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## Is Driving Your Next Sport?

The sport of carriage driving continues to be a growing one. What brings people to this sport? Is it the nostalgia of times past? Is it the allure of creating an elegant turnout? Or is it the thrill of combined driving? Since driving requires different skills for the driver and the horse than riding, most people seek out a professional or a mentor before attempting it themselves. Yet there are plenty that enter into the sport armed with little else than a desire to do it. Here are two trainers discussing how to enter the sport.

Jeff Morse trains at his Green Meads Farm in Richmond, MA. Jeff's experience comes from growing up on his family's farm where many top Morgan horses were bred and trained. Jeff has continued his interest in horses and is a well known figure at driving events throughout New England. Jeff is currently the chair for the American Driving Society (ADS) pleasure driving committee and also does driving clinics throughout the United States.

Cheryl Rivers is a third generation horseperson having learned the art of riding, driving and training with her father, and he from his father. Cheryl trains from her River Echo Farm in Stockbridge, VT, where she takes a select number of horses to train and show for the season. Cheryl is well known for her gentle handling of both horses and customers.

What are the demographics of your customers?

Jeff: Generally, retiree's or about to be retiree's who had some kind of previous equine experience, usually riding, which was curtailed due to career and/or family rearing priorities. The physical demands of driving being somewhat less than riding make it attractive to this age group. The challenge of driving, particularly combined driving, is also very attractive.

Cheryl: My driving clients are most often folks who have ridden and are hoping to expand their horizons. Many are baby boomers like myself who are looking at driving as a way for them to continue to enjoy equestrian competition as medical issues related to aging make riding more challenging. We also have first time horse owners who need to learn the basics. I encourage all my clients to drive as well as ride, and most do.

In your opinion, what attracts people to driving?

Jeff: The physical demands are less than riding in almost any form yet the mental

challenge is attractive. The congeniality of the participants is well known in equine circles and somewhat unique. The fact that it is an international sport makes them feel part of some major equine endeavor. Everyone roots for the national team.

Cheryl: The traditions and romance of carriage driving are appealing to many folks. Driving is wonderful for couples and families to be able to enjoy a horse together. As folks age and are more physically challenged, driving is a way for them to continue to enjoy equestrian competition. People who own a breed noted for its driving prowess often wish to explore their horse's abilities.

If someone brings you a horse that has not driven before what skills would you like the horse to have?

Jeff: I prefer to teach rather than un-teach. My job is so much easier and the cost of training so much reduced if the horse has not already learned things the wrong way or in ways that are counter-productive to driving. Sometimes it's best if all they know is how to lead and be groomed. From there I can create the horse I want.

I find that generally you get where you want to end up a lot faster by going slow. My least favorite challenges are horses that have had little handling and are five or more years old or horses that have changed hands a lot having big periods of unknown history. These are generalities and of course there are exceptions but my radar goes off when they are presented to me for training.

Cheryl: It isn't so much a question of skills as it is basic respect and trust for human beings that are the building blocks of a good driving horse. Ideally a horse should lead correctly respecting the personal space of the handler. The horse should respond to a few basic verbal commands, the most important being WHOA. I can teach them this if they arrive without it, but the training process goes smoother if they are used to obedience and submission and have WHOA ingrained. Standing still when asked is the foundation of a safe driving horse. Many people do not realize horses can be taught to stand quietly. It takes time and patience

Can you suggest some training techniques owners can use to prepare their horse for driving?

Jeff: I think it helps to remember at all times with young horses that patience is a very useful virtue and a skill every carriage horse needs to master. This is easier to instill in some breeds and in some individuals than others. Patience and anxiety are linked. An anxious horse cannot be patient. So to the extent you can reduce the anxiety level through handling of green horses, the better off everyone will be when it comes to driving.

Lots of handling, standing around, being tied and being led everywhere. Just these simple things will help make the training proceed faster and be more successful in the end. Being ponied from a riding horse or better yet, from a driving horse works wonders in preparing a young horse for being driven. They become accustomed to the sights and sounds and see that a fellow equine is getting along just fine with it. When it's time to hook them for the first time, a lot of it is then already familiar.

Cheryl: You can help prepare your horse to be a successful and dependable driving horse before you send them to the driving trainer. It is important to be conservative and careful

so as to desensitize your horse to some of the sounds, and feel of being driven. If you don't have proper equipment or help, or if you have a physical limitation best to wait and let a professional do it.

1. Fit your horse to a blinder bridle and let them wear it in the stall.
2. Practice the word "whoa." This can be done on a lead line or while you ride. Focus on developing immediate obedience. I have found that practicing this with the horse in a blinder bridle absolutely translates into driving. Practice short stands in the beginning and gradually add time until they will stand relaxed for 5 minutes. If you can make it to 5 minutes you can then go on for longer periods when required. When you say whoa your horse should halt and feet should not move forward or back until you give a command to move.
3. Lunge your horse with the blinder bridle on. Practice verbal commands on the lunge. Walk, trot, whoa. Be prepared to back up your verbal commands properly. Undisciplined lunging will set back rather than advance the training process.
4. Practice running a long whip or long rope back and forth and under and over your horses body. This includes touching the hind legs and bringing pressure against the hind legs. Be careful. DO NOT put yourself in kicking range, that is the reason behind the long whip or rope.
5. Desensitize your horse to all sorts of noises while wearing the blinder bridle. A wheelbarrow creaking and banging from behind, add rocks to the wheelbarrow and include car noises including passing with a car.

What issues could a horse have that would not make him a driving prospect?

Jeff: I often get asked to train horses that for some reason can no longer be ridden. A horse needs every part of his body and mind functioning without limitation or compromise to be a successful driving horse. If they don't have it riding, they don't have it driving.

Horses that have grown up making most of the management decisions about how they are ridden or handled generally have a tough time giving up that role and therefore do not make good driving prospects. The biggest part of my job as a trainer involves anxiety reduction and management. Horses that have been mistreated in the past are usually quite anxious and depending on how deep seated that is, it can be hard to bring them around a less anxious state.

Cheryl: Rarely do I encounter a horse that cannot be taught to drive, but some horses take to it more readily than others do. The biggest drawback to a driving horse in my experience is a horse that has too strong a flight instinct. Most horses are able to overcome their basic instinct to bolt and run with firm, but kind and consistent training. Some will remain somewhat unpredictable. Bolting is much more serious in a driving horse than a riding horse. Some horses have a strong aversion to a crupper that is not easily overcome. My dad who was a trainer used to refer to some as being "allergic to leather."

Can you suggest how a prospective driver could educate themselves regarding driving?

Jeff: I would recommend reading Heike Beane's book, "Carriage Driving, a Logical Approach Through Dressage" before working with any driving horse. I re-read it regularly and still learn something every time. It will give the owner a great idea of what the end product of the training is supposed to be like.

Absolutely take some lessons with a professional trainer. Drive their well trained schoolmasters to get comfortable with being six feet behind a horse yet still have control. Go to clinics. They are a great place to see a large variety of issues for both horses and drivers and a see how they are recognized and solved.

Volunteer at driving events. This is also a great way to learn the sport of carriage driving. My best customers learned SO much by coming to the events I attended and volunteering to help me and my other customers compete before they even owned a horse. By the time they were driving and competing with their own, they had seen almost all the mistakes competitors can make and they avoided them.

Cheryl: A prospective driver should join the American Driving Society (ADS) and read some of the excellent books they list on driving basics. Videos may be useful as well.

Take some lessons with a pro driving an experienced horse. Many trainers will educate you along with your horse as they want to see the two of you succeed as a team. Volunteer to help with a driving event. Most are hungry for volunteers. Audit clinics. Find a knowledgeable mentor to advise you. Do not skimp on hands-on learning time.

Describe what you feel to be the best first driving horse for someone.

Jeff: The best first driving horse can vary from person to person. If the owner is an experienced horse person, they may want to bring one along from a very young age. They will more likely be doing it to experience the journey involved in training a driving horse from scratch. The folks who want to jump right in and learn about horses and driving at the same time need the more experienced forgiving equine. The worst combination is the green horse and the green driver without some professional assistance. That almost always never works.

Cheryl: My experience runs counter to the standard answer that green drivers should not drive green horses. I have had great success forging partnerships between green drivers and willing sensible horses.

Much of my experience has been working with clients who want me to teach both them and their horse to drive. If your riding horse is willing, and smart and you have a respectful partnership this is the best candidate for your first driving horse. The best first driving horse for a new driver would be a horse who loves to drive, who has a good brain, and a willing disposition and is genetically programmed to drive. Good training and instruction can be added to achieve success and safety.

As you can surmise from the responses of these two trainers to the questions posed that the person you chose to help you enter into the world of driving will be most valuable to you. Most trainers are willing to answer questions and bring their customers through the driving experience in a similar fashion. Enjoy.