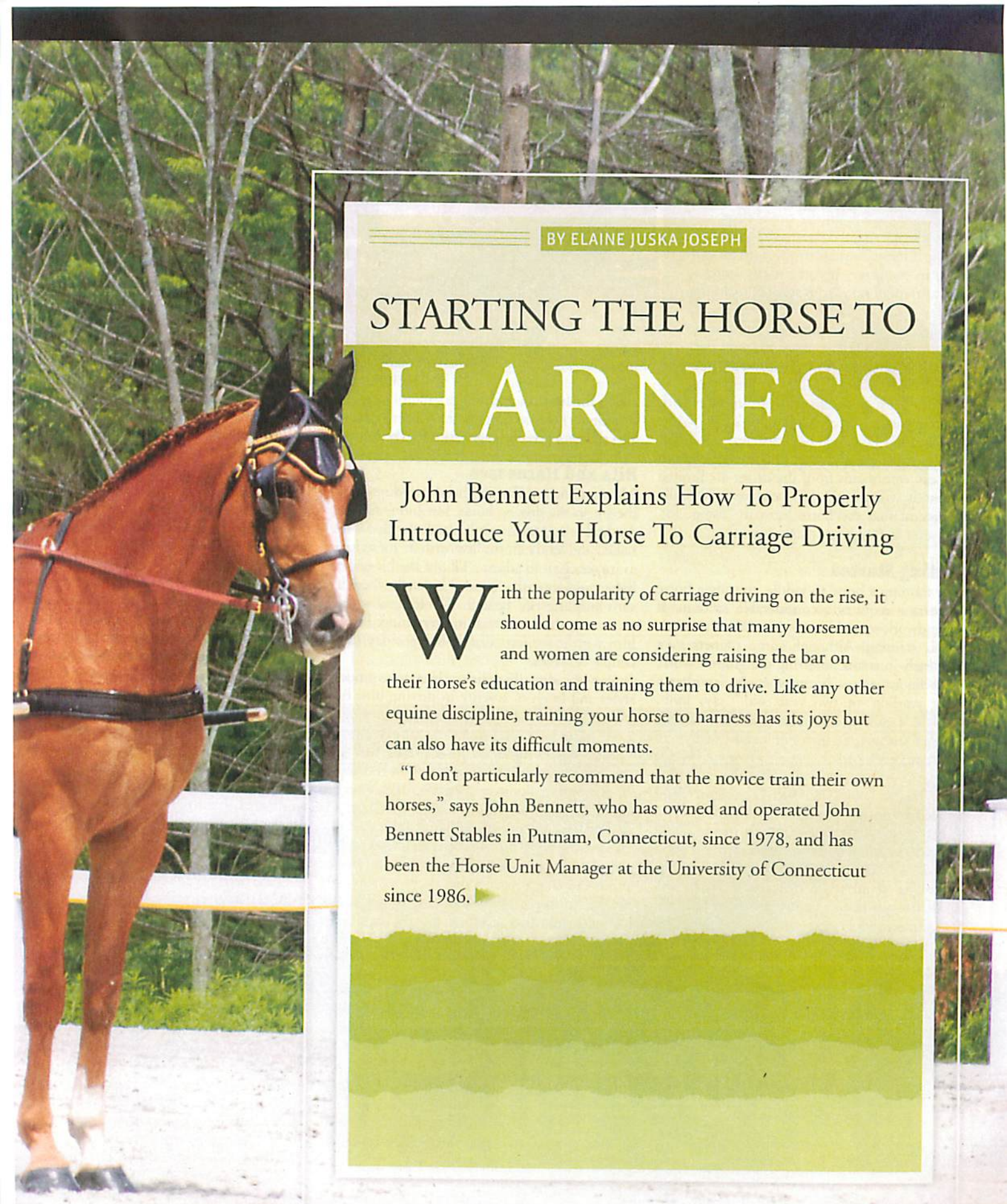

BY ELAINE JUSKA JOSEPH

STARTING THE HORSE TO HARNESS

John Bennett Explains How To Properly Introduce Your Horse To Carriage Driving

With the popularity of carriage driving on the rise, it should come as no surprise that many horsemen and women are considering raising the bar on their horse's education and training them to drive. Like any other equine discipline, training your horse to harness has its joys but can also have its difficult moments.

"I don't particularly recommend that the novice train their own horses," says John Bennett, who has owned and operated John Bennett Stables in Putnam, Connecticut, since 1978, and has been the Horse Unit Manager at the University of Connecticut since 1986.

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A 30-YEAR VETERAN to training horses to harness, John is a well-known and well-respected carriage horse trainer within the region. John says, "Training a horse to harness is a process that requires a tremendous amount of time, effort, and dedication."

The horse in harness must, from an early stage in the game, become accustomed to and tolerant of numerous stimuli, including harness parts hanging off of him and slapping at him, inconsistent pressure on various points of his anatomy, and lots of noise—often alarming—coming from directly behind him. In most instances, he must learn to accept his surroundings with limited visual capabilities (blinkers). Most importantly, however, he must learn to trust his driver's commands and judgment. While in harness, commands from the driver are limited to hands, voice and whip, and so it is vitally important that the horse learn to "listen" for, and react favorably to, these cues.

TORY MACDONALD

◀ John Bennett riding with Jackie Smakkula after taking the blue ribbon in a cart class.

Getting Started

Like training a horse to saddle, starting a horse in harness requires a considerable amount of groundwork to set the stage for different levels of his training. Although some trainers start very early in terms of setting the ground work, "I prefer to start a horse when he is either a 'long yearling' or two years old," says John. "This is a good age, because a horse will learn quicker at this time in his life, and usually will not have developed any bad habits as of yet. Of course, it is very important that the horse has been handled, and handled consistently and properly, from the ground since birth."

Having good ground manners in place and an understanding of basic commands is a good foundation for a horse. He should also be trained to stand while tied. These basics will all dictate the horse's ability to safely stand for you while you introduce the bit (if he is not yet accustomed to it), the bridle with blinders, the collar, the harness, and so on.

It not only helps to simplify the trainer's job, but also creates a positive experience for the horse.

Bits and Harnesses

Many trainers differ in their introduction of the bit to the driving horse, but John's favorite method is to attach a half cheek snaffle to the halter, and let the horse "live with it" for as long as it takes him to adjust. "I'll put the bit on the halter, and leave the horse in his stall, where he can't hurt himself," he says. "I let him eat with it in his mouth, drink with it, everything. I leave him with it for four or five hours a day for a couple of weeks."

As with riding disciplines, there are countless styles and levels of severity in driving bits, but most trainers hold to the belief that starting a green horse in as mild a bit as possible is a good rule to follow. Although John prefers the half cheek snaffle, which is one of the most common of driving bits, loose ring snaffles and straight bar bits are also commonly used at this stage.

"Putting a mouth on him," as John calls it, "is teaching the horse the correct response to bit pressure." Each horse responds as an individual, and it can take a week, a month, or a couple of months for the horse to learn. "It is important to understand that at this stage you are developing the horse for a future life of softness, suppleness, and responsiveness. The bitting process is three fold. One, the horse must become accustomed to it. Two, he is taught to respond to pressure on the bit. And three, positioning of the head. This last detail is greatly dependant on the horse's conformation, of course."

Once ready to advance to the next level, many trainers will start using the simple device of a surcingle with long lines. John uses a surcingle with crouper and side reins or a longe line, but rarely uses a check rein. "I don't like checks on horses," he says. "I want them to find their natural headset, if possible."

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◀ Once the horse has been introduced to the bit, many trainers will start using a surcingle.

He'll acclimate the horse to the surcingle with crouper by leaving the horse in his stall with it on, just like he does when teaching the horse to accept the bit. Once the horse is comfortable with the equipment, it is time to go to work. "I spend a lot of time going in circles with the horse," John says, "on the longe line first, then bitting rig, then long reins—all the while having someone make a lot of noise to desensitize the horse. At this point," he says, "the horse is still without blinkers."

Blinkers (or blinders in some circles) are a very necessary safety device when driving a horse, helping to limit what the horse sees of its surroundings, most particularly the vehicle that relentlessly follows him while in motion. "I have been training horses for 30 years," says John. "I average between 25 and 30 horses a year. In all those years, with all those horses, I have only met two horses that could not be driven with blinkers. I personally believe it is downright foolish to hook a horse with an open bridle."

Time To Hook Up

John believes that one of the biggest mistakes he has seen people make when starting a horse in harness is to hook the horse too soon. "So many people don't take the time to set the ground work. You need to get the horse used to strange noises; you need to acclimate the horse to bit pressure. People rush and get the horse into the shafts too soon."

Once he is confident that the horse is ready to hook, John puts the horse right to the cart. Although a lot of trainers swear by drags or tires at this stage, John no longer does this. "I used to train on a drag, years ago, but I had a bad experience with a horse that got hurt with a drag. I started to think, if the horse is ready to pull something, why not just hook him to the cart?" The cart he uses to train at this level is a simple, lightweight jog cart with rubber tires. The harness is a quick-hitch leather harness, with enough adjustment so that he can use it on most any horse, from a large pony to a draft horse.

"This harness has snap-on traces and shaft loops. There is no breeching, which isn't necessary on such a light cart anyway," he says. "The important thing is that I want the harness to be safe, quick to hook or unhook, and not break apart."

Unlike many other trainers, John doesn't use

plastic pipe or anything else in the shaft loops to acclimate the horse to the feel of unbendable shafts at his side. "Once the horse is ready to be hooked, I have two helpers with longe lines attached to the shafts, not the horse, and I control the horse at his head. It is very, very important that I be the only one at the horse's head. If there are two people at his head, he will get mixed signals. The horse should only be receiving communication from the driver, no one else."

John keeps the horse in an indoor ring at this stage, until he thinks the horse is completely at ease in the shafts. "Once he is at ease, it is time to take him outdoors, then on the road. I keep the horse moving at a comfortable pace, often at a trot. When a horse is moving forward, he is less likely to get himself into trouble."

John says that fundamentally, horses want to know what to do to please you. "I have no preference for breeds, as far as what makes a good carriage horse," he says. "But, I will say that temperament and attitude are very important. A carriage horse must be sane and willing."

The End Result

Ultimately, a well-trained harness horse should go forward when asked to, stop when asked to, and back when asked to. The horse should start to pull the cart or carriage quietly but deliberately, without jerking the load. He should stand quietly while being harnessed and hitched; he should never be inclined to run away but be willing to work and respect the driver's commands. If you have short-changed the horse of any of these learned skills at any point in the training process, you will jeopardize its future as a carriage horse. "I like to give a horse three to six months of training," says John. "We don't measure training time in 'hours,' but in short, frequent time periods, five to six days a week. Part of the training process includes understanding the horse's personality. Again, it is the simple things, like training him to safely cross tie that is so important to the training process."

This is why John feels that a professional should train a carriage horse, rather than a beginner. "As I said before, most people truly don't have the time to devote to properly training their horses," he says. "Time and consistency are the keys to giving a horse a good solid basis. It is very easy to undo the groundwork with a horse in a very short period of time. Rushing through the training process can ruin a horse. Naturally, professional training is costlier, but it is a wise person that sees the long term value of proper training. Of course, part of my training program includes training the owners. It is so important for the owner to get the proper education in driving their horse, as well!

Blinkers are a necessary safety device, helping ▶ to limit what the horse sees in its surroundings.

LISA CENIS

And as for me, I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction when I train a horse well, train his owner well, and listen to the stories the owner tells of how happy she is while driving her horse. In the end, this is what makes me happy."