

Presenting a Winning Picture

Walk a minute in a carriage judge's shoes. Given 30 minutes to pick a winner and placings, first impressions often stick in a judge's mind not only during that class, but throughout the show. Very often they will make mental notes to identify each turnout such as "busy-hands" or "lady-with-reds-that-don't-match" or "horse-needs-haircut" or "looks-good-I-will-keep-my-eye-on-that-one!". Presenting a winning picture to the judge is a goal everyone would like to be able to achieve.

How important is that first impression? Examining the American Driving Society (ADS) judging specifications for five different classes, we find "impression" and "condition and neatness" a definite part of the judging criteria.

ADS rules for judging pleasure classes

- Concours d'elegance,- The essence of the competition is elegance. This will include vehicle, harness, appointments, horse, driver, passengers, grooms, etc. Above all general impression is most important.
- Turn out - 70% on condition, fit, appropriateness of harness and vehicle, neatness and appropriateness of attire and overall impression
- Working - 20% condition, fit of harness and vehicle, 10% neatness of attire
- Reinsmanship - 25% on condition of harness and vehicle and neatness of attire
- Park - 30% overall impression

Northeast Equine Journal interviewed three well known carriage enthusiasts. Robin Groves of Brownsville, Vermont, has been competing in both pleasure driving and combined driving competitions for over 30 years. Her horses have been the American Morgan Horse Open Competition Champions time and time again and she has passed her winning skills to her many students through lessons and clinics throughout the United States.

Jeff Morse of Green Meads Farms, Richmond, Massachusetts, operates a carriage driving stable and has a life long show career with Morgans. He was the 2004 Morgan Horse Association Man of the Year and is current chair of the American Driving Society (ADS) Pleasure Driving Committee

John Greenall of West Windsor, Vermont, is the former chair of the American Driving Society (ADS) Pleasure Driving Committee and has competed in and judged pleasure driving shows throughout the United States. He is well known for his ability to present an outstanding turnout and acts as a consultant to many top competitors.

All three will be featured speakers at The Driving Forum on March 10 & 11, 2007 at the Westford Regency Hotel in Westford, MA. Contact Tel: 603-673-3956 or www.driving-forum.com.

How important is that first impression when you enter the ring?

Robin Groves – "It is all important! If you don't make a good, solid first impression, you will have to work extra hard to get a second and third look. An unappealing picture makes it hard to see a good performance."

Jeff Morse –“ I tell my drivers to make it easy for the judge to remember you, but don't make it hard for them to forget you! By that I mean stand out in a POSITIVE memorable way. If you enter the ring with loud colors, they had better work! Or the judges, being human, will only 'see' you as the “entry with the clashing pinks” and you may be stuck with that vision in the judge's mind for an entire competition. Equitate - body position in the vehicle is very important. Sit up. Look confident. Be comfortable. Check yourself just before you enter the ring.”

John Greenall – “First impressions are very important especially in a large class. I want to see everything in place when a competitor enters, not adjusting reins, tucking an apron in or moving in the seat. I start my judging by mentally splitting a class into a top and bottom as I have to evaluate everyone in a very short time. Figure 30 minutes to judge 10 turnouts – that's 3 minutes each. If you start on the bottom it is hard to move up.”

How do you pick a color combination that works for you?

Robin Groves – “Start with the horse, then match it to a vehicle of appropriate size, type and color, ie, sporting or formal, natural or painted. Then choose attire that compliments the horse and vehicle. Ladies should be tidy but feminine, gentlemen should be tailored and distinctively masculine. Everybody needs a dash of color to avoid looking like the undertaker or his wife! You should wish to be noticed but not glaringly stick out of the crowd. It's also nice to match your color choices to the current season, ie, pastels for spring and summer, autumn colors for fall. Color photos of your total turnout should guide you appropriately until you find a harmonious and attractive package – package is the end product.”

Jeff Morse –“Colors are a bit easier for gentlemen but have similar issues for ladies.

Clothing should be tasteful, well coordinated, complimentary and for me personally, a bit understated. It also needs to work with the style of the vehicle. I start with coordinating off of the vehicle upholstery by trying to pick up that color and use it in an understated way into other parts of the turnout, perhaps in the apron, the tie, or the hat band. For ladies, hats and scarves should be used in the same way: to accentuate and compliment, not to distract.

I tend to drive the basic bay, chestnut, black Morgans so having to coordinate with a louder, multicolored paint or spotted horse is usually not an issue. I try to stay away from having one clothing color that stands out too much from the rest that I wear. Be subtle and sparing with white and black. White can easily distract a judge's eye and too much black is not visually stimulating and can be a bit funereal. Everything needs to blend together and work to support the other colors.”

John Greenall – “If you dress to the type of horse and vehicle you are driving you are half way there. If it is a formal vehicle, then I expect everyone, including the horse, to be turned out. If it is a country vehicle I expect a more tailored look. Color can make or break a turnout so be careful. Certain colors can bring out the coat color of a horse, - other colors can blend in so much with the horse that everything rather melts into one

large blob. I suggest testing out clothing in sunlight standing next to the horse. If you want to be seen, don't dress like the horse!

The horse, how does he fit into the picture?

Robin Groves – “He is the MOST important part of the picture. He needs to look full and fit, sleek and shiny. The mane super tidy or braided (some horses look better one way or the other, try both), the tail hand picked and fluffy, hooves oiled, legs trimmed or well brushed out and the face clean and trimmed. I try to take all of the parts of my turnout and make them show off the horse.”

Jeff Morse – “I want the judge's mental note to be “great bay Morgan” rather than “nice hat”. I try put together the turnout in such a way that the HORSE can be primary in the judge's mind. Everything I do must accentuate the horse and allow him or her to be the focal point.

Most of the entries today are country turnouts and one should proceed with some care with manes. Sometimes the better choice is to braid. For instance, if the mane is excessively long, or has missing chunks etc. The horse should be groomed to perfection. That does NOT mean they have to be kept blanketed in a stall 24/7! Carriage horses are ‘using horses’, not hot house flowers! Minor nicks and dings on otherwise clean, well groomed, well fed, well conditioned horses are just signs that they are being used. It is, after all, a “horse” show, not a “people” show.”

John Greenall – “The entire turnout needs to balance with the horse. If the carriage is too big or small or the harness not fitted correctly the best horse will look “wrong”. The horse needs be in harmony with the driver, eager to perform and confident in the ring. I want to think that the horse is having a great time out there.”

With modest equipment, what things can be done to make it look great in the ring?

Robin Groves – “Everything must be super clean and shiny – that includes the horse, harness, vehicle and driver. Constant attention to the paint or varnish on the vehicle and a well-fitted harness is important. Even a synthetic harness needs attention to keep it supple and shiny looking. Any horse can look smashing if properly turned out.”

Jeff Morse – “Make sure your equipment...your vehicle and harness... is clean and sound. Nothing says you don't care about your presentation more than by neglecting something as cheap and easy as cleaning your equipment and your horse.

Don't be afraid to make adjustments to your vehicle. It is relatively simple and cheap to block up your seat platform to put you at the right height or to block up your floor so you can reach it. Replace the shaft leathers when they get worn. I always carry Testor high gloss black paint stick right in my vehicle and will touch up the black paint on my vehicle's metal parts after cleaning and polishing. Spending a bit of time during the off season detailing your vehicle not only improves it longevity and soundness but can pay off in the competition ring.”

John Greenall – “If everything fits well, a modest turnout can really stand out. That includes the vehicle to the horse, the harness to the horse and the driver to the vehicle. Sometimes placing a wedge under the driver can make a huge difference in appearance. The hat and clothes of grooms and/or passengers need to fit and accent the position of the driver in the carriage.”

Is there an attitude you strive for?

Robin Groves – “Yes, quiet competence and control and an aura of elegance. I also strive to not blend in with the masses but not stick out alarmingly.”

Jeff Morse – “Confidence. I want to exude confidence that I have trained my horse well for the job at hand, that I have put together a turnout that I am proud of, that I know my way around the ring. I do not want to be a defensive or tentative driver. I don’t want to be rushed. I want to appear to be comfortable. It is, after all, a “pleasure” show.”

John Greenall - “ A good competitor has their act together. It is a business-like and sharp performance.”

How do you achieve a “look at me” picture?

Robin Groves – “Be confident. Present a relaxed, happy horse moving forward in good self-carriage. Sit tall, eyes up and alert. Be smooth with your commands to the horse while being prompt to the judges orders.”

Jeff Morse – “My eye is always drawn to those who have provided strong evidence that they care about every part of their turnout over which they have control. Most of what makes for a winning turnout simply takes a little knowledge, some time and effort, not money. Many winning drivers do not have the means to own a better horse or fancier vehicle but they have trained their horse well for the job, they have paid attention to the details and have done the best with what they have to work with.

Bottom line: Show your horse! Provide a reward for the judge’s eye wherever it goes!”

John Greenall – “Bring in a horse with an alert manner and coat glowing. Everything should be clean and fitted. The driver should be sitting with good posture and be alert to what is going on in the ring by placing themselves in the most beneficial spot for the judge to see. If you are lost in the crowd, no matter how good you are, I can miss you”

Photos



Some hats work...



and some don't



A braided mane would better match the tailored look of this driver

Coordinating with paint horses can be as simple as adding a white scarf

