

Hitch Horses: Impressing the Generations

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The sound of metal against asphalt rings hollow as the horses begin their journey. The eight-horse hitch is better than 75 feet long from the tips of their noses to the tailgate of the wagon, and each team takes off not in a single leap but in well-trained and perfectly timed choreographed strides—the lead team first, the point horses next, the swing team, then the wheel horses last.

It's the wheelers that take the brunt of the weight, moving the three-and-a-half-ton hitch wagon from a standstill almost entirely on their own. Within seconds the wagon wheels roll, and this grand vehicle is in motion as the other teams take up the slack with heel chains clanking against shiny metal eveners. Because the wheel team is so important, they are the tallest, heaviest, and strongest of the teams. While they may stand 18.2 hands and weigh as much as 2,400 pounds each, the lead team may be as small as 17.2 hands and weigh only a ton apiece. Still, all in all, a typical eight-horse hitch will consist of nearly 9,000 pounds!

It not only takes a tremendous amount of skill to drive such a hitch, but a considerable amount of human strength and stamina is also necessary. In driving "eight-up," as this configuration of four draft teams is called, the driver holds approximately 40 pounds of reins in his or her hands, four reins or "lines" per hand. With minimum pressure from the horses, it easily jumps to approximately 75 pounds of pressure weight on the driver. Each team is communicated to at separate times; the lead team, for example, must be given a command and must respond before each subsequent team, so that the wheel horses are the last to receive direction. "The more horses you drive, the more challenging it is. You really have to pay attention when driving a big hitch!" says 16-year-old Davinia Saglio, of Winter Hill Percherons in Glastonbury, Conn. "You are navigating your horses all the time." Davinia, a prodigy in this field by anyone's standards, is a partner with her parents, Nancy and Peter, in running the largest Percheron breeding farm in New England. With three stallions and 45 mares and geldings to care for, it is both impressive and marvelous to hear this

young woman talk about all aspects of hitch horses. “My mom always wanted draft horses, and bought a Percheron mare and foal about 15 years ago through a newspaper ad,” explains Davinia. Shortly thereafter, her parents purchased breeding stock, including a stallion named White Clover Mark at a dispersal sale, and the farm and its fine reputation has grown by leaps and bounds ever since. They now have three stallions, including Windermere’s Gladiator, an impressive grey standing 18.2 hands that throws equally beautiful foals. “For the first time in 2007, we showed all home bred horses. We will do the same for 2008,” says Davinia. Typically, Davinia and her parents show anywhere from 9 to 13 horses at each show, which includes the Big E, the New York State Fair, the Addison County Fair, Topsfield, the World Percheron Congress, the National Percheron Show, and other big draft horse shows throughout the country.

While today’s modern hitches are equally as impressive as their turn of the 20th century ancestors, their purpose has to some degree changed, yet in some respects has remained the same.

Historically speaking, “hitches,” or, more accurately, “commercial hitches,” held dual purposes—to transport goods and to advertise the goods they transported. Commercial hitches were wagons from the genre of carriages, wagons and sleighs known as commercial vehicles. Some of these vehicles, be they small wagons, two-wheeled carts or large “trucks” and drays, which resemble modern day flatbed trailers, were sometimes even designed to resemble the goods they advertised: cigars, milk churns, top hats, watches, luggage bags. Famous brand names such as Sears, Roebuck & Co., H.J. Heinz Co., Studebaker Bros. Manufacturing Co., Miller Beer, Pabst Blue Ribbon and countless other breweries all utilized commercial hitches, either for product transportation or strictly for product advertising. What we currently know as a “hitch,” however, has been modified into the large wagons we recognize as “hitch wagons”—once commonly called “express wagons”—in modern day show rings and in parades. These express wagons typically had platform springs, flare-boards on the sides, and had a high driver’s seat, and were used as a hauler of freight through the cities. Studebaker was one of the most well-known and respected manufacturers of this sturdy wagon type, and many of today’s contemporary “hitch wagons” are restored originals, or continue to follow this proven design.

Countless companies celebrated these large “hitches” as a means of advertising their products

during the late 1800s right up to World War II. Then there are those few companies whose products have become synonymous with these grand hitches. Breweries are perhaps the most famous, and of all the breweries in the world that have used and continue to use the hitch wagon as their emblem, none surpass the reputation of the Budweiser hitch. On April 7, 1933, the fire engine red Studebaker beer wagon and its team of eight flashy bay Clydesdales was sent into the streets by August Anheuser Busch, Jr., as a surprise to his father and as a means of celebrating the repeal of the prohibition. So enthusiastic was the public's reaction to this display of grandeur that Busch decided to continually display these horses, thereby launching one of the most commercially successful symbols in American corporate history. In 1951, the Clydesdales made their way onto their first TV commercial. It depicted the hitch pulling a beer wagon through the gates of the Anheuser Busch estate in St. Louis, Missouri. This estate, also known as Grant's Farm, is home to more than 35 Clydesdales, and is one of the largest Clydesdale breeding farms in the U.S. Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc., owns more than 200 Clydesdales nationwide, stabling them at Grant's Farm and at farms in Merrimack, New Hampshire, and Valencia, California, as well as other locations (see sidebar).

Before the Budweiser Hitch, however, there were breweries and other companies that competed against each other not only with their products, but with the presentation of their hitches. Many of these companies took tremendous pride in their horses and wagons. The wagons themselves sometimes came with exquisite paintings and signage. The horses were well fed, well groomed, and well harnessed. Likewise they were well stabled, and the layout of these high-end stables became another bragging point for the advertising savvy entrepreneurs that sent these vehicles out into the streets. The breweries were especially competitive for the public's attention, and brewery horses tended to be high-headed, smart-gaited and good-looking.

Modern day hitches, particularly those in North America, have followed this tradition established by the breweries over a century ago, and draft horses of hitch type in North America have evolved to exceed the ideal. Characteristically, a hitch horse of any draft breed is very tall and leggy, high-headed, cresty-necked, and well-proportioned in thirds: one third front, one third barrel, one third hind end. A hitch horse is typically more spirited than its farming counterparts, with flashier,

animated gaits and a wonderfully alert eye. To help in exaggerating the high, snappy leg action, hooves are shod in what the industry calls “scotch bottom shoes,” where the toe is squared off and the sides flared to cause the horse to break over earlier. Typically it increases the horse’s natural shoe size by two or three sizes. Although the current ideal in conformation and action are highly sought after in a quality hitch type, modern day show horse, these qualities were not the ideal for a long day of heavy work. Turn of the century hitch horses were required to travel as much as 30 miles a day, six days a week, often at a trot. Far from having to work such strenuous hours, today’s hitch horses are instead keeping alive the tradition of advertising and promotion, of capturing the imaginations and loyalties of the people. “Our hitches promote our farm and breeding program, Winter Hill Percherons,” replies Davinia Saglio, when asked if her family’s hitches also advertised her father’s construction business. “Most of the people in the industry that show hitch horses, do it to promote their farms and breeding programs. Of course,” she adds, “I do it because I love Percherons. I can’t imagine a life without them!”

Hitch horses are shown in North America today by very specific standards. In the ring, they must be shod with scotch bottom shoes, have tails and manes properly braided with ribbons and rosettes, and they should have very specific types of show harness, with a peaked collar being mandatory when shown in harness. The hitch classes generally consist of team, unicorn hitch, multiple hitch (four-up, six-up and eight-up), as well as “driving competitions, which test a driver’s skill with docking procedures, spin-the-top procedures, and other skills,” explains Davinia. “The docking procedure is done with four or six horses,” and requires the driver to back up the horses and fan them left and right at 90 degree angles to the wagon, as they would have been required to do when unloading goods in the cities. “Spin the top” requires the driver to spin his team and wagon without moving one back wheel, and, of course, without losing control of his horses. “I would like to see shows add more classes like that, and to add more music!” exclaims Davinia.

“A lot of the shows out west use music. The horses love it, they really respond well to it. I also think it would help draw the attention of more spectators.”

Always drawing public attention is, after all, one of the draft horse industry’s greatest skills. With public attention and awareness comes the continued success in bringing the draft breeds back

from near extinction. The greatest hitches of them all were the 40-horse circus hitches that wound through city streets before the troupe set up their tents. The last true circus hitch was seen in 1903 and belonged to the Barnum & Bailey Circus. Although many swore that such a sight would never be seen again, Dick Sparrow, a world renowned trainer and driving instructor, put 40 Belgian horses together in 1972 for the Schlitz Circus Parade, and made history. Pulling a Columbian bandwagon 140 feet long, the 40-horse hitch, driven four abreast and 10-up, required the help of 60 people. With reins weighing better than 75 pounds when slack, the pressure weight from the 80,000 pounds of horse flesh was enormous, although the lines only go directly to key horses in such a hitch: a total of 5 sets of lines, one set on team 10 (the leaders, 135 feet away from the driver's seat), team 8, team 5, team 2 and team 1 (the wheelers). The rest of the horses are in buck straps, a line that goes from bit to bit across each team of four. Dick Sparrow drove this hitch in many major parades and events throughout the U.S. over the course of five years, but discontinued it in 1977. In 1976, he entered the Guinness Book of World Records by adding eight more horses, for a total of 48, at the Iowa State Fair. From the years 1989 through 2002, the 40-horse hitch was again recreated, but this time with Dick Sparrow's son, Paul, driving, with his own son, Robert, in the seat beside him.

Draft horse owners work very hard to keep their horses in the public eye. Although photographs and TV commercials do their fair share to impress, there is nothing to compare to the sight, sound and sensation of eight one-ton horses, be they Clydesdales, Belgians, Percherons or Shires, passing you by on the street or in the show ring, rumbling like thunder, coats and harness shining like precious metal. It is this legacy that modern day hitches hope to pass on for generations to come.