Reflections upon moving forward

Sasha Klein has been writing show reports for the Morgan Connection since she was 15 years old. For three seasons now the young lady this magazine once dubbed the “hunt seat poster child” has turned in a caliber of work way beyond her years for clarity, control and content. Like many other 17 year olds, she will be graduating from the junior exhibitor ranks at the end of this show year. She volunteered some thoughts about competing with her peers and the lessons she will carry forward throughout her life.

This is the last time I will be writing for The International Morgan Connection as a Junior Exhibitor. In a few weeks, after the 2006 Morgan Grand National and World Championships, I will age out of the junior ranks. After a decade (two years in walk/trot and eight years in junior exhibitor), some think that I have been a junior exhibitor for the past 25 years and it sometimes feels that way to me. But having spent so much time competing in, and reporting on the young rider divisions, I would like to share some thoughts about my experiences as a Morgan junior exhibitor show rider.

I have learned a number of major life lessons during my junior exhibitor career. From an early age, it is important to grasp the basic concept that you get out of it what you put into it. Going into riding only to show, and getting caught up in the color of your ribbons cuts you off from priceless character-building opportunities to learn about sportsmanship, being a member of a community, altruism, striving for excellence, diplomacy, and commitment.

I know that I have been extremely lucky to have had wonderful trainers, to whom I am deeply tied, great horses, and devoted and loving parents who have supported me through every step of my junior exhibitor career. In order to achieve the level of skill that I have demanded of myself, I have also learned what it means to juggle the many aspects of life. Commuting has been a major part of my life since fifth grade. I am often asked how I have managed to keep up with a demanding school schedule, as well as maintain a balanced personal life, while spending most weekends at a barn two states away from my home. My answer is that I do it because I have to - it has become an integral part of the fabric of my life.

As I enter my last Oklahoma as a junior exhibitor, and look back on my career in the junior ranks, I find that winning world championship titles are among the least important of the wonderful experiences that have accrued to me through my last decade in the Morgan world. Several years ago, standing in the line-up at an Oklahoma championship, I realized that I had never spoken personally to several of my long-time competitors. It soon became clear to me that the junior exhibitors who did not make it a priority to become friendly with their competitors were missing out on a key piece of the Morgan community. That moment marked a major change for me in my life as a show rider. From then on, I made it a point to speak to and become friendly with the kids I competed against. I cheered them on and helped them when I could, and when I became on a regular basis, a reporter for this magazine, I wrote about their skills in my coverage of horse shows. I also lauded the accomplishments of the next generation of Morgan riders, the walk/trotters.

Over the last few years, I have been delighted to find that my whole group of junior exhibitors have followed suit, and the warm-up ring and the line-up have become much friendlier places to ride. As we all age out, I feel that my former competitors are now my community and my peer group, as we help one another to make the difficult transition to the amateur ranks. I think that this has been an important and enduring life lesson for us all.

The Morgan world is comprised of many altruistic people. My introduction to true charitable work (more than money, giving of oneself - one's time, energy, and soul) came from Morgan people who have selflessly been involved in helping those less fortunate than themselves. Wonderful organizations such as the Marion Therapeutic Riding Association, which I have been privileged to become a part of, are heavily supported by the Morgan community, allowing us to give something back.

Middle school and high school are very difficult times in this culture, especially for girls. Those fortunate enough to have found a place in a community such as the Morgan world have a huge advantage in life tasks such as creating a sense of self, mastery and independence, and in building self-esteem at a crucial moment in development. Successfully navigating the life of a junior exhibitor teaches skills that can be used for all time. You learn about discipline, determination, loyalty, helping others, and being part of a larger community. You learn about being a good sport, in good times and in bad times.

As I finish my career in the junior ranks and prepare to embark on my amateur career, I realize that the friendships I have made along the way and the heartfelt support of the Morgan community have meant the most to me over the past decade. My involvement in the Morgan show world has helped me mature from a girl into a woman. I have learned the meaning of responsibility, the necessity of respect for others, and the value of determination and commitment.

As a magazine reporter, I have been privileged to watch the next generation of young Morgan riders, the future of our sport and our breed, grow and develop. This has provided me a perspective on the enduring nature of our sport, its enormous formative value, and its continuity over time.