

Nadeau

This Morgan a baron that robs your heart

UC Ringmaster is standing before me, in full chestnut splendor this snowy afternoon, reminding all present that he is the ringmaster, that he is the champ.



Terese Karmel

Now I'm not a fan of Morgan horses (I don't dislike them, just don't know much about 'em).

Thoroughbreds are my game, but I know a superior animal when I see one. What helps his day is that Ringmaster's greatest admirer alongside me, pointing out the 23-year-old's best qualities.

"Look at that magnificent head," Al Cowan says, as the stately fellow stands at attention or John Bennett, who takes care of the horse barn at the University of Connecticut.

"He never drops his ears," Bennett chimes in after Ringmaster has trotted around the UConn Polo Arena with Bennett hitched to him in a buggy.

"When that horse was dropped, he was the best foal that every hit the ground," says Cowan.

He knows. Shortly after Ringmaster's birth at the UConn barns, the horseman in attendance called Cowan to come to the birth site to see him. "What'll we call him?" the horseman asked.

"Ringmaster 'cause that's what he's gonna be" comes Cowan's reply, a conversation he repeats to me more than two decades later with the spirit and confidence as if it was at the moment of Ringmaster's birth.

He turned out to be absolutely correct.

Among his other honors, Ringmaster twice earned the biggest prize of all for Morgans: world champ — that in the early 1990s during annual competition in Oklahoma City.

"He thinks a lot of himself. He's a champ." This time it's Bennett extolling Ringmaster's virtues. "He could win the damn world championship today," offers Cowan. From what I see, I think he could win the damn Kentucky Derby.

I didn't intend to spend an afternoon with this Morgan horse but somehow an earlier interview with Cowan about a study he had completed on agriculture in the state led to it.

It's not that his study, based on state agricultural data from the year 2000, isn't important. It's not only important — it's lively and understandable, two qualities that prompted Al Cowan, with his natural affinity for humans as well as animals, to translate into terms that make sense to people like me.

For example, based on figures from the state Department of Agriculture, Cowan calculated that 254 eggs were produced by Connecticut farms for each person in 2000.

And, if they desired, there's enough milk produced for every person in the state to drink 10 8-ounce glasses a year as well as eat up to 10 pounds of apples, 8 pounds of corn and 2 pounds of strawberries in 365 days.

I asked him why he personalized this list instead of just reporting, for example, that the dairy farmers produce, say 500 million pounds of milk (my figures not his) or 900 billion eggs, and so forth. "You can't understand 500 pounds of milk," says when I question him about the figures.

And then he puts state production of milk in even more understandable terms: "That's enough 8 ounce glasses of milk to go around the circumference of the earth 1.4 times."

Even Afghanistan, I pitch in. "Including Afghanistan ... where the milk of human kindness doesn't really exist," comes the reply.

If there's a method to Al Cowan's madness it's that despite being "officially" retired as a professor of animal science at UConn since 1985 (and department head for 33 years), his sleeves are still rolled up and he's rooting around in the horse dung and cow hay like the young ag student.

"My wife says I flunked every damn day of retirement," he says during our first conversation in a library, this quiet afternoon when the students are still on break.

And then he tells me some of the activities he is still involved in, mostly on behalf of reminding people and legislators that as highly urbanized as it is, Connecticut is still first among New England states in net farm income (\$184.8 million, according to 2000 USDA statistics) and its crop production, valued at \$352.2 million that same year, was also highest of the six.

Total agricultural output valued at \$590.6 ranked second only to Vermont, and barely at that.

Although he's been calculating and reviewing figures like this for five decades, Al Cowan speaks with a sense of wonderment when he considers that Connecticut's 4,872 square miles is fifth among the six New England states (does Rhode Island even count, I wonder, but dare not ask).

These are the types of figures he will present Feb. 23 to legislators at the annual breakfast meeting (featuring, one gathers, Connecticut produced eggs and milk) of the Tolland County Farm Bureau for legislators in the country in which Cowan, legislative policy chairman of the group, will go over with the lawmakers.

"There are many good things," he wrote the legislators informing them of the meeting. "There are problems and challenges, too," he added. And then tactfully tells me that it would be better for farmers and the state as a whole if the Connecticut program of purchasing development rights of farm land was a little more intense. Twenty-one years ago, when the program was established, the goal was to purchase 130,000 acres.

Since that time, only a little more than 28,000 acres costing \$7 million have been bought to protect farm land and Al Cowan and others think this isn't enough two decades into the program.

And so he keeps his large beefy cowman's hands in the political stew pot of farm lobbying and he also keeps chalk in these large hands as a substitute teacher in the UConn ag school when a colleague is unable to do a class.

"I don't know these kids and they don't know me, so I always introduce myself as 'Hello, I'm Al Cowan, take a number from 1 to 99.'" What follows is an exercise in which students cube the number, Cowan asks for the results and then through a memorized formula comes up with their original number.

I try it with him (my number is 39), he comes up with 49 and then we discover that my own arithmetic is faulty — not his by any

stretch of the imagination. "You can win a lot of beer with this," he comments.

Those same hands have held the reins of many a Morgan horse both in Storrs and at the University of Massachusetts, where he taught for six years before coming to UConn in 1952 as the youngest animal science department head in the country, where he taught courses and did research in his specialty of animal breeding and genetics and reproductive physiology. Agriculture education was and remains a major focus.

With all of these years and all of these experiences, he has stories that would fill volumes. And the names of the people and their individual tales — these are the things that prick my ears as he tells me about Locke Theis, a horse owner out west who had to sell off a large group of animals because a drought came along. That, in a roundabout way, is how UConn acquired Panfield, another prize Morgan who became a great breeder. "I haven't been as good a breeder as Panfield," the father of two comments.

And then at another point he mentions Lyman Orcutt and his good wife, Cheryl, the former a great judge at Morgan shows, and the latter his kind widow who lent Ringmaster back to UConn a couple of years ago for breeding and he's still here and he's still getting it on with mares. Orcutt, he tells me, "could talk with guys with manure on their boots and to top researchers with the National Academy of Sciences." After UConn got plenty of offspring out of Ringmaster, he was sold to the Orcutt farm sometime in the mid-1980s.

And lazily, somehow, like a meandering river, our conversation drifts from Morgans to thoroughbreds, and Al Cowan tells me in that hoarse, deep voice of his that he saw Secretariat's 31-length victory in the 1973 Belmont Stakes and now I'm really in his pocket. And before I know it, we're back to Morgans and I learn of Abbot, who as it turns out was responsible for Cowan's most memorable tumble, that when while waving to a pretty girl in an Amherst field, Abbot cut left, and Cowan fell right. "It was a hard fall, but not for the girl," he says.

He pitches another study he's undertaking — important, I'm sure — on women in agriculture, and I nod politely, but I'm thinking about that damn Ringmaster again.

"Did he remember you when he came back here?" I ask.

"I think he did," comes the rather bashful reply, unusual for such a straight talker who is more comfortable, I am absolutely sure, at horse auctions and in the barns than at faculty senate meetings.

"I used to do this thing that made him happy." A few days later when we're with the horse, Cowan scratches Ringmaster's side and the Morgan nuzzles against his other hand and drools.

"Look at those hocks. They're where they're supposed to be, not way out there," Cowan goes on. Ringmaster demands attention, once again. We are in the presence of royalty.

"When he was 6 and 7, he could set you on fire. And he still can. He's got quality to burn."

From our brief acquaintance, it occurs to me that so does Al Cowan.

Terese Karmel is features editor of the Chronicle