

# CAROLINA HOOFBEATS

October 2012

FREE

**DRIVING for FUN,  
WORK, & COMPETITION**



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# An Introduction to Driving

Say “driving horses” and what images pop into your mind? Perhaps it’s a field of Standardbreds straining for the finish line in a harness race. Maybe a pair of minis pulling a cute down-sized wagonette. The Budweiser Clydesdales. Or an Amish family’s everyday transportation, a lean ex-racer hitched to a no-frills runabout.

You might think of the magnificent matched teams that draw a Queen’s coach, or the stately blacks that pull a hero’s hearse. There’s the speedy pair pulling a cutter in a Currier & Ives print. And Joey the movie horse, who represents every war horse that ever pulled a caisson through the muddy fields of France. Closer to home, you might see Belgian draft horses in pulling contests at the fair, or a matched pair on a just-for-fun jaunt through the woods.

They’re all driving horses. There’s just as large a variety of types and sizes and styles of driving horses as riding horses.

Each style of driving and each horse-drawn vehicle, whether it’s for work, pleasure, ceremony or commerce, has been designed for a specific purpose.

If you’re curious about driving and think you might like to try your hand at hitching old Nellie to that antique doctor’s buggy that your neighbor has been using for a lawn ornament, the crucial piece of advice is: *Don’t*.

## Instead, first get training for the driver.

Invest in lessons with an experienced, professional trainer before you invest in any equipment (other than a helmet and gloves, which you definitely should have).

Driving is similar to riding in some ways, but very different in others. One of the major differences is in the equipment. You can go for a ride bareback with nothing more than a halter and rope, but to safely drive a horse you must first acquire the necessary skills to understand how to fit, hitch, and maintain everything, and then get the right horse, harness and vehicle.

## Join a Club

One of the quickest ways to learn, gain experience, make friends and find resources is to join a driving club. Different clubs focus on different types of driving: pleasure driving, fine harness, breed shows, dressage or combined driving events. A driving club can also



Mind the cones! The cones course tests accuracy and communication between horse and driver. Tommy Cope of Advance, NC, driving Cobalt. Photo courtesy of Penny Brandon, Whips and Wheels Driving Club.

help you find wonderful, safe places to drive. Whips and Wheels Driving Club (WWDC), based in the Mocksville area, has “fun” as its primary goal.

“We try to promote our sport in a safe, non-competitive environment,” explained WWDC’s Head Whip (President) Penny Brandon. “We do cones courses and similar games, cross-country trail driving, and enough dressage to say that we know what it is. WWDC has some sort of event at least once a month—either driving or a clinic, or both.

“Our equines include all sizes from Percherons to miniature donkeys. And we have a terrific Halloween Drive every year, with costumes!”

Some of the WWDC members also like to compete in Carolina Carriage Club (CCC) shows. The CCC is based in the Tryon area, where they host training clinics, pleasure and dressage shows, and combined driving events.

In Southern Pines, there’s the Moore County Driving Club, which has been going strong for decades—and has the advantage of being located close to the Walthor Moss Foundation, with its many miles of wonderful carriage trails.

## Then get training for your horse.

Even better, consider acquiring a veteran driving horse with a solid reputation for good

manners and patience.

The best, most reliable riding horse may not make a safe driving horse. To become a driving horse, a horse must learn to accept and respond in new ways to commands and a new set of stimuli.

For example, your driving horse must not “yield to pressure” by stepping away when he feels the shafts rub against his shoulders, ribs or flanks.

He may be trained to yield to pressure against his chest and shoulders by stepping backward—but now he must learn to push into the pressure of the breast or neck collar, to pull the vehicle forward. Likewise, he can’t step forward away from the pressure of breeching—he’s got to sit back into the breeching to slow or stop the vehicle.

He also must accept the more limited visual field of a “closed” (blinded or blinkered) bridle, which is designed to keep his attention focused forward and not have him worry about the cart and its contents that are bouncing and lurching behind him. Not all horses are happy with a closed bridle.

A potential driving prospect must be able to remain calm, confident and steady in the presence of barking dogs, running children, strange noises from things he cannot see behind him, and all sorts of traffic (cars, other

horses, pedestrians, bicyclists). He should willingly cross bridges, muddy ground and streams.

He must have great brakes—in other words, you must be able to stop quickly with the reins and voice in an emergency. You cannot use your weight or visual cues as you might in riding. (Though you can use mechanical brakes on the vehicle—see below.)

Your horse must stand absolutely still when asked to, for as long as necessary. There's a lot of fitting and fiddling and checking and re-checking that happens with a harness and cart, and the horse must have good patience to stand still while all this is going on.



Combining pageantry, history, and modern sport, the Pittsford Carriage Association annually hosts the Walnut Hill Carriage Driving Competition in Pittsford, NY. It's an international celebration of traditional driving, in held in a 19th century country fair setting. Sandy Thompson driving her pony, Annabelle. Photo courtesy of Sandy Thompson.

### Choosing a Vehicle

There are many, many kinds of horse-drawn vehicles, but today they generally fall into three types: carts, which are usually two-wheeled; carriages, which are four-wheeled and carry people; and wagons, which carry cargo. (The term “buggy” isn't synonymous with “carriage”; a buggy is a specific type of lightweight vehicle, often with a folding top.)

For training, the best vehicle to start with is a two-wheeled cart that is sized to fit your horse. The most important measurements are the length, width and height of the shafts; and the height of the cart's seat, which should be high enough so you can see over the top of your horse but not so high that it's precariously tippy.

A cart with pneumatic tires can give a smoother ride in the arena or training field, but don't take it out on the trails! There's nothing like a tire blow-out to ruin your drive. Solid tires or rubber-rimmed wheels are better for country driving.

You can expect to pay \$500 and up for a training cart, and \$2000 and up for a road cart

or its close cousin, the Meadowbrook.

A four-wheeled carriage is more stable than a cart and the horse doesn't have to carry it, just pull it, but the turning radius is larger so it is not as maneuverable. Look for a vehicle with a cut-under box that allows the front wheels to pivot underneath the body of the vehicle. Otherwise, you may lock up a front wheel when it hits the box in a tight turn.

With a renewed interest in competitive three-phase combined driving (dressage/presentation, cross-country/marathon, and obstacles/cones), there are now several manufacturers who produce rugged vehicles for this specialized sport. Marathon carriages are technological marvels, with shock-mounted seat frames, stainless steel brake rotors, telescoping shafts, and negative angle wheels for greater stability.

For example, the Single Horse Marathon

Batmobile M-160 model produced by World Class Carriages (WCC) features bumpers that are “designed to withstand and facilitate a very fast drive through hazards. The carriage bounces off of hazards with ease and stays in its track,” according to the WCC catalog.

### What About Antique Carriages?

Until you really know what you're doing, and you've made friends with—or married—a skilled service person, you'll want to stay away from antique vehicles. Antique (or just “old”) horse-drawn vehicles can be beautiful and stylish, but they require special skills to maintain them properly. Safety is a major issue with these vehicles. Wooden parts can suffer from unseen cracks or dry rot; metal parts, including springs and hardware can weaken from rust and disuse.

### A Note About Brakes

Buy a vehicle that has hydraulic brakes, or install them. Use them to slow down a too-fast horse, park on a hill, or ease your horse's burden going down a hill. Otherwise, your horse's mouth is your only brake.

Hydraulic brakes should be standard equipment on all modern carriages, but you may have to ask for them on your training cart or road cart. See the article “Driving Forward” on page 29 for more information about brakes.

### The Harness

The purpose of the harness is to safely attach the horse to the vehicle so he can pull it, turn it and stop it safely. The bridle, lines (reins), whip and driver's voice are the communication aids



Allan Harper of Dixie Carriages in Stantonsburg, NC.

for command and control. Everything must fit correctly and be adjusted for your horse and your vehicle. This is crucial. The breeching, for example, has to be placed low enough on the horse's hindquarters so it doesn't ride up under his tail, but high enough so it doesn't pull his rear legs forward and cause him to slip when he's holding back the carriage.

Although all harnesses have similar parts and functions, there are variations. A lightweight harness with a breast collar is suitable for pulling a lightweight cart or carriage; a gig harness has a wider saddle or back pad to carry the weight of a heavier, taller gig cart; a heavy draft or pulling harness must be equipped with a neck collar to better distribute a heavier pulling load. It's important to be sure that the parts putting pressure on the horse (the collar, breeching, saddle) are wide enough and well padded to prevent pressure sores and make the horse unwilling to work.

Traditional harness is made of leather, in black for a black or painted carriage and in russet for a natural-wood finished vehicle. Today, biothane and other strong, washable, leather-look synthetics are often the preferred choice for pleasure and cross-country driving. The harness must always be sturdy and well-stitched.

A new, good-quality, single-horse light harness will cost about \$1,000. Stay away from inexpensive leather or nylon harnesses, as the stitching can pull or break, the metal parts will probably rust, and the straps will stiffen and become abrasive with time and wear.

After you and your horse have had lots of experience in a basic training cart, out on gravel roads and fields as well in the arena, you can branch out into different types of driving.

Enjoy!

✂ Sarah Blanchard

*Sarah Blanchard is an instructor, trainer, equine marketing professional and author. She is an NC open show and AHCA judge, and the co-author of the book Carriage Driving: A Logical Approach to Training through Dressage. Contact her at sblanchard@carolinahoofbeats.com or sarah@pegasus-marketing.com*

**More Information**

**Whips & Wheels Driving Club**  
www.whipsandwheelsdrivingclub.com

**Moore County Carriage Club**  
www.moorecountycarriageclub.com

**Carolina Carriage Club**  
carolinacarriageclub.com

**Central Carolina Driving Club**  
carolinadriving.net/ccdc/

**American Driving Society**  
www.ads.org

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