



JEROME PARKER

A VIEW FROM CENTER RING

BY JENNY GREY

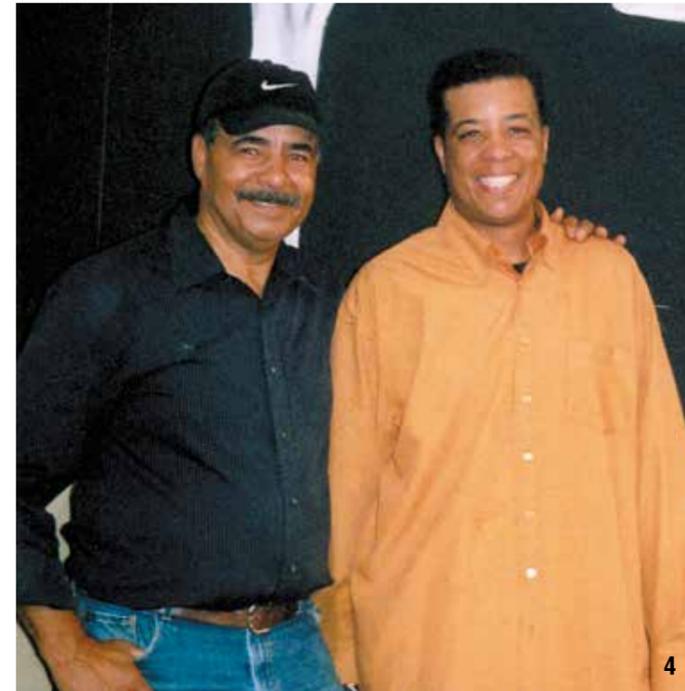
Jerome Parker was born to be a ringmaster. A third-generation member of a distinguished family of horsemen and a trainer for 25 years, he has a wealth of experience to draw on each time he steps onto the shavings. Recognized as the 2020 People's Choice Ringmaster of the Year for both Morgans and Saddlebreds and earning the 2015 AMHA Cecil R. Brown Memorial Sportsmanship Award, he is carving his own place in history as he continues his stellar career. With his view from center ring he states proudly, "I have the best seat in the house!"

Born on his grandparents Joe and Marie Parker's farm

1 Jerome Parker proudly carries on the tradition of the Parker family in the show ring.

2 Born on his grandfather's farm in Amenia, NY, Jerome grew up with a big extended family that included some of the finest horsemen in the country. Taking an early ride on Oakwood's Charm, he was destined for a career with horses.

3 When Jerome won the AMHA Cecil R. Brown Memorial Sportsmanship Award, he insisted his mom Jo Ann accompany him to the podium. "It was the highest honor I ever received", he said, acknowledging Jo Ann as the greatest influence in his life.



in Amenia, NY, Jerome grew up in a family who had a profound and positive effect on the Morgan breed. Joe and Marie had six children -- Hugh (Jerome's father), Bernard, Leslie, Bill, Joe Jr. and a daughter, Dorthea. Four of the boys went on to become highly respected horsemen while Joe Jr. became a professor at a local college. The Amenia farm essentially became a family compound. When the Parker offspring were ready to leave home, they each built a house on the property where they lived until the mid-1980s. When Hugh married Jo Ann, they had three children -- Jerome, Travis and Devon, who grew up in a great environment surrounded by multiple aunts, uncles and cousins in an extended family that still remains very close today.

With uncles excelling on the Morgan circuit, a father who made a name for himself showing Arabians and a grandfather who was famous for his spectacular wins with such superstars as Chasley's Superman and Bay State Gallant, it was a natural progression that Jerome would join the family business. The years he spent as a trainer, and what he learned from the generations before him, have a huge influence on his career as a first-rate ringmaster today.

Learning at the feet of a master as a young boy, Jerome remembers happy times sitting in Joe Parker's home with his brothers when he was young. Joe would make them lunch, tell them stories about the past and just talk about life in general. While their uncles worked horses, 'Granpop' explained what they were seeing and why.

Also a huge influence on his son's career, Hugh Parker turned his attention to Arabians while Jerome was in his teens. After gaining national attention working at El Hamal Arabians, Hugh opened his own stable where Jerome would train and learn under the guidance of his dad, working Morgans, Arabians and a few other breeds. Later on, Hugh took over the management of a Morgan farm where Jerome became the trainer with the responsibility resting squarely on his shoulders.

Mentored by some of the best horsemen in the business, Jerome was ready to go out on his own. Moving to Mystic, Connecticut for this new venture, he will always remember one of his first customers, Isabell LaCrosse. "She was always in my corner", he remembered. "She never left. She was such a great help to me. When one person believes in you, you can do it. You just have to listen and comprehend. All of my customers encouraged me and helped me mature. I met so many good people... It all started with mom. She had a way of building you up." When Isabell and Jo Ann came to shows together to support him, he remembers, "It was a treat to show off for my mom!"

The strongest influence in Jerome's life, Jo Ann Parker taught her sons to be proud of their heritage and to make a difference in the world. Always aware of their color and the difficulties that came along with it, they were never allowed to use it as a crutch. The message was always to work hard and do better. Although Jo Ann was strict, Jerome describes her as one of the kindest people in the world. The youngest of three and a self-professed 'mama's boy', Jerome is kind and generous to a fault, encouraging people when they are down and applauding their successes. Winning the AMHA Cecil R. Brown Sportsmanship Award after he became a ringmaster, and knowing his mom made him the person he is today, he insisted she be on the podium when he accepted this award that he regards as the highest honor he ever received. Today the plaque he received is hanging on the wall in Jo Ann Parker's home.

During the many years Jerome spent as a trainer, he was known for his ability to develop young horses. "I really enjoyed taking a yearling or a two-year-old, forming a relationship with them and watching them do well", he reflected. Having a number of breeders in his customer base, Jerome would teach their babies to lead and then get them to perform without breaking their spirit. Always working hard and doing the best for his customers, he was conscious of the importance of upholding the family legacy. However, there came a time when Jerome was ready to move on. With no particular plan at the time, he worked at a factory for a while but never envisioned his destiny as a ringmaster. Even when it happened, he remembers, "I never saw it coming!" He was about to move from a job he enjoyed to a vocation he loved.

When Cindy Mugnier asked Jerome to help out with the Academy division at a UPHA show, he got a first taste of being responsible for a ring. Shortly afterwards, his friend Bob Kleinfelter asked him to be a ringmaster at a 2 1/2 day show which fit perfectly with his day job. Gradually new shows were added, he left the factory and now he is doing 24 shows a year including the prestigious New England Regional Championship, Lexington Junior League, the Saddlebred World's Championship, and of course, the Morgan Grand National where he has been a key member of the team as a ringmaster in the Coliseum for the last 10 years. When the shows are over, Jerome is content to return to his apartment at Wild Wind Stables in Northford, Connecticut, where he helps out wherever needed. "I need to get my horse fix!" he told us emphatically.

4 Jerome's father, Hugh Parker, was his mentor and teacher in the early years. Making a name for himself showing Arabians, Hugh opened his own business then moved on to manage a Morgan farm where Jerome took over as trainer with the responsibility squarely on his shoulders.

5 When Jerome began his own training business, he showed WBM's Worth Watching for one of his first clients, Isabell LaCrosse. Always in his corner, Isabell stayed with Jerome until the end of his training career. He will never forget her encouragement and support.

6 One of Jerome's greatest pleasures was to start a young horse and bring it along without breaking its spirit. His first venture as a young trainer was with Nexus who showed in the park harness division.

The late Fred Nava, who became familiar with Jerome's ability to manage the ring at the East coast shows and who was managing the New England Regional, approached Jerome to take the position of ringmaster at the Grand National in 2012. Bill Whitley enthusiastically endorsed this decision. Presiding as ringmaster over the main ring since 1974, Bill knew exactly what qualities were needed and Jerome fit the bill. With great respect for the Oklahoma tradition, Jerome was a little daunted by the responsibility but knew it would have a huge, positive effect on his career. When Fred Nava flew to Oklahoma to pair Jerome up with Bill Whitley, Nava was already very sick. "He wasn't able to be there for the whole week", Jerome remembered. "We hugged and I told him 'I owe you everything'. It was the last time I saw him." Fred passed away in 2013 having created a profound change in Jerome's life.

Partnered with Bill that first year, Jerome was in capable hands. "He was unbelievable", said Jerome, who quickly absorbed the responsibilities of a ringmaster at the Morgan Grand National. At the end of the week Bill told Jerome "Big Daddy, I had a good time with you!" and also gave him a hug. Affirmation from a person who had managed that ring for almost 40 years meant the world to Jerome, giving him the confidence to return the following year knowing that he was up for the challenge.

With exemplary teamwork, Jerome and Bill worked together for the next few years in Oklahoma City, getting to know each other well. Always with safety on his mind Bill told us, "When I was at one end of the ring and he was at the other, I knew the ring was covered. He just wants to help everyone and keep everyone safe...He has a big advantage with his height and presence", Bill observed, reflecting on Jerome's ability to catch and calm a loose horse. "He's also very efficient and keeps things moving along and we have some fun at the same time. I can't say enough good things about him. He's a wonderful person and a joy to work with."

Having been coached by Bill Whitley and Fred Nava about proper ringmaster attire, Jerome went into his second year at the Morgan Grand National with a red coat made by Marsha De Arriaga. Initially wondering if he would feel com-

fortable being dressed up this way, and encountering some good-natured teasing from his brothers, he walked down the chute dressed in the red jacket for the first time, feeling less than confident. Just as he was about to enter the ring, however, something happened he will never forget. "Mrs. Fu was cheering and saying 'Bravo! I felt like a million bucks. I squared up my shoulders and straightened up feeling this is important and means something." From then on, Jerome has worn the red coat with great pride as a symbol of the respect he has for the show and its traditions.

Establishing a nationwide reputation for his ability to keep a ring running smoothly, Jerome attracted the attention of the Saddlebred World's Championship management who three years ago offered him the position of ringmaster on the green shavings in Louisville for the Saddlebred World's Championship. It was a huge honor that he accepted with some trepidation. Having been part of the Morgan community for so many years, he knew most of the people who were showing. Feeling less comfortable in the Saddlebred world, he would have to prove himself. "This was my biggest move ever", he remembered, knowing he had a responsibility not to tarnish the family legacy. Not only was Jerome warmly welcomed, people came up to him, sharing memories of his grandfather Joe who had trained so many great Saddlebreds. This meant everything to Jerome who remembered, "In Louisville I knew nobody but everyone was great!"

Jerome's transition to Louisville was eased considerably by his good friend, Howie Schatzberg. Always supportive, Howie walked side by side with Jerome down the chute and onto the green shavings for the first time in a show of solidarity. It was an act of kindness Jerome will never forget. As the photographer at Louisville for the last 21 years, Howie remembers his own first time walking into the ring alone, awe inspired by what he was experiencing. Wanting to share that moment with Jerome, he told him "Just soak it in and remember!"

Making a heartfelt and emotional statement on social media after his first Louisville experience and reflecting on the events of earlier years he stated, "I can't thank everyone enough, especially the Morgan community. Over 60 years

ago you gave a Black man a chance to compete at a world championship level and in time the Morgan world became family. And six years ago Fred Nava and the Morgan Grand National put his grandson in center ring ... and this year Joe Parker's first love (Saddlebreds) had his grandson standing in center ring at its world championship. Granpop, we got there! I hope you're proud." There is no doubt Joe would stand and applaud his grandson with pride for ensuring the Parker family legacy and tradition of excellence will live on in the hearts and minds of a new generation.

A great friend for many years and a big fan of the Parker family, Howie has watched Jerome's transition from trainer to ringmaster. "There's something in his DNA that sets him apart", said Howie. Very much alike, Jerome and Howie have never lost the excitement of being at a show. They have a common thread. They root for people and don't take anything for granted. While in the ring they talk to each other about special moments or great performances. Both of them having a long, first-hand knowledge of how the breeds have progressed and how much the trainers are achieving, they are often in awe of what they are seeing accomplished and have long-lasting memories of the special events occurring in the ring.

For Jerome, his favorite memory is one that made the audience cheer and shed tears when Alex Mooney, who lost her life to cystic fibrosis in 2019, took the victory pass. Living life to the fullest after coming back from a double lung transplant she won the 2012 Grand National Championship in English Pleasure Amateur Mares riding her beloved 'Desi' (DAP Wisteria). "The applause was something different", said Jerome. "It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It reminded me about what was good about the horse

7 Looking forward to working in center ring with Jerome again this year, Missy Hanover said "It's a delight to see him find his perfect job. He is the best of the best!"

8&9 Jerome has always been close with brothers Travis and Devon as they share the love of horses and sports. Still very close, they talk on the phone frequently.



world. Every year somebody strikes a chord and I remember it as clear as day."

While not everyone can win a victory pass in Oklahoma or Louisville, when Jerome hands out a ribbon he makes each competitor feel they have accomplished something special. His big smile and words of congratulation are completely genuine because he has walked the walk. "Win or lose, everyone has earned the right to be there", he reminds us. "I know what it takes to do this...I cheer for the winner and bleed for the loser!"

Having worked with many great ringmasters over the years, Howie Schatzberg views Jerome as the most well-rounded, especially at such a young age, with skills that set him apart. "He's consistent in all phases of what he does", said Howie, especially noting Jerome's awareness of what is going on in the ring at all times. Just as important, Jerome knows the history of most of the trainers and competitors he is there to serve. "He knows their past", said Howie. "If they have lost a loved one or if there is something going on in their life, he quietly acknowledges it with a pat or a word of encouragement. He is in this for all the right reasons."

A well-known judge, Susi Day echoes Howie Schatzberg's viewpoint while describing Jerome as a friend, a legend and an amazing human. When thinking of him, a huge smile comes to her face. "He is the kind of person who makes your day better, just because you had the pleasure of being in his presence. There is no more positive person in this world than Jerome. From the first time I met and worked with him we had an instant friendship. He is the ultimate professional who knows how to make what we do in center ring a joyful experience. He has a passion for the industry rare among center ring officials. He is not just collecting a paycheck; he is pursuing his life's passion and it shows in everything he does. He makes our jobs as judges seamless. We do not have to worry about anything because 'Jerome's got this!' The consummate professional, the ultimate jokester and without question one of the best people I know."

A close friend, Amanda DuPont can attest to Jerome's empathetic nature saying, "If I have a problem or just want to talk, he's the kind of person I can call at midnight or even three a.m. and he will pick up the phone. If I need a reality check or a morale boost, he is always there to listen. I don't know what I would do without him." The night before her son AJ showed for the first time, she sent a message to Jerome saying "Please watch out for my boy." The next day Jerome sent her a text telling her what a good job AJ had done. This

meant the world to Amanda who has taken many new riders to smaller shows where a good ringmaster is essential. "I just feel better knowing that Jerome is in the middle of the ring", she said, echoing what the Morgan community feels.

As a judge, Amanda enjoys the fun environment Jerome maintains. When the hours are long and officials are tired, he takes the lead to keep an upbeat atmosphere. Whenever a show hosts a special event, Jerome will be the first to volunteer his help, even going as far as playing with a group of youngsters on a bouncy ball or dressing up in a silly costume. Also relating a story about Jerome's dedication to the job, she remembers the time he texted her after an evening session saying that he was in the hospital taking care of a kidney stone – a process we understand is incredibly painful. By the next morning he was back at the show with a smile on his face as if nothing had happened. When his mom told him there were no excuses in life, he took her advice to an extreme!

Also a judge, Missy Hanover looks forward to being in the ring at the Morgan Grand National with Jerome again this year. She has great respect both for the history and traditions as well as the competitors, many of whom she has known from her early days as a trainer on the West coast. "Every year I go, I don't take it lightly", she told us. "It's a huge responsibility and an honor."

Meeting Jerome for the first time while judging the Western New York show Missy remembered, "He was such a natural and we had a great time!" "He's a superstar; he's humble and kind...everybody feels comfortable with him in the ring...he has such a respect for the past, the animals and the horse business. He is such a good, kind person; I have never heard him say a bad word about anyone. It's a delight to see him find his perfect job. He is the best of the best!"

With responsibility that extends well beyond his time in the ring, Jerome makes sure he is prepared to work as many as three sessions. "Nothing interferes with the job", he told us. "I get plenty of sleep; I try to get some exercise and walk on the treadmill; I take care of myself. I like to make sure the show runs the same way every year. Each day I prep everything for the next. I check in with the judges to see if they need anything and I make sure the right number of ribbons and awards are laid out." While safety is the primary issue, he is careful to give the judges the space to do their jobs and to support them any way he can. "Everyone respects each other's jobs...it's a moving machine and it works great!"

When activity in the other rings slows down, ringmasters from those venues are able to backfill a session in

the Coliseum and Jerome may have some time off. Having developed a love for travel and exploring while going to distant Arabian shows with his family, Jerome looks for opportunities to visit local landmarks while at a show. When he has a night to himself, he often visits the Oklahoma City Memorial after dark. "It's amazing", he told us. "There are tons of people but they are all very quiet." For many of us, this is a very special place.

Not only recognized as a top-notch ringmaster, Jerome has gained a national reputation for leadership in the greater equine community. Named as a thought leader by the USEF for the Diversity in Action program, he strives to bring more awareness and opportunity for minority groups to become involved in equine sports. "You have to do the outreach... and it's not easy when everyone is so busy but kids will follow other kids and they are the ones who will move the breed forward." Not only will these young people be changemakers, they will remember Jerome in the same way that people remember his grandfather – someone who made a difference and paved the way for those who came after him.

As the Parker family changed the hearts and minds of people in the Morgan breed two generations ago, Jerome believes everyone should be welcome, no matter what they look like. The key is to bring the opportunities to the people he is trying to reach. Becoming well-known as a ringmaster with a nationwide reputation, he is in a perfect position to be an agent of change.

A very special person with a distinguished career that has taken him all the way from breaking young horses to presiding as a ringmaster in the Oklahoma coliseum, Jerome Parker has touched our lives in many ways. A superb ringmaster who spent a lifetime preparing for this, Jerome found his vocation in a job he loves. He enhances our memories by making each occasion special. Deserving his place among the top ringmasters of our time, he proudly upholds the family legacy while taking his own well-deserved place in Morgan history. Quite simply Jerome Parker is the best of the best.

10 When Jerome first walked down the chute and onto the green shavings as the ringmaster at the Saddlebred World's Championship in Louisville, his friend, Howie Schatzberg, walked beside him in a show of solidarity, telling him to just soak it in and remember.

11 Having spent 25 years as a trainer, Jerome developed a wide circle of friends in the Morgan horse community including the great Judy Whitney Harris.

