

Dr Al Cowan

A Lasting Influence At UConn & For The Morgan Breed

By CYNTHIA WEBER

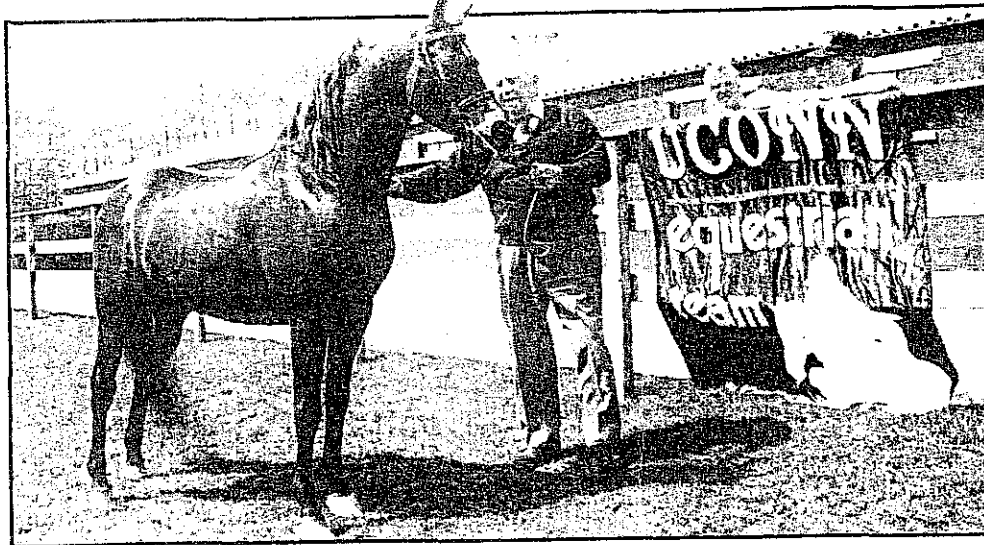
STORRS, Conn. — When Dr Al Cowan speaks, people listen. There is something in his rich, bass voice that commands attention. But there is more than a commanding presence and voice. *Underscoring the voice there is a twinkle, a disarmingly direct approach, and prodigious knowledge. One not only listens, one listens with concentrated respect.*

Over the years, a great number of people have listened to Dr Cowan. As head of the Animal Industries Department of the University of Connecticut from 1952 to 1984, Dr Cowan has wielded a powerful influence over the horse world in general and over the Morgan horse world in particular. Today while he is emeritus professor of animal science, horse breeders continue to listen intently.

Dr Cowan's association with the Morgan began when he was a student at the University of Massachusetts. As a student, he regularly rode a Morgan stallion named Abbott. Then when Dr Cowan joined the faculty at Massachusetts in the mid-'40s, he was instrumental in expanding their Morgan breeding program. When Dr Cowan moved to the University of Connecticut in 1952, Morgans naturally became the focus of the university's horse breeding program.

The breeding program at the University of Connecticut is, and always has been, small by most standards, for the program produces only eight to 12 foals a year. However, the quality of the foals is outstanding and has helped to enrich and to maintain Morgan breed standards from Connecticut to California.

As Dr Cowan is quick to point out, however, the Morgan breeding program at the University of Connecticut is only a tiny part of a much larger business, the business of education. He reiterates that



Dr Al Cowan holds U.C. Show Biz, one of UConn's premier stallions.

—Photo, Cynthia Weber

there would be no horses at the university if the horses did not successfully serve as an educational and scientific tool in the school's development program.

Although the University of Connecticut boasts an ever increasing number of riders, trainers, and champion horses, Dr Cowan is always looking at a larger picture. "We highly encourage students with a specific species interest to always broaden their base in order to enhance their career opportunities," he remarks.

As a land grant college, Connecticut has the resources to expand and to refine its agricultural and scientific programs in many areas. Touted by many as having the best equine studies program east of the Mississippi, the University of Con-

necticut, not surprisingly, attracts increasing numbers of students from other states. It is surprising, however, that the majority of those students are women.

Dr Cowan points out with some pride that women have not always enjoyed this career opportunity. He reveals a chart with some startling statistics: In 1938 the percentage of women to men enrolled as majors in the college of Agriculture and Natural Resources was 3 percent women to 97 percent men. This ratio held solidly until 1968, but then a shift occurred. The ratio jumped from 10 percent women to 90 percent men, and then in 1978 the ratio was 23 percent women to 77 percent men. In 1980 it was 54 percent women to 46 percent men; in 1990 it was 60 percent women to 40 percent men; currently in the entire field of Animal Science at the University of Connecticut, the percentage is 70 percent women to 30 percent men.

Dr Cowan finds the increased numbers of women in the university's equine program extremely logical. During the forties and fifties, he notes, women were allowed very few activities and outlets. Today, of course, women play sports as fiercely as men and enjoy nearly the same celebrity and success. However, 40 and 50 years ago it was another story. Horses not only provided the missing competitive and career outlet, but they also served as equalizers in competition. Astride a horse, a woman can do anything a man can do.

The dominant numbers of women currently enrolled in the university's equine studies program is immediately evident if you visit the immaculate barns on the Storrs campus. Young women are driving

stalls, and young women are caring for foals and grooming stallions. Everywhere, young women are working effectively and efficiently.

If you are privileged enough to visit those barns as a guest of Dr Cowan, his legacy, reputation, and continuing commitment to education are also immediately evident. There is a palpable respect among all for the man the moment he enters the barn. Watching him and listening to him speak, you will understand and share the respect. He asks a student to remove U.C. Show Biz, a Morgan stallion from his stall. Show Biz is a full brother to U.C. Ringmaster world champion, one of the best bred at UConn. Gleaming with stud-like vitality, Show Biz dances on his crossties. Dr Cowan scratches the horse in a certain spot on his neck, and the horse instantly relaxes.

Dr Cowan obviously knows the horse. In fact he seems to know *everything* about the horse. He praises the fine points of the horse's head and neck. He comments on the animal's conformation to his type. Listening to him speak, his expanding vision unfolds with the same stunning clarity of a budding flower captured by time-lapse photography.

Dr Cowan understands Show Biz. He understands Morgans. He understands horses. He understands genetics. He understands life. And yet there is no arrogance beneath the understanding. He is an educator, an educator with a sense of humor. When asked to comment on the profound influence he has had on the Morgan horse world, he responds with his characteristic twinkle and directness: "Actually, I'm better known as a cattle man."

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