

HT EXCLUSIVE WITH THE LEGENDARY GEORGE MORRIS

By Engy Adham

GEORGE MORRIS – FOR SOME HIS NAME CONJURES THE IMAGE OF THE PERFECTIONIST COACH ISSUING STRICT INSTRUCTIONS, WHILE OTHERS ENVISION THE HORSEMAN IN SMARTLY POLISHED BOOTS WAITING HIS TURN TO JUMP IN THE BIG INTERNATIONAL LEAGUES. OTHERS MIGHT CALL TO MIND A BLACK-AND-WHITE PHOTOGRAPH OF A 14-YEAR-OLD ATHLETE WINNING THE ASPCA MACLAY AND THE AHSA MEDAL FINALS AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN. AT THE END, THEY ALL AGREE THAT GEORGE MORRIS IS A TRUE LIVING LEGEND IN THE WORLD OF EQUESTRIAN SPORTS AS AN INSPIRING SPORTSMAN, OLYMPIAN, TRAINER, COACH AND INNOVATOR.

A person could spend hours porusing Morris' long list of accomplishments, starting from his early childhood when he conquered his fear of horses to become an Olympic team silvermedalist and the world's most accomplished hunter and jumper trainer.

The 1960's saw Morris' highest and best-remembered achievements when he won the Olympic team silver medal in Rome and the Grand Prix of Aachen on Night Owl - "He was a great horse. He had great heart and so much scope; not the most careful horse in the world, over the massive solid fences at Aachen he was a real Aachen horse. In those days, Aachen was a *puissance*-type class with successive jump-offs – not against the clock," Morris recalls.

Among all the horses Morris has trained, Calypso is one of Morris' most favourite horse. "Calypso was a Dutch horse by Lucky boy. He looked like a pony but he was a lot like his father; he did not have the best front end and it was not until we got to the Florida circuit that I realized he was a great horse. He was very intelligent and agile. He had a lot of stride. He is a horse that has taught himself in the ring, and all great horses learn at the show ring. You never had to sharpen him or do any particular gymnastic. Calypso was wonderful and probably would be worth 10 million Euros now," Morris says.

His famous comeback in the 1980's and, in particular, winning the \$500,000 Du Maurier Class at Spruce Meadows in 1988 mark a personal favourite achievement for

Morris: "I was 50 and it was one of the biggest thrills of my life."

Maybe because of his many early accomplishments, George Morris did not feel constrained by the classical equestrian training he received. He created his own independent identity in the equestrian world. Morris left his mark by developing techniques inspired by the classics of equestrian instructions. He redefined equestrian training to not only be concerned with sets of tasks or techniques to be followed or gobbets of information; he was interested in sharing his philosophy and the art of riding.

George Morris introduced his training philosophy using a unique riding style, which is a combination of the forward seat and the classical deep seat. He



acknowledges the complexity of it, yet praises its benefits for better jumping. "To put those two seats together for jumpers is quite a tricky task: you cannot just rely on the deep seat because that is too rigid and you cannot just rely on the forward seat because that is too passive. You have to put the two together – that is my philosophy of training: to produce a very well-schooled horse, so you are in the position to do what Caprilli first taught us. That is, to use a very forward seat and let the horse do the jumping," Morris explained.

He continues, "It is paradoxical, but I like a very well-schooled horse under total control but at the same time I like him to be under such control that I can teach him to help me jump the fences. To expand on that: to jump well, the horse must be allowed

to have complete freedom over the fence. Using the forward seat ensures he is unhindered as he arrives at the point of takeoff and over the fence."

Morris has been aware that there is no such thing as the ultimate conventional formula; a human understanding needs more than a set of tasks to memorize, so he put his philosophy into practice. "My system is built on exercises, right up to Olympic level: exercises for the rider's position, exercises for the use of aids, exercises on the flat and exercises over jumps. I use jumping exercises, three days a week is the maximum with the very rare exception of a competition. For eventers, if they work on their cross-country one day a week, they can work on their show jumping two days, or vice versa. They will work on fitness or on their dressage for the other

three or four days. In my opinion, horses should not jump more than three days a week maximum."

While people have always been able to identify an American rider from the rest of the European riders, does Morris think that this still applies today or have riders particularly at the more advanced levels adopted more of the forward seat and use it more than before?

Morris told HT that there is not a clear-cut answer to this question. In an age where everything is universal starting from universal teachings to international riding styles, tradition and heritage of horseback riding matters and it contributes in building the culture of the horse riding sports. "I think that top athletes realize the real speed you have to go today to break a record." He continues, "It is easier for

the horse and the rider to have a short stirrup and to sit somewhat forward so that the horse gallops faster and easier," Morris replies.

Morris thinks that a lot of people in this sport have developed a feeling for his teachings. "What I was taught is that all the different parts of the rider's body have to be in tune with the movement of the horse. Dressage and jumping are two different games; we use dressage to better school the horse to respond during jumping." Although he acknowledges the adaptations to the forward seat principle invented by the Italians, Caprilli and Sanatini, he added his own character to it. He understood that a good rider is not only about mastering riding techniques, but about training the horse as well. Not only did this technique introduce a new riding style to riders but it also required them to school their horses in this technique as well.

"Many eventers find the show jumping phase difficult. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, today the dressage is very exaggerated for eventing – it is almost Grand Prix dressage, which requires a very different position to that for show jumping and is very contrary to the forward seat. Secondly, when they go cross country, most of them go over every fence in the safety seat, sitting back on the horse's back and often leaning on his mouth – this hinders him. This is very often against the movement and, consequently, the horse gets defensive by the third day. He is not confident that the rider won't sit back on his back and overuse their legs and perhaps even hit his mouth. So he goes to the third day defensive, which gets a hollow jumper, it gets a quick jumper, and it gets a stiff jumper. Those jumpers hit fences. Eventing really asks the horses and riders to do three very different things today, where years ago they were very similar things. That is the difficulty."

Not only do Morris' contributions raise the bar of equestrian training higher than standard, but more importantly, they establish a new school of thought. George Morris

developed the canter exercise for forward flow: "This is a great first or warm-up exercise to get the horse flowing and to work on the canter – I use it a lot. It builds confidence because the rider has to trust the horse to avoid checking him. Trotting fences is very good for horse and rider but is just preparatory. The reality is canter work; you jump a course in canter and gallop, so that is what has to be ridden." Not only is canter exercise beneficial for the horses, but for the riders as well; it can help develop a rider's eye for a stride. The beauty of both these exercises is that they include single fences and related fences as well. "It is the kiss of death today for the rider when you just practice related fences. Single fences – as found out hunting – are very good for the rider's eye. People don't do enough of that today in my opinion," he explained, adding

"You have to perfect the ability to let the horse go forward. That is, to follow the horse to the fences then place him either to a rather deep distance so you get the right bascule, or to a balanced distance. It must never be a long, flat distance."

Morris developed the "Y-Shape gymnastic for improving the canter work" which is a gymnastic exercise that introduces coursework and keeps the horse rideable at the canter.

"This part of the exercise is the most difficult – the horse has to listen, especially to the half-halt, and that is where the canter work comes in. He has to stay in the corners – not cut them, he has to steer at the gallop, and he has to listen to the outside leg. This makes the horse more responsive to the aids and develops the rider's ability to keep their focus through quite a few jumping efforts and turns."

While training and riding philosophies shape the riding styles of horsemen/women, HT asked George Morris whether the breeding of the sport horse today has affected riding styles. "Yes, definitely," Morris confirms, "for example, the Arabian horses are known for their intelligence and every

horseman needs that. The Argentines, Australians and Chileans rely on the 'thoroughbred' horses but Europeans rely on the warmbloods. Now the Europeans took the 'thoroughbred' so the European horse now has become closer to the Arab horse."

Although the world recognizes the Americans as the people who established the structure of organized show jumping, the American market with its diversity did not invest in breeding lines like the Europeans have done. Morris replies, "It has never been our history to breed jumping horses, we breed racing horses. Up until the 70s, we used thoroughbred racing lines in show jumping. So, we will never catch up with them because it is the European's tradition to breed all kinds of horses. Tradition gives the Europeans an edge because it is part of their history."

Morris is a human databank of horse and rider training wisdom developed over six decades of personal high-level hands-on experience and years of practice in the field, creating an ever-growing cadre of his students who have learned from the source through his clinics and workshops, published books and videos. Out of all the different students George Morris have encountered along his path, Conrad Honfeld is a rider who has personified Morris' vision in show jumping. "Well, I would have to say that Conrad Honfeld was a very hard working student and really intelligent." He gives all newcomers the same grounding advice: "Become a very rounded horse person and listen to what skilled horsemen have to say. Get a very good basis in horse management, a very good basis in flatwork and a very good basis in jumping work."

George Morris is the ultimate example of living history in the equestrian world. Not only was he able to learn, create his own independent identity and establish a school of thought of his own, but he was able to build a living legacy in the world of equestrian training which will continue to influence jumpers and eventers for generations to come. 

