




Marilyn MacFarlane driving her Friesians in a unicorn hitch at the 2010 Walnut Hill Pleasure Driving Show.

PHOTO: LISA CENIS



The **Art** *of* **DRIVING TANDEM**

FROM FOUR IN HAND TO UNICORN
HITCHES, LEARN THE TECHNICALITIES
OF THIS COMPLEX TRAINING METHOD

BY ELAINE JUSKA JOSEPH

ALTHOUGH MANY HISTORIANS may differ on exactly when, why, and where the art of driving tandem originated, it is certain that it became popular in the 19th century in England as a means of getting out to the countryside for an organized hunt. The traditional style of cart used was called a going-to-cover cart. According to Marc Johnson, a well respected carriage horse trainer and driving instructor located out of Boston, Massachusetts, these carts were similar to dog carts. The lead horse would be in an open bridle and saddle, ready to ride upon arrival. "It was a very good way to get to the hunt," says Johnson. Although many believe that the lead horse was driven this way to keep the riding horse, or "field hunter," fresh for the rigors of chasing after the hounds, Johnson also believes that the principle behind driving tandem is, quite simply, a means for the horseman to show off his exceptional driving skills. Sometimes referred to as a "poor man's team," driving horses in a tandem hitch is far from easy, and is not traditionally associated with the lower class on a social level. Members of high society could regularly be seen taking Sunday drives through the parks of some of the larger cities both in Europe and the United States. Tandem etiquette was adopted by the Tandem Club in Britain in order to help enforce responsible horsemanship, and to ensure safety for everyone. ►

Kateland Farm Miniature Horses' Katie Rodas driving a random hitch alongside Leslie German.



LISA CENIS

An Elite Horse

"The horse out front really, really needs to be a well trained driving horse," says Peter von Halem of New England Carriage Imports in Bozrah, Connecticut. Von Halem is not only well known for his beautiful carriages, but for his Hackney/Clydesdale crosses that he shows and events all over the Northeast. "The lead horse needs to be a reasonably independent and forward horse. It is very difficult to drive a tandem if the lead horse is insecure out front," he says.

The description of driving tandem is considerably simpler than the actual act of driving in such a way. A tandem hitch is where two horses are driven—but one in front of the other, not side by side as with a pair. The unicorn hitch is where a pair of horses is at the wheel and a single horse is in the lead. A unicorn, although similar in nature to tandem, is actually an easier hitch to drive. "Driving a unicorn," says Johnson, "is not much different from driving a four in hand. This style of hitch, however, wasn't necessarily used for going to the hunt, like tandem was. It was used when, quite honestly, the driver only had three horses instead of four.

"Then there are 'random hitches,' where three horses are driven in a row. In my opinion, such a hitch is only necessary for showing off. It is immensely difficult to drive this way. With a lead pair in a four in hand, you always have the chance that at least one from the lead will go where you want it to, and the other horse will then follow suit. With a tandem, the horse out front must be an extraordinary individual."

Von Halem concurs, stating, "You want the lead horse to be a natural leader—one

Dusty Bezek ► driving tandem for Rockbottom Farm Belgians at the Addison Country Fair and Field Days.



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that moves forward, and likes to be ahead of the wheel horse. You want him to have attitude and animation, be elegant, and lighter than your wheel horse. But at the same time, you want him to be a real nice mover, something to show off with."

The Technicalities of Tandem

"In a tandem hitch, there is no load on the lead horse, unless going uphill. It is the wheel horse that does all the work," says von Halem. "The way a lead horse is hitched to the cart is through long traces that are hooked to the traces or breastplate of the wheel horse, so that both can pull in the same direction. Another way is to use a small single tree attached to the D ring on the breast plate of the wheel horse. In this instance, you would be using standard length traces.

"In a unicorn [hitch] you have a pole attached to the wagon for the wheel horses. At the end of the pole is the crab, and from the crab you would attach a single tree for the leader. In either instance, the reins are held just as you would

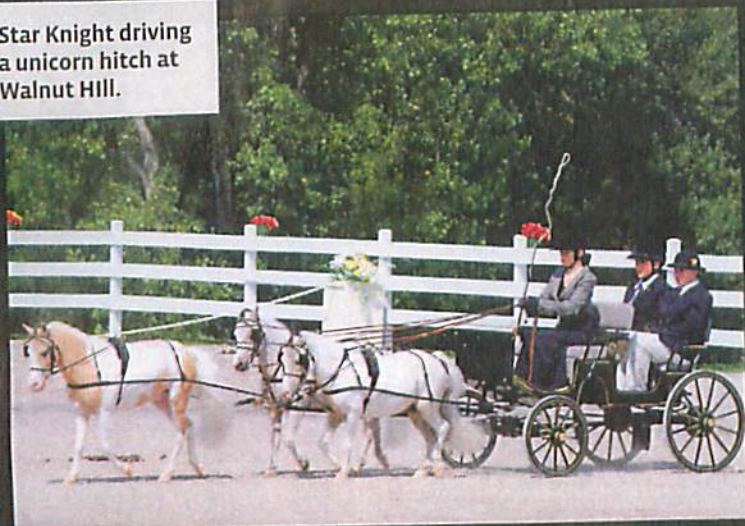
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hold them when driving a four in hand. The reins from the lead horse pass through a roger ring on each side of the bridle (at the rosette) of the wheel horse, then through the upper turret rings on its saddle, when driving tandem. In a unicorn hitch, the leader's reins go through the inside roger rings of each of the wheeler's bridles."

Von Halem explains that the two-handed method of driving is of course easier than driving single-handed. "The single-handed method is where the left hand holds all four reins. This method works well when driving in a ring or on the flat. The right hand is thus free to tip your hat, for using the hand brake, or, most importantly, for handling the whip." Being able to drive single-handed in the show ring, according to Johnson, is a plus. "Two-handed driving is not considered as traditional as one-handed, so those that do drive single-handed will prevail in reinmanship classes."

Star Knight driving a unicorn hitch at Walnut Hill.



Mary Waller driving tandem at Walnut Hill.



The Whip

When driving a horse, whether single, pairs, multiples or tandem, the whip is one of the most important aids a driver has for communicating with his horse. Each style, however, has a specific type of whip the driver should use. "A tandem whip has a very long thong," explains Johnson. "Like a four in hand whip, you must be able to reach the leader with your whip. It takes a tremendous amount

of skill to cast your whip, and then catch the thong on its return and keep it on the whip stock. It takes a long time to learn how to do this properly.

"Years ago, I spent a summer in England and each night I would practice until I could finally do it well. It is a dying art. I see a lot of people now that will attach the thong to the whip stock with tape, rubber bands, and thread...just for show." Because

the driver's only aids are voice, hands and whip, whip skills are particularly imperative when driving tandem. "The driver with excellent whip skills will find that those skills are his best friend," Johnson says.

According to von Halem, "It is the Germans who still put so much emphasis on whip handling. It is quite a skill to be able to swing the whip to the outside and touch the shoulder of the lead horse. It is an art form in and of itself, and when done well, looks nice. Frankly, most people cannot do it!"

Training for Tandem Driving

When training a lead horse in a tandem hitch, Johnson likes to start with ground driving, then he

"adds the wheels," once he is confident that the horse is also confident. "I like to see if the leader will be compatible to the role before adding anything as complicated as a vehicle with wheels," he says. He has seen a lot of trainers ride the wheeler and drive the leader out front, and says, "it is impressive to see!" In spite of the tandem's hunt history with what is essentially, as previously mentioned, a riding horse out front in an open bridle, Johnson says that the "one thing I don't condone is the open bridle thing. I think it is a poor idea for someone trying to set an example. It is not the type of turnout I like to do, anyway. I don't like the risk involved when driving horses without blinders."

Von Halem's method of training leaders has been to start them within the confines of an indoor arena, with a lead rope on the horse and help on the ground. He says that the harnesses used on leaders in most tandems, as well as unicorn hitches, are half pair harnesses. "No breaching," he says. "The lighter the harness for the lead horse, the better. In the show ring, a light harness helps to emphasize both the leader and the wheeler so nicely. And of course, breaching just isn't necessary on a technical level when put to a cart like this."

Tandem Driving References

Are you looking to take up the challenge of developing your skills to drive tandem? Read up on it first: Try *Driving Tandem*, by Paul Doliveux. *Make the Most of Carriage Driving* by Vivien and Richard Ellis has a chapter on driving this special form of art, as does *The Encyclopedia of Carriage Driving* by Sally Walrond. *The Midwest Tandem Driving Clinic Handbook*, written by Mary Ruth Marks, another good read for those interested in learning to drive tandem. 🐾

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