



Without limits

I first saw Morgan Wagner riding her horse Endo in a video linked to my Facebook feed. It was a working equitation class in Las Vegas, and I watched with rapt attention as the young woman and her horse navigated around the obstacles in the arena, including gates, bridges, poles and even a small jump. If not for the headline on the video, I might never have noticed that the horse was blind.

The video ended with applause and cheers, and I went on about my business, returning to the work I'd been avoiding. A few months later I arrived at the barn where I board and saw a large Appaloosa standing in the cross ties. Where his left eye should be was a darkened hollow. I walked past them and saw that the other eye was gone, too. I turned around and came back.

"Is that the blind horse?" I asked without thinking. Obviously, with no eyes he was certainly blind.

"Yes," said the young woman who was grooming him.

Looking for inspiration? Consider Morgan Wagner and her horse Endo, who have overcome daunting challenges to continue to excel in the show ring.

By Theresa Rice

"No, I mean, is he *the* blind horse, like in the videos?"

"Yes."

And that is how I came to meet Morgan and her special horse Endo. Morgan was 13 when she picked out the 3-month-old foal at her grandmother's farm. Morgan not only broke Endo to saddle as he matured, she trained him to a high level of performance working together at liberty. For those unfamiliar, liberty work is when the horse and person move together in an enclosed area with the horse completely

loose—able to move at will but instead choosing to obey the person's requests. The goal is to build a strong foundation of trust and communication between horse and rider.

When Endo was about 9 years old, he developed uveitis, a painful inflammation of the uveal tract of the eye. Through years of recurring inflammatory episodes and treatments Endo's eyesight declined, and the pain mounted. The growing shadows that filled his visual world made him spooky and unsafe to be around. Morgan decided to have Endo's right eye removed in 2012, and the left one a year later. She knew that she might be ending Endo's career as a riding horse. But she made the gamble that he would be able to live a pain-free productive life.

At the same time, Morgan faced challenges of her own. She was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus at age 19, although looking at her you wouldn't suspect anything is amiss. Lupus is a chronic autoimmune disease that can affect tissues throughout the body; symptoms can include extreme fatigue, headaches, painful joints, anemia and fever.

Before Endo lost his eyesight, Morgan did

INSPIRATION: By continuing Endo's show ring career, Morgan Wagner hopes to demonstrate what blind horses can accomplish.



some research into how to help a horse adapt to blindness, and she began teaching Endo oral cues so that he would still know how to perform expected tasks.

After the second surgery, Morgan went back to work with Endo almost immediately to keep him in a routine. Their first and most daunting task was helping Endo re-learn balance. Even when his sight was clouded with shades and obstructions, the gelding had been able to make his way in the world. Now blind, Endo had to re-orient himself. Once this issue was resolved to a point that Morgan could safely ride him, she got back in the saddle.

Morgan and Endo did not start competing in working equitation until after his eyes were removed. The pair attended a working equitation clinic by Julie Alonzo, who was so impressed with their teamwork that she was happy to

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continue working with them.

Working equitation combines distinct "tests" focusing on different skills: dressage, ease of handling, speed and, at the highest level of competition, cattle handling. For Morgan, one of the draws of the discipline was the supportive community she found on the circuit. Competitors get to know each other and support one another in their pursuit of better performance.

Nonetheless, Morgan does hear negative comments sometimes. Some people suggest that she asks too much of the gelding. Why, they ask, doesn't she just put him in a pasture and let him lead a simple life? Morgan's answer to such questions is that every positive experience Endo has in a new

place, and the mastery of every new skill, makes him that much safer to be around. She continues to train Endo to demonstrate that blind horses still have value and can have meaningful relationships with their owners.

After watching the two working together around the barn, I tend to think Endo feels more at ease with Morgan than he would simply being turned out to pasture. He sticks his head out of his feeding window at the sound of her voice, "looking" for her. He also will stretch his head toward her, using sound and touch to find her, for scratches. Sometimes while riding my own horse in the ring with the pair, I forget that Endo is blind. His extraordinary talent seems to be the product of his attachment to Morgan and her dedication to him, not some kind of forced display pushed by a trainer.

I recently asked Morgan what she

would tell someone who was looking for encouragement in dealing with a challenge or disability. She pondered a moment, then responded: "Don't put limitations on yourself. You've got to find

a way to do what you want."

Spending even short periods of time around the barn with Morgan and Endo has changed my perspective on horsemanship. Now, I believe we can overcome any barrier with our horses. Most of us face challenges far smaller than those overcome by Endo and Morgan. I, for example, would just like to do a flying lead change without racing off into the sunset. But the prospect of success is there for each of us to achieve, if, as Morgan would say, we just set our minds to the task and stop putting limitations on ourselves. 🐾

To follow Morgan and Endo's journey, you can find them on Facebook at "Endo the Blind."

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