and happy. Every horse spends about an hour in the walker every day while its stall is being cleaned. Rick likes to bit and lunge for 15 or 20 minutes before getting into the saddle. Any 'kinks' are worked out before they are ready to be mounted. MLB Power Play was lunging in the round pen, paying attention to his trainer but never tense or anxious. An occasional flick of an ear just indicated that he was listening. Rick mounted up and worked him in the paddock, both on and off the rail. "You never know what you are going to run into in the show ring. My horses all learn to work off the rail." Being ready for anything was essential in the Quarter Horse world where there might be a hundred entries in a qualifying event with huge splits.

A tour around the barn was also revealing. Almost every horse came up to the front of its stall to greet us. There was no pinning of ears or bad behavior; just curiosity. Even with a few stallions in the barn, there was no squealing or kicking. The whole atmosphere was tranquil.

When Rick gets on a horse his cues are so subtle, they are impossible to see. Every horse works in a beautiful frame. It is beautiful partly because it looks natural and unforced. Rick establishes a degree of trust with each horse that they want to work for him. This partnership is apparent in the show ring. Rick enjoys starting the young horses. When they first work under saddle, he does not worry about headset or speed. He simply works on cadence and correct body position. Once they have correctness of gait, he will work on the finished product. Even when they are more finished, he allows them to extend. "They go at the speed I want them to go when I ask for it. They need to follow the rider." This really worked to his advantage in his world championship class last year when they called for extensions. "I loved it!" he recalled. Hollybrook Touche moved on freely without



Rick is able to relax in the lineup at the Morgan Grand Nationals. (Photo by Ellen Collins)

once losing his frame. This almost certainly gave him an edge when the judging panel made their decision.

Rick trains just one or two of his own horses each year. He does not want to wear too many hats. Once a horse is more finished, he might vary its schedule with a trail ride around the property or work on the trail course. He may also be found showing in the western dressage or trail divisions where athleticism, a high degree of training and a good-thinking horse are of the utmost importance. Most of the competitors who show primarily in the Coliseum never see these events and they are missing out on first-rate performances. Graywood's Belinda Breeze was the 2011 Western Trail Reserve World Champion among a tough group of competitors. He also earned top ten finishes in western dressage with Belinda and Selene in 2011 and again with Selene in 2012.

Rick also works with amateur riders. This requires a completely different skill set. The average or even very experienced amateur rider is unlikely to have Rick Gervasio's skill level. It becomes his job to create the best possible combination of horse and rider. Fortunately, he is an excellent teacher; very kind and extremely patient. His directions make sense. He wants his riders to relax and not overthink the job at hand. His lessons don't just take place on the rail; they involve bending the horse around the trees in the paddock and trying to reproduce the same subtle cues Rick uses. Speaking as one who has ridden for a lifetime but never ridden western, it was a huge wake-up call that it is very difficult to make it look easy! If my own lesson was any indication, his amateur riders are treated with the same respect and care as their horses. Rick expects his riders to work hard, strive for excellence and be the best they can be.

Just one of the many things that stand out about the Rick Gervasio trained horses is their happy demeanor in the ring. They jog into the ring with a beautifully balanced cadence and absolutely nothing looks forced. Rick looks perfectly relaxed. He has done his job to the best of his ability and now it is time to show off the finished product.

Tami Johnson got to know Rick when she was training a filly for Mike and Karen Burrige. She kept her at Rick's farm while preparing for the Summer's End show. She has the greatest of respect for him both as a horseman and a person. "Rick is a funny guy. He takes his work very seriously; so seriously that

sometimes he misses the opportunity to laugh because he's busy worrying about the important things. So I make it a game for myself to make him laugh. I'm always up for a challenge! Although I've known Rick for a few years now, I actually only recently had the opportunity to ride a 'Rick' finished western horse just a couple of weeks ago. I've been riding and showing all my life; from little shows up to OKC but I've never been on a western pleasure horse that was so much fun to ride. He was like a fine sports car – really responsive and smooth. I'm going to make a point of dropping in more often now and will bring my boots instead of my camera!"

Rick took his first trips to the Morgan Grand National in 2009 and 2010 with just one horse, Graywood's Belinda Breeze. He placed very respectably among the top six in all of his classes. In 2011, he bumped the number of entries up to four horses. Even though he was working with a small show string, Rick Gervasio was becoming well-known throughout the country for the quality and success of his program. He had a great Grand National show that year, earning four Reserve World Championships – a remarkable record for someone who was only in his fifth year of showing Morgans; two of those years having been spent exclusively in the state of Florida.

Lilly Hansing is now the lucky owner of Belinda Breeze who is now trained by Susan Morey. Susan knew Rick when he was training Arabians. "I saw him show Belinda a couple of years ago and fell in love with her. When the opportunity came up to find a western horse, she was the first one I thought of. Knowing Rick's work ethic, there was no question this was the horse I wanted. He does an excellent job of getting his horses broke without compromising their spirit. I think the Morgan industry has just seen a small preview of what he has in store for the show world."

Graywood's Belinda Breeze, who provided Rick's first introduction to Morgans, was destined to win the 2011 Open Western Pleasure Reserve World Championship against deep competition. Belinda and Rick were edged out by Tracemark Touch of Gold ridden by consummate western showman, Daryl Hopson. The moment is commemorated by what is now a famous photograph of Daryl and Rick shaking hands in a gentlemanly gesture before their victory pass. Belinda Breeze was also the Reserve World Champion in Western Trail. In that same year, Gael Mountain



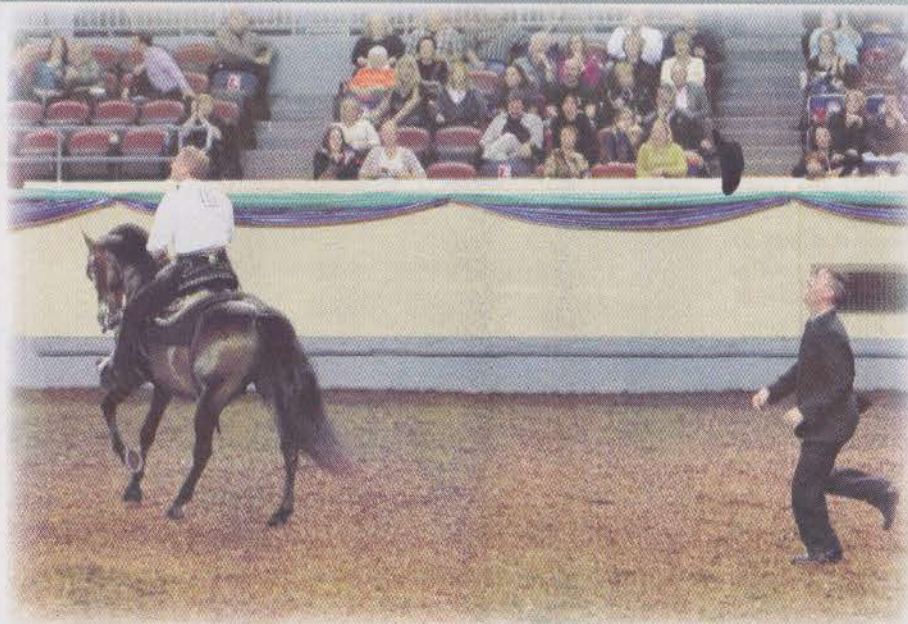
Ocala, Florida is home to Rick Gervasio Pleasure Horses. He landscaped the property himself, creating a beautiful environment for his customers.



Rick and Lori Sargeant enjoyed valuable time together at the Live Oaks combined driving event. Lori is a busy ER doctor who still finds time to help out at the shows and prepare the client entries. (Photo by Tami Johnson)



In October, 2012, Rick Gervasio won his first Open Pleasure World Championship riding Stacey Resler and Jim Little's Hollybrook Touche. This ten-year old stallion had less than a year of training.



In an unplanned move, Brian Hadley caught Rick's hat after he tossed it in the air when his name was announced. When the hat was returned for the presentation photo, Rick wondered why it wasn't covered in shavings!

Bugle Boy won the Three-Year Old Western Pleasure Stallions and Geldings Grand National Championship. He also finished third in the world championship class with a catch rider. This is a strong testament to his level of training.

Lori Sargeant's lovely homebred mare, TFF Selene, won the Western Three-Year Old Reserve World Championship and the Futurity Western Pleasure Three-Year Old Reserve World Championship. She was destined for even greater things in 2012. Rick has trained TFF Selene since she was a three-year old. She was the first young Morgan he started. Now that she has won reserve and world championship honors in both of her junior years, Lori is anxiously awaiting her turn in the ladies division.

Lori and Rick met at the 2009 Grand National show and they have been together ever since. She is a busy ER doctor living in Ohio so they have the challenges of a long distance relationship. "Although the physical distance between us is not ideal we have both put a lot of effort into making it work", said Lori. "It is not easy but nothing good ever is." Their friend, Tami Johnson reports, "She (Lori) is the power girl behind the scenes. She arranges her schedule to come to the shows and she WORKS! She grooms, makes out all the entries plus she has her own horses she rides and shows."

Rick was thrilled with his 2011 Reserve World Championship but even then, he was setting bigger goals for himself. After the class he told Brian Hadley, "I want to win this thing next year!" At the time, he didn't even know who was going to ride. Brian Hadley and Rick became friends in 2011. Brian is a Texas horse trainer with saddle horses in cowboy country. Knowing a good western horseman when he sees one, he agrees that Rick is one of the best. He is also a fine horseman in his own right who won the 2012 English Pleasure Gelding Championship with Jeanne Thomas's Aries Patton. Rick needed someone to help stand his horses up for the strip classes, Tami Johnson, who was helping in this capacity, was not able to attend Jubilee that year. She suggested that he work with Brian Hadley. Brian not only helped Rick in the ring, he became one of his first good friends in the Morgan business.

Brian remembers the days when hunters and western horses were placed in those divisions because they couldn't make it in the pleasure or park divisions. Today nothing could be further from the truth. The western pleasure division is filled with top quality horses, in part because this is a good place for that fast growing set of riders – older people who are buying horses now that their children are 'off the payroll'. Brian said, "Rick is making country cool again!" There are, in fact, many great riders contributing to the 'cool' factor but it is certainly a big plus that Rick Gervasio has added his star power to their ranks.

In addition to Rick's power as a horseman, Brian describes him as 'very competitive and a great strategist'. "Going into the world championship, he knew exactly where he wanted to be and placed himself to be seen. He knew what he wanted after the 2011 Nationals and had planned for it all year." What many people do not know is that Hollybrook Touche was completely green and had barely worn a saddle when he first came to Rick for training late in 2011.

Tami Johnson was at Joyce Metters' Hollybrook Farm to photograph Touche. Tami believed this stallion by Futurity French Command was too nice not to be used. She convinced Joyce

to send him to Rick for training. She remembers, "I showed him my pictures of Touche and told him, 'this is your open horse'. He didn't believe me at first but by April he was telling me the horse would go all the way!" That spring, Rick's customers, Jim Little and Stacey Resler of Manasota Morgans were in the barn when Jim spotted Touche. The couple was convinced this beautiful stallion would be a good show prospect. He went on to succeed beyond their wildest dreams.

Rick had the horse with the potential to achieve his goal of winning an open world championship but he had a short time to get ready. He remembers, "I knew I would have to put 120% effort!" He did that and more. Hollybrook Touche went to his very first show at the Southern States Regional in 2012 where he was undefeated. He remained undefeated through the Gold Cup and Jubilee Regionals, leaving no doubt that he would be highly competitive in Oklahoma City.

Rick rides his own ride and is not too focused on what his competition is doing. In the 2012 world championship event he was riding against some of the most talented and

biggest names in the business – David Rand on LPS The Boogie Man (the sire of TFF Selene); Garn Walker and Indian Outlaw; Kelly Kraegel and Fastrak Thunderbird; Andy Marlett and Hylee's Goldmine, Daryl Hopson and Grand Cru Beaujolais – the list goes on. It was a stunning array of talent and the judges had to make difficult choices. When the cards were in, Hollybrook Touche won the judges' vote and Rick Gervasio won his first Morgan Open Western Pleasure World Championship. He had taken the raw material of a beautiful, ten-year old stallion and produced a world class performer in less than a year.

Who could possibly forget the moment when Rick galloped around the ring in a moment of jubilation, tossed his



Stacey Resler had the thrill of riding Hollybrook Touche back to the barn after his exciting world championship win. She is excited about riding him in the amateur western pleasure division this year.



World Champion Hollybrook Touche had barely worn a saddle when he went to Rick Gervasio for training in late 2011. By 2012, he was a world champion.

hat in the air and Brian Hadley caught it? It was one of those perfect 'memory imprint' times that will go down in history. Thankfully, it was caught on camera! Both Rick and Brian will tell you it was totally unrehearsed. When Rick went into the presentation area to have his picture taken and his hat was returned, he wondered why it wasn't covered in shavings. He had no idea what Brian had done. For Brian Hadley, it was an exciting moment that he summed up very simply, "I was thrilled for my friend!"

Stacey Resler has been involved with Morgans since 1978 and had the distinction of owning the 1989 Open Western Pleasure Champion, Nemour's Peter Piper. Horses of this quality usually come along just once in a lifetime. Over twenty years later she has the thrill of owning another great performer in Hollybrook Touche. He will be remembered as one of the best in Morgan history. She had the thrill of riding back to the barn after his victory and we will have the pleasure of watching her ride Hollybrook Touche in the amateur western pleasure division this year. She cannot say enough about the depth of Rick's skills, his work ethic and his ability to create a good environment for his customers.

We are fortunate that Rick has found a passion for Morgan horses. His deep technical skills and his ability to communicate with his horses on an extraordinary level will help to elevate the western pleasure division and make it even better than it is today. One thing is certain; Rick Gervasio Pleasure Horses are here to stay and the Morgan community could not be more pleased!