

Driving Your Horse: **SAFETY** COMES FIRST

BY ELAINE KEELEY

Safety is paramount when driving your horse. In this article, our experts offer help to keep both the experienced driver and newcomer safe while enjoying this ever-growing sport.



>> It is early evening, and the sun is dropping into the landscape,

warm and bright and glowing over the rooftops of your neighbors' houses. Your team is walking along quietly, and you are feeling relaxed and happy. The near horse, one you just purchased, was anxious while hooking, and you almost decided against taking him out. As bikers whiz by, it crosses your mind that you should use a stronger bit on this new horse, just to be on the safe side. Down the street you go, and you are making small talk with your friend sitting next to you. The near horse jumps at something, quickens his pace but settles down again. You remark to your friend how nervous this new gelding is, and just as the words leave your tongue, he bolts. Smaller but no less powerful than the mare beside him, his influence on her is instantaneous, and she runs with him. You take up two, maybe three feet of slack in the lines, yelling, "Whoa, WHOA!" but it does no good. You yell to your friend to grab the reins with you. "PULL!" The horses topple a road sign as they leap from one side of the road to the yard across the street. They hesitate, but they bolt again and race toward a neighbor's house. They miss the house but trample the bushes three feet from its corner. A large oak gets in the way, and each horse takes opposite sides of the massive trunk. The force of the heavy-duty pole hitting the tree splits the pole in two, pulls apart the wooden eveners, bends the front axle, blows apart the stainless steel hardware as well as the hames on both sets of harnesses, and causes the horses to finally stop. The off horse stands quietly afterwards, blowing heavily but calm—the near horse, the one you are now cursing, is quivering white-eyed in the mess of straps and steel that was once a good harness. Your friend can't get down from the carriage because his knee is dislocated from its impact with the dash when you hit the tree. The adrenaline you are experiencing keeps you from noticing your own knees, bleeding and swollen, and you jump down to grab the horses before anything else happens. The neighbor, a nice woman who saw it all happen, runs over to offer some help. "You're lucky no one was seriously hurt!" she exclaims. You know you are lucky. Despite what just happened, it could have been much worse.

Checklist To A Good Foundation

Safety is, or at least should be, the greatest priority for all horsemen and horsewomen, regardless of the discipline. By its very nature, however, carriage driving has the potential to be dangerous under the right (or wrong) circumstances. "Recreational drivers don't realize how wrong things can go, so quickly," says Andy Marcoux, a combined driving expert whose retail harness shop, Coachman's Delight, is based in Milford, Mass. "Unlike with riding horses, the potential is there for causing great damage not just to the horse and driver, but to their surroundings." Andy, who specializes in coaching drivers and training horses for all three phases of this ever-growing sport, offers a wealth of knowledge for any driver, be they recreational or competitive. "I always recommend that people get professional advice when trying out the sport of driving for the first time."

It is critical that drivers, as well as their horses, learn the basics, and learn a methodical way of doing things, so that shortcuts aren't taken and mistakes don't happen. "People tend to become complacent as they gain confidence, letting down their guard," says Andy. "That is why learning to do things in a particular order is helpful. We notice that in combined driving events, most of the accidents happen

to Level 2 drivers—people who have enough experience to push things a little, but not enough experience to really make informed decisions on the course. Level 1 drivers are still cautious enough not to take chances. Advanced level drivers, while often taking great risks, have enough time under their belt to usually make it through all right." Accruing time in the driver's seat with one's horses is much like putting change into a piggy bank—eventually there is enough to actually make a difference. So important is the consistency of "time spent driving" that the American Driving Society (ADS) awards points in recognition of its recreational members who log in their hours of driving over the course of the year, reaching milestones of up to 1,000 hours. "There really are no statistics in regard to accidents with recreational drivers," reports Susan Koos-Acker, Executive Director of the American Driving Society.

As for the safety record in ADS sanctioned Combined Driving Events, Susan says, "you see the occasional mishap, usually caused by excessive speeds in the hazards in the marathon phase. But this is generally a safe sport. We require all competitors to follow specific guidelines and sign off on a pre-drive check list." Andy Marcoux adds, "Accidents in this sport will have a certain regularity, because more and more people are becoming involved in the sport. Most of the accidents we are seeing, however, are recoverable. People are becoming more knowledgeable and thinking about the consequences of their decisions, on



Andy Marcoux

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and off the course." An example Andy gives is with the quality of equipment. "Good equipment is essential. Good maintenance of that equipment is essential." When taking shortcuts in this department, not only can the equipment fail, but sub-standard equipment can make it more difficult to recover. "Something as simple as a cheap knock-off snap shackle that doesn't open when you need it to can make a bad situation worse." Bits are another example. "Some people like to bit the carriage, instead of the horse," explains Andy, referring to formal showmanship events. "Driving depends on a much higher level of communication with the horse through the bit than riding does. In some cases, over-biting a horse can be as detrimental as under-biting. As for bitless bridles in the driving world—I completely discourage it!"

Quality Counts

Andy prefers leather harnesses over synthetic, but warns that it is very important to consistently check the integrity of the harness and its hardware, no matter what the material. "Keep an eye out on areas of the harness that flex, and where buckles meet the material—these are areas that will often crack first. Also," he continues, "keep an eye on the stitching. The older, cotton stitching that is found in some of these harnesses are more likely to rot with time. The newer, synthetic threads are proving to be more dependable." Regardless of the material, however, Andy stresses that poor maintenance of any harness can cause failure.

The quality of the carriage or cart that is chosen, particularly by a new comer to the sport, is also of the utmost importance. All too often, those

just starting to drive have a romantic notion about that quaint old antique they found at an auction, but the truth can be anything but romantic. "Unless you collect antiques," says Peter von Halem, owner of New England Carriage Imports in Bozrah, Conn., "or unless you specifically want to drive an antique in some of the more traditional pleasure shows (in which case the carriage had better be in very good condition), use a modern carriage for everyday driving, training or competition." Peter prefers an all-steel carriage, and feels that a well-made, steel-framed vehicle will most likely hold its integrity under even the most

sport. Peter suggests that preliminary questions should first be answered: "Is the type, size and weight of the carriage appropriate for the driver's experience level, appropriate for the horse, and appropriate for the kind of driving which the driver is planning to do?" Andy's methods of teaching include very systematic groundwork which will hopefully be carried through for a lifetime, including the sequence in which the horse is harnessed and hooked. "I know this isn't followed in the draft horse world, but for example, we always bring the cart to the horse, not the other way around," says Andy. "This helps to

"Get help from experienced people."
Learning from the experience of others will help to keep you, your horse, and those around you safe while driving.

trying conditions. If a wooden carriage or cart is preferred, however, Peter offers this advice: "When considering a wooden carriage, the wheels are probably the most critical part. Spokes, hubs, felloes (rims) and tires should be absolutely tight. There should be no wobble in the wheel when it is turning and no significant play between the hub and the axle. Rotten or pulpy wood is unacceptable. Another critical component are the shafts and the pole. Wooden shafts, if in very poor condition, are especially a safety hazard."

Rules of the Road

Andy, Susan and Peter each recommend that all drivers, no matter what the experience level, follow some very specific rules when engaging in the

eliminate some of the dangers involved when trying to drive the horse to the cart or carriage, back it into the shafts, etc." Teaching the horse to stand quietly is of paramount importance as well. The most important rule for any driver to follow, no matter what size horse? "The single biggest rule we have," emphasizes Susan, "is never, ever take off the bridle before the horse is unhitched from the carriage!" As a matter of fact, the ADS will ban any driver that disobeys this rule. Their pre-drive check list, includes some very specific guidelines, including the general condition of the horse before the drive, the condition and proper adjustment of the harness, and the condition of the carriage and its parts. Our experts also strongly

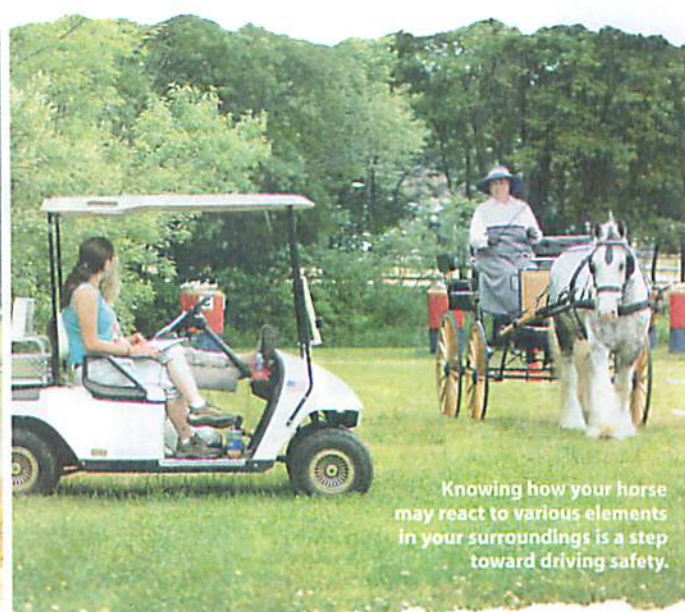
recommend that helmets be worn by drivers, navigators, or even those just along for the ride, whether on a marathon course or driving for pleasure. "Even in other phases of competition, judges are learning not to penalize a driver for wearing protective headgear instead of a traditional hat."

Handing Down The Art Of Driving

Although driving draft horses, in principle, is not much different from driving their smaller cousins, the two worlds are sometimes very different on many levels. "In the working draft horse world, there really isn't any 'safety check list,' per se," says Lynn Miller, an author, illustrator, publisher and working horseman from Sisters, Oregon. Instead, he speaks of a "vocabulary of anticipation" that all horsemen should learn. "The important thing is, what do you need to remember to help resolve a situation? For thirty-five years I have been working the fields with draft horses. I have come to learn that their nature of response is more important than their brute strength. Knowing this helps me to anticipate problems." Lynn has authored many books, including the bible of the draft horse world, *The Work Horse Handbook*. He also publishes *The Small Farmer's Journal*, a quarterly, grassroots magazine devoted to the farmer who works the land with horses, oxen and a strong sense of integrity. While teaching draft horse workshops all across the U.S. and Canada, Lynn says, "The very first thing I tell my students, the most important thing I tell them, is this: 'Don't know that you trust your horses, trust that you KNOW your horses'." Although Lynn might explain things in a more philosophical way than Andy Marcoux or



Lynn Miller



Knowing how your horse may react to various elements in your surroundings is a step toward driving safety.

KRISTI MILLER

LISA CENIS

the American Driving Society does, his recommended guidelines to the beginner really aren't that much different from theirs. "Each new teamster needs to learn how to judge his horses' strength, as well as his horses' health and the health of his equipment." Taken a little further, this means that the experienced teamster should be consistently monitoring his horses, equipment, and surround-

ings. When asked to pinpoint a reason why people might fail to accomplish their goals in learning to drive, Lynn replies, "There are two things that cause people to fail in their pursuit of working with horses. One is a dangerous arrogance of the newcomer, pretending to know what you don't to avoid ridicule." Continuing without hesitation, he says, "The second is that so many knowledgeable people

won't fully share their knowledge. This is an art, not a science. By having a less-than-giving spirit, we miss out on all those who could master the craft." When a person fails, his or her bad experience filters down to an array of others, often causing their failures as well. "Any person that fails is a setback times three. Conversely, those that succeed encourage others to succeed," explains Lynn. "Safety issues are there-

fore critically important. Trust your instincts. People need to be nurtured to the point that they trust that they know their horses." This echoes Andy Marcoux's viewpoint, which is to recommend that no matter what the situation, "Get help from experienced people." Learning from the experience of others will help to keep you, your horse, and those around you safe while driving. 🐾

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Wietske G-STER

Wietske was awarded her 2nd Premie STER status at the 2007 Keuring in Northampton, Ma. Wietske's movement is effortless with forward classic movement. She has a beautiful shapely head with big bold eyes. She passed these traits on to her yearling gelding, Victor. Wietske is currently in training for dressage and driving. Look for this sweet personable mare during the 2008 show season.



Até van de Wittewijk

This 7-year old gelding is known for his kind and even-tempered personality, as well as his incredible drive to win. Até is very serious about his work, never timid to strut his stuff. He is a 2nd Premie gelding, standing at 16.3 hands. His father is the famous Anton 343 and he is out of Jelsje VD Wittewijk by Tjitte 333.



Dorette fan de Koldenhooft

"Dorette" is a very forward moving mare with great talent. She is a steady dressage horse working at Training level. She has a very sweet personality and is a great mother. Her first foal, Taru Alejandra, was awarded a 2nd Premie at the 2006 Keuring.

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