This Morgan a baron that robs your heart

UC Ringmaster is standing before me, in full eight-meat splendour, on a snowy afternoon, reminding all present that he is the ringmaster, that he is the champ.

Now I'm not a fan of Morgan horses (I don't dislike them, just don't know much about them). Thoroughbreds are my game, but I know a superior animal when I see one. What helps his day is that Ringmaster's greatest admirer and associate, pointing out the 23-year-old stallion's best qualities.

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

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

"When that horse was dropped, he was the ex-fool that every hit the ground," says Cowan.

He knows. Shortly after Ringmaster's birth the UC horses, 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 gonna be," comes Cowan's reply, a conversation he says to me more than two decades later with the spirit and confidence as it was at the moment of Ringmaster's birth.

He turned out to be absolutely correct.

Among his other honors, Ringmaster twice won the biggest prize of all for Morgan: the grand champion — that in the early 1990s during the annual competition in Oklahoma City.

"He thinks a lot of himself. He's a champion," Bennett extolling Ringmaster's traits. "He could win the world championship today," offers Cowan. From what I see, I think he could win the Kentucky Derby.

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

"It's not that his study, based on state agricultural data from the 2000 census, 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 the sense to people like me.

"For example, based on figures from the state department of Agriculture, Cowan calculated at 2.54 eggs were produced by Connecticut each person in 2000. And, if they dried, there's enough milk made for every person in the state to drink 0.8 ounces glasses a year as well as eat up to 3 pounds of apples, 8 pounds of corn and 2 arts of strawberries in 365 days.

asked him why he personalized this list of just reporting, for example, that to dairy farmers produce, say 500 million units of milk (my figure not his) or 900 billion eggs, and so forth.

"You can't understand 500 units 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 ounces glasses of milk to go around the circumference of the earth 14 times."

Even Afghanistan, I think. "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 UC 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 flanked 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 remolding 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 highest of the six.

Total agricultural output valued at $380.6 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).

There are these types of figures he will present Feb. 23 to legislators at the annual breakfast meeting (Featuring one, me!, one, meeters, Connecticut, produced 300 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 13,000 acres.

Since that time, only a little more than 25,000 acres costing $7 million have been bought to protect farmland 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 UC on agriculture 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 UC 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 stick with me as he tells me about Locke Thris, 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 UC acquired Pasfield, another prize Morgan who became a great breeder. "I haven't seen as good a breeder as Pasfield" 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 UC for a couple of years for breeding and she's still here and she's still getting it on with mares. Orcutt, he tells me, "could talk with guys with mares on their boots and to top researchers with the National Academy of Sciences." After UC 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 Morgana 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 real in his pocket. And before I knew it, we're back to Morgan 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 hooves. 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.

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