

The Dressage Experiment

A technical account of how a Morgan carriage horse became an FEI dressage competitor.

By Angelia Bean

Several years ago, I started “the dressage experiment.” I wanted to know if the “warmblood advantage” was created by some amazing warmblood genetics, or by deeper pocketbooks that a lot of warmblood owners had to invest in their mounts’ educations. I met a Morgan stallion, Statesmans Eclipse, who met the criteria of an FEI dressage prospect—active hind leg, uphill movement, good mind—in a non-warmblood package, and talked his owner, Kate Farris of Ensign’s Grace Morgans, into letting me develop him to FEI. Eclipse was ten years old when he made the career switch from combined driving, which put him far behind schedule for an FEI dressage prospect. The German thinking, which had filled my working student years, is horses should to be trained in half-pass and changes before age nine, because the softer, younger ligaments are more able to learn these high-torque movements with less injury. At age ten, Eclipse was learning to work with the weight of a rider on top instead of behind him, so I knew I couldn’t afford to make mistakes in his training. I was going to need help.

Plus, in order for “the dressage experiment” to be valid, I needed to give Eclipse the same education any warmblood would get. First,

Right: This photo, taken in 2006, the year Eclipse showed 3rd level, shows his talent for lateral work. His half pass earned him consistent high marks (Photo by Catharine Parnell).





Counterclockwise from bottom left: Eclipse's dressage training improved the quality of his canter, seen here in 2006, 2009 and 2012. Note the increased bend in his hips, hocks and stifles as the training teaches him to carry more weight on his hind legs (Photos by Linda Butz and Catharine Parnell).

he had me, a professional dressage trainer with four years of working studenthood and many trips around the sandbox under my belt, for six rides a week. Not my working student, but me. Then I gave him extra help in the form of lessons with many, many big-name trainers—Gunnar Ostergaard, Maryal Barnette, JJ Tate, to name a few, but the two trainers that provided the most help with his progress were Scott Hassler and Catherine Haddad Staller.

I am truly fortunate to call Scott Hassler my regular instructor. I started working with Scott when Eclipse was competing second level. Eclipse's self-assured attitude and super work ethic charmed Scott, who nicknamed him "Studboy."

Despite all of the expensive warmbloods in Scott's barn, he is not a breed snob. He was a tremendous help sorting out Eclipse's lateral work. Eclipse had the opposite problem of most dressage horses—instead of being stiff, he was too wiggly. Scott helped me stabilize the wiggle by setting up each lateral work in the following order: angle, bend, activity. When I set Eclipse up that way, I can ride for bigger gaits during shoulder-in or half-pass without the angle varying. If I don't carefully follow that order, when I sit into his back to make the gaits more active, he'll increase his bend as well, letting that extra energy spill out sideways, instead of becoming more swing and suspension. But when I follow that order, Eclipse earns consistent sevens on his lateral work.

No matter how textbook correct a horse's lateral work may be, the overall score is limited by the quality of a horse's basic gaits. When I showed up for a three-day boot camp of lessons and announced I wanted to improve Eclipse's gait score from a six to a seven, Scott didn't discourage me at all. We went right to work.

Eclipse's right lead canter is naturally quite good, a clean, three-beat canter with a long moment of suspension. His left lead, well, not so much. Scott employed his bag of tricks—which for Eclipse meant suppleness and thoroughness. To that end, we spent many, many hours on a 20-meter circle moving Eclipse between shoulder-in to travers (haunches-in) to counterflexion, to help him find the best alignment and balance. Once Eclipse found a clean left lead canter, we'd compress a little, then let him jump into a bigger, more suspended stride. If Eclipse got quick instead of bigger, we'd go back to moving him between the lateral pieces. According to Scott, the problem was Eclipse needed to strengthen the bridge of his back, instead of pulling with his neck.

Eclipse's left lead canter became a more distinct, three-beat-gait when he was in a slight travers position. So that's how I rode it for almost two years. Building the back muscles took a long time. Even to this day, I ride Eclipse's left lead differently than his right lead. But now it doesn't feel like a "bad" lead anymore, more like he has a slightly exaggerated right-sidedness instead of truly straight and ambidextrous. But then, few horses are.

The work of improving the quality of Eclipse's basic gaits was hard, tedious work. Eclipse would come back to the barn tired, but he never said "no." The big, fancy warmbloods in my barn didn't put nearly the effort into every workout that Eclipse did, and his amazing heart took him further than many horses in my barn. And it won the heart of all of us around him.

After all of this careful attention to improving the quality of his left lead canter, teaching Eclipse the flying change left-to-right



Left: Taken in 2006, Ange and Eclipse were six months into “the dressage experiment”; Right: This photo was taken in the Summer of 2012. Both photos are at approximately the same point in the stride. Note the increased amount of bend in all of Eclipse’s joints, primarily his hind legs, and how much more compact and uphill his carriage has become (Photos by Linda Butz).

was pretty easy. He was either completely correct in the left lead, making the change easy, or I had to correct the canter quality. The right lead didn’t need nearly as much help from me, so I thought it was great. But when I went to do the change, he would often be a bit startled by the aid and drop his back. For one change, it wasn’t really a big deal, but when we added counting, our tempis were fraught with mistakes, always in the right-to-left change. So I needed help.

About this time, I had the opportunity to ride in a clinic with Catherine Haddad. She put me at ease in the first five minutes of my lesson, by announcing that she loved Morgans. She said if she didn’t ride warmbloods, she would ride Morgans because they are so correct in their neck conformation.

I showed her my problem with counting in the tempis. Catherine suggested I ride the changes from my spur instead of from my seat. So instead of preparing the canter, change my legs, then change my shoulders/seat as I had been doing, she had me prepare the canter, change my leg then give him a tick with the spur. Since he was dropping his back from my seat aid, this seemed like it would help. After a bit of practice, Eclipse and I learned to count.

The next big hurdle in the Prix St George test is the canter pirouettes. In the pirouettes, Eclipse’s too-wiggly problem really came out. If I didn’t have everything just right, his pirouette would become a turn-around-the-middle. Catherine stressed that in the pirouette, the inside hind leg must step straight forward, and not cross at all. Then she had me bridge my reins to prevent me from using the inside rein. She kept firing corrections at me, about leg pressure, seat pressure, rein use, all of which were correct, but between her input and trying to

keep Eclipse’s wiggle under control, it was just too much input at once.

By this point in the lesson, Eclipse and I were both feeling pretty overloaded with technicality. So she asked me do walk pirouettes, which Eclipse and I do consistently well. Her sage advice was “whatever you are doing so he understands to turn into the bend in the walk, do that in the canter.” So I did. And he gave a recognizable canter pirouette. The pirouettes are not Eclipse’s highlight, but they are respectable.

Scott took a look at the pirouettes some time later, and was pleased with how much more organized they were. We could create a canter pirouette from the walk, or from a carefully set-up line, but when I tried to put it all together in the Prix St George test order, things wanted to fall apart. Scott watched me work for a few minutes, and commented that when I was struggling, Eclipse was getting too long behind me. He had me focus on keeping Eclipse’s hind legs right under my seat, regardless of what we were doing. When I could keep the feeling of Eclipse’s energy bundled up just under the saddle, we could stay organized through the entire canter tour.

This year, every time Eclipse went out Prix St George, he had big, tough classes and he was the only Morgan, and at age seventeen, often the oldest horse in his class. He held his own, placing in the top half every outing. I am terrifically proud of the little guy’s progress and his huge heart. “The dressage experiment” paid off. ■

This article first appeared in the Morgan Dressage Association Newsletter.