

HARNESSING

A HERITAGE

After decades of raising Morgan horses suited for family life and working cattle, Harlan Grunden's father handed him the reins. Now he hopes to continue that legacy and pass it on to his grandchildren.

By KATE BRADLEY BYARS



At the helm of his family's 51-year-old Morgan horse breeding program, Harlan Grunden has no plans to slow down, pictured here with homebred stallion RG Monarchs Go Figure.

A HERD OF NEARLY 50 BLACK MARES and foals shouldn't be hard to spot against the late fall landscape in the central Nebraska hills, yet not a one is in sight. The only hint of a historic Morgan breeding horse program located nearby is a weathered wooden sign proclaiming Grunden Ranch just off the gravel road that leads to the ranch entrance from Curtis, Nebraska, nearly 14 miles away.

Up and down hills populated with mule deer, turkey, whitetail deer and an occasional cougar, the gravel drive

in from the road ends at a typical north country round top metal barn, designed to withstand wind and snow. What lies inside is worth far more than all the steel in the surrounding barns and corrals.

"We have roots here; we've been in it for 51 years now," says Harlan Grunden, meticulously choosing his words like he chooses the work shirt and suspenders he sports daily or the pairing of his stallions and mares. "The horses tied us to each other."

A flash of a swinging black mane draws attention to the pipe corrals, and there stands the next

generation of stallions to continue the Grunden name in the circles of the American Morgan Horse Association.

"There is the future, I think," Harlan says with a smile.

The black 2-year-old stallion, GRM Monarch's Successor, is the last son of his two-time world champion stallion, RG Stuart's Monarch GCH. The yearling in the pen with him, H&K Misty's Prince, is a purchase Harlan made last year that includes Grunden-bred horses starting at the second generation and going back as far as six generations.

"I plan on messing with horses as long as I can. I may be that 80-year-old buying a new stud!"

Now 60, Harlan became the patriarch of his family's Morgan horse breeding program, after his father, Harvey's, passing in 2019. Harvey first introduced Morgan horses to the area in the late 1960s, and he lived to see his family's hard work recognized as a 2017 American Morgan Horse Association Breeders' Hall of Fame inductee.

With registered names that have the "RG" acronym honoring Harvey's grandfather, Russ



A herd of nearly 50 mares and foals graze the pasture below the main barn and corrals, where the horses gain sure-footedness needed to work cattle in the central Nebraska hills.

Grunden, the Grunden Morgans are easily identified among those who love Morgan horses and always dreamed of owning one. The acronym is still used for horses bred by Harlan's brother, Harris, and his wife Joanie, who split to form their own breeding program. Harlan uses a "GRM" to showcase his homebred horses. Having instilled a love for the breed in his children, Harlan now shares those horses with his grandchildren.

But the family has never kept the horses to themselves. Horses with the Grunden name extend from Nebraska to Germany, where a one-horse breed registry had to be created in 1979 to recognize the stallion they exported. Today, the horses are also found in the Netherlands and other European countries, as well as Canada; domestically, the Grundens have sold horses to clients in 28 states. And the family has no plans to end their program.

HARVEY SET OUT TO FIND A HORSE that had the qualities needed to work cattle in the hills of Nebraska but with a smooth ride to help his recurring back problems. He and his wife, Myrna, soon found themselves hunting Morgan horses.

"It was my dad that went into Morgan horses. Everybody and their pup has a Quarter Horse breeding program, and he wanted something just a little different," Harlan says. "Dad wanted something he could get his kids involved with, and he always heard a Morgan was an easier riding horse. We knew of other ranches that did use them—not in this area but scattered around the [United States]."



The breed has been recognized for more than 200 years, taking its name from a stallion owned by a colonial-era man named Justin Morgan. "Justin Morgan's horse," Figure, became the breed's founding sire. The breed associa-

tion founded in 1909 as the Morgan Horse Club is now the American Morgan Horse Association. The Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show showcases the best of the breed annually. The Grundens have been involved in the AMHA for decades, and Harlan has held several positions in the association, including serving as the vice president and is currently on a regional board of directors.

In Amish communities, Morgan horses are often seen pulling carts, or they're seen around the United States as show horses under saddle, in dressage and in driving classes. A Morgan at halter is shown in the "parked" position with the back feet stretched out to elongate the horse's back. Morgan horses are not typically associated with Western working ranches.

"The Morgan is many different breeds within the breed," says Harlan. "There are the real showy, 'typey' park harness and saddle horses, and the dressage horses, and reining horses. Most breeders

stick with a particular bloodline to pursue the horses they like."

The search for a gentle horse that could handle any kind of task led Harvey to Funquest Farms in Topeka, Kansas, owned by Stuart Hazard, whose

SHOW STRING SUCCESS

BEGINNING WITH RG BO BONANZA in 1994, the Grunden family's horses have been taking the top prizes at the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show. Harlan, Hance and Megan have numerous championships to their horsemanship résumés. Here are some of their top show horses' wins.

GRM Miss Black Beam

2010 mare by Hidden Y's Special Flair and out of RG Miss Beamington, by Windhover Regency

- Shown by Megan to the Grand National championship in English trail in 2020.

RG Regency Chester

1996 gelding by Funquest Cafallero and out of RG Miss Beamington, by Windhover Regency

- Shown by Megan to the Grand National championship in western trail (open or amateur) in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010; and Grand National championship in English trail (open or amateur) in 2009, 2010 and 2012.
- Shown by Hance to the Grand National youth trail championship in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

RG Stuart's Monarch

1998 stallion by Funquest Monarch and out of Tretton Lady Midnight D, by Caduceus Denver

- Shown by Harlan Grunden under harness to the Grand National Gambler's Choice championship in 2011; the Grand National carriage obstacle driving world championship in 2012; and, in 2016, to the carriage pleasure driving world championship, and Grand National reserve championships in pleasure driving turnout and reinsman.

bloodlines included Morgan foundation sires Flyhawk and Jubilee King. The land on the Grunden Ranch requires a horse with stamina to traverse up and down the hills, across creek beds and to move the family livelihood, cattle.

"The Morgan horse has a good, big, strong foot," Harlan says. "They also have a large lung capacity. They have the stamina to last longer working. All the breeds are out here in these hills working, but this is our niche, I guess."

"[Stuart] always told dad that [bloodline] fads come and go, but stay in the middle of the road and they'll come back to you. The Funquest Farms concentrated on Flyhawk, who was a personable type horse with a whale of a trot. With a strong trot, you can get out and really work cattle, cover some country."

Just as important to Harvey as finding a horse that could work the ranch was finding a horse suited to his young children. Harlan and his brother, Harris, and sister, Gina, all competed in 4-H shows as well as local events on their Morgan ranch horses. A trip to purchase horses or to show at an event like the Nebraska State Fair annually became the family's vacations.

It was a tradition that Harlan and his wife, Tammy, continued with their kids, Hance and Megan (now Welch). When they each reached 10 years old, their grandfather Harvey gifted them the choice of a horse. It was a gift he hoped had a two-fold benefit: first to give the children a lifelong project and second to share his love of horses.

At 10, Megan selected "Chester," RG Regency Chester. The horse carried her on trails and to gather cattle, and throughout youth competition, earning multiple AMHA world and reserve world and national championship titles. The horse is one that the family points to as a prime example of their multi-faceted program.

The gift of a Grunden Morgan soon extended to spouses. Tammy and Harlan married 38 years ago, and Harvey gifted Tammy her first Morgan, RG Bo Bonanza. "I feel blessed to live in the country," Tammy says, while moving cow-calf pairs one Tuesday this past September. "There is something about this life—the sunsets, sunrises and the freedom to ride. It's just a freedom here."

She was riding GRM Miss Black Beam. In October, Megan would show the mare to a world champion title in English trail at the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

"I've shown in almost every class, English and most all Western events, and we come out here and move cattle, do jobs on these horses," Tammy says. "We raised kids that grew up with it and loved it, and now we hope the grandkids will go on with it."

BEHIND A ROW OF TREES that forms a windbreak between the vast, treeless hills and the Grunden family's home and barn is a near-pristine swath of land home to the family's cow-calf pairs. In 1935, Harlan's grandfather, Forest Grunden, bought the family's ranch land. It grew with purchases made by Harvey and Harlan, and was also split between family members after Harvey's passing. Today, Harlan remains on the original homestead, still improving the land and building on its heritage.

“My son, Hance, his wife Victoria, Tammy and I run our cows together,” says Harlan. “We take in cow-calf pairs. They are still out there grazing [now] and we take care of them like they are our own.”

The Red and Black Angus-influenced cattle are easier to spot on the Grunden land than on some neighbor’s, as Harlan uses controlled burning to keep trees off his land and increase the quality of grass. He and

his neighbors form a successful unit that conducts controlled burns on land in the area.

“The cedar trees reduce the carrying capacity, suck a lot of moisture out of the soil and the grass doesn’t grow as good. It also makes it easier to round up and to check fence [without trees],” he says. “When it is a canopy of trees, a lot of times you can’t find the cows but can only hear

them. Here, we can generally get them all on the first shot.”

Harlan implemented controlled burns to increase sustainability. Much like digging wells to allow for at least two sources of water to each pasture, independent of the snowfall or moisture that helps the rivers flow each year.

“We remove trees and drop them down in these bottoms,” he explains. “We will start the trees burning on both sides, with 8,000 to 10,000 gallons of water on hand as well as 10 or 12 fire rigs all around. We just keep [fire rigs] working all the way around [the fire] and keep track with walkie-talkies. We watch the wind a lot; 10- to 15-mile-an-hour winds are ideal. When it is really calm, you can’t get the fire to push. We burn into the wind so it is not a wall of fire.”

Another practice is to not have a mare foal prior to April 15.

“There isn’t much demand for short-ear horses! January or February here, we can have calves lose their ears in the barn [due to frostbite],” he explains. “We don’t want anything like that on horses.”



Tammy Grunden married into the cattle-raising lifestyle and took to it with gusto. She’s shown Morgans in English and Western and, though she holds a job in town, saddles up to assist with cattle work. This day she rode, GRM Miss Black Beam, a mare headed to the national show less than a week later.

KATE BRADLEY BYARS

MAYNARD BUCKLES

Second Generation BUCKLE MAKERS

Handcrafted and Custom Made Belt Buckles, Bracelets and Accessories

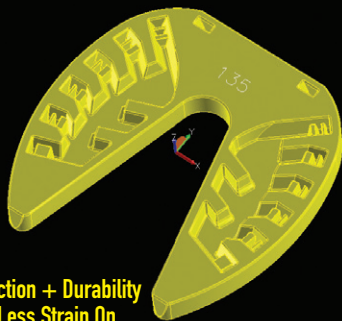
505.862.7253 sales@maynardbuckles.com **MAYNARDBUCKLES.COM** PO Box 419 - Thoreau, NM 87323

THINGS HAVE CHANGED



Avoid Lameness
Flexes with Terrain

Frog Does Its Job



Traction + Durability
Less Strain On
Tendons
Suspensory
Ligaments
Pasterns Shins
Knees
Hocks Stifles Hips
Shoulders Back

**QUANTITY
DISCOUNTS**

LOW AS \$15.77 PR.

Installation Videos:

www.horseflex.com/goldenwingshorseshoes

ORDER ONLINE & AMAZON
GOLDENWINGSHORSESHOES.COM

VAQUERO SERIES

14-DVD VAQUERO SET
24 hours of Cowboy Entertainment



This highly acclaimed collection of fourteen feature-length documentaries on DVDs provides a vivid picture of working Cowboys, Buckaroos, Vaqueros, Paniolos, Cowpunchers, Californios, Cow Hunters and Cajuns. Filmed on historic ranches across the USA, Spain, Canada and Mexico. It paints a penetrating portrait of cowboy life from early ancestral roots to the present day.



\$220 SAVE \$60
14-DVD Set
\$20 shipping
USA Only

\$19.95 Single DVD
\$4.50 shipping
USA Only

J&S
PRODUCTIONS
PO Box 91560
Santa Barbara
CA 93190



www.VaqueroSeries.com 805-705-8107



The fourth generation of horsemen are ready, willing and fully capable of saddling up to help on the ranch. The enthusiasm of Megan's boys—Lane, in the saddle, Jett and Rudy, is seen in their adoration of the horses.

A GRIN SPLITS HARLAN'S FACE as three blond-haired boys tumble out of Tammy's truck in the driveway. The younger two, Jett, 6, and Rudy, 4, head straight for the kittens on the house steps. However, Lane, 9, walks to the horse corral holding four weanlings. He greets his colt, gifted to him on his eighth birthday by Harlan and Tammy, with soft pets and a smile.

Harlan sees the next generation to continue the Grunden name in Morgan horses.

"Their mother, Megan, she has four world titles and five or six reserve world titles. She works at the [Great Plains Regional Medical Center]," Harlan says. "My son lives here on the ranch with his wife. Hance helps with the breeding and haying, and then helps Megan's husband, Dawson, with harvesting in the fall. These kids right here, they're going to stay with it."

Many days, after her job running the Curtis town convenience store, Tammy picks up the boys and brings them to the ranch. In the evenings, Megan picks them up on her way home. The boys help ensure that every horse leaving the Grunden Ranch for a new home is kid proof.

"They have to have a good disposition; what with the grandkids around, these horses are child proofed," says

Harlan. "We've had a stallion or gelding at the World Show in the past and my grandkids will be running their [toy] trucks through the clean shavings in the stall, even running them on the horse's body. They are good minded."

Seven stallions form Harlan's breeding roster—one for every day of the week, he says. He hand breeds them to his mares, and the Grundens typically foal out around 20 mares each spring.

The striking dark stallions range in size from 14.3 hands to 16.1, and most are bay or black, with the homozygous black gene being a quality Harlan seeks. For his clientele, a black or bay horse is sought out more than a chestnut. More than 65 percent of his clients are Amish or Mennonite. They use the horses to work on the farm, and the horses pull their carts.

After he broke his pelvis 10 years ago, Harlan shifted his competition focus to driving horses, to spend less time in the saddle

"My granddad, when he graduated from eighth grade, he was a freighter," Harlan says. "His dad had a contract to haul freight from the valley by team and wagon, and my dad remembers haying with a team of horses. That was my draw—I wanted to drive. I showed under saddle but wanted to compete so I was drawn to the buggy."

KATE BRADLEY BYARS



Harlan Grunden won the 2016 carriage pleasure driving world championship with his homebred Morgan RG Stuart's Monarch.



Harlan conditions horses for carriage classes in the hayfield, using round bales as obstacles.

**WYOMING SCHOOL
OF HORSESHOEING**

Wyoming's only farrier school!

Providing a rewarding Education with horses & people. We are committed to your success!!

Full Time 2,4,8 week courses.
Monday-Friday
Lodging and meals included. GI Bills® Accepted. See website for details.
School Website:
www.wyominghorseshoeingschool.com



Office:
307-634-4171
Email:
info@terrybisonranch.com

Terry Bison Ranch
125 Service Road East
Cheyenne, WY 82007

Now he has a collection of buggies that fills the barn rafters as well as another building on the ranch. It is a collection museums would covet.

"We had the rafters worked on [in the barn] and they pulled all my buggies out. I laughed and said that if someone pulled in they would think we were having an Amish family reunion!"

Soon, 4-year-old stallion GRM Monarchs Go Figure will be Harlan's next show-pen project as well as an up-and-coming breeding stallion. As predicted, the bloodlines that stayed true to the foundation blood of Flyhawk and the horses produced by Funquest Farms haven't gone out with any fads.

"We have repeat buyers. Most of the time, the horses hook people. But, most of the horses I sell sight unseen," Harlan says. "Before Dad passed away, he said, 'Harlan, if it weren't for Mom and I, you wouldn't be where you are.' And I agree. We've been around long enough that people have heard about us. Someone getting into it will hear from someone older that Grundens have good horses."

It is a legacy not lost on Harlan or Tammy. And one the couple eagerly wants to pass on to their grandchildren.

"That is a big love of his life—something to carry on," says Tammy. "He wants to see the ranch and the horses carry on and go another generation down."

With two young stallions in the corral and three young grandchildren to all grow up, together, the Grunden Ranch Morgan horse program is looking fairly young, in spite of its decades-old history. **WH**

KATE BRADLEY BYARS is a *Western Horseman* contributing editor. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com

TOP: HOWARD SCHATZBERG, COURTESY OF GRUNDEN FAMILY, BOTTOM: MELISSA HEMKEN



GIVE YOUR HORSE OR FAMILY THE GIFT OF CBD THIS HOLIDAY!

Full Spectrum, Premium Hemp • 3rd Party Verified & Lab Tested • Processed in an FDA Certified Lab



\$10 OFF
ANY ORDER

Just Enter
Promo Code:
Holiday

www.TheHealingCowgirl.com | Call Brenda at 419.234.4320

