

## **SAFETY AT COMPETITIONS – THE STEPPING STONES**

As a competition driver and official, I get the unfortunate opportunity to see a lot of carriage driving accidents. While some are unavoidable, most could have been prevented with better awareness of safety.

Safety awareness comes from many different angles. To start, the rules clearly require a lot of safe practices. Traditions and Education also help to establish safe practices and there is also the old hard way - experience. I have used them all. My desire here is to provide more safety rules, traditions and education to avoid the opportunity of you having to learning the hard way.

While safety is just as important at home, it is a priority at a competition because there is more opportunity for unusual things to happen and your lack of attention to safety could endanger others. In addition, drivers at a competition are often distracted, nervous and in a hurry. So for these reasons, safety needs to be used each and every time at home to become a habit at the show. Only a good safety routine, done each day, will protect you from that mistake that injures you, your animal or someone else.

There are several times in a driving day when safety is paramount. The most important time is while putting the animal to and from the carriage. If you have ever seen an accident when the animal was partially attached to the carriage, you know what I am talking about. If you've had the chance to avoid this picture, trust me it is usually a very bad accident as the animal is too often injured by the dangling carriage.

Step 1: Train your animal to be ready for competition. I was recently at a competition where an experienced driver entered the show, hauled the horse to the show to spend the night, walked the horse around during the show, lounged the horse, put harness on the horse and ground drove all over the show grounds. Then she packed up and left without entering the arena. Competition will happen next time when the horse is ready. This was such a perfect training opportunity for the horse and driver. If you don't feel ready don't drive. Come and let the animal see the excitement. Or get a professional to drive the horse. Or stay away until you are both ready. And if you do not know our sport yet; come watch, volunteer and or help another driver. You will learn a lot and we need your help!

Step 2: Make sure your equipment is in top shape. While there are some who clean their equipment daily, more likely you are more like I used to be and only completely clean the harness and carriage before competition. If you compete often, this model might work out for you, but with COVID and just life in general, you might not get around to competing. If that is true for you, set a time each day, week or month (depending on how much you drive) to always fully inspect your equipment. Make a check list and follow it. Your safety depends on it!

Step 3: Always have an assistant when putting to and unhooking from the carriage. While you would prefer an experienced driver and horseman, a less experienced person can still calm the animal in a crisis, or at least be able to call for help while you are dealing with the crisis. If things go wrong, another person is always better than being alone!

I just heard a great new idea by Stacy Giere to protect against mistakes. She has a rule in her driving barn and then at shows, that there is no talking during hooking and unhooking except about the hooking process. At a show, it too easy to talk about your nervous concerns while hooking up the carriage, that could fail to remember an important step like the underbelly girth. Or when unhooking but think more about your desire to take up bowling because you appear to be very good at knocking stuff over. Take the minutes you hook or unhook as an opportunity to slow down and be quiet and thoughtful of your procedure.

While putting to the carriage – always keep the reins in your hands! While you might have a header to help you, you must also keep the reins in your hands at all times the animal is being put to the carriage. That way you have a double chance to stop a problem when the reins are where you can use them – in your hands. And it goes without saying that the reins to the bit are the first thing you attach before anything else is attached to the carriage. So if you are driving a pair, reins first – then hook to the carriage. And of course, never take the bridle off until the animal is completely unhooked from the carriage. Finally never tie an animal to anything while put to the carriage.

Step 4: Make driving a group activity - At a competition, always ask for help if you did not bring your own helper. 99% of drivers are more than willing to help another driver and will always take the extra minutes to head your animal. While a person in the carriage is not required at the ADS and USEF level, they are required at all times at the FEI level. And most countries enforce the FEI rule at all levels of competition. Why? Because having someone near and then on the carriage is more likely to provide you with help when you need it, rather than asking for help during or after an accident. And most judges prefer to see a groom on the carriage because it's traditional, smart and safer.

#### **FEI Article 942 Safety**

**1. In the Showgrounds, whenever the Horse(s) are fully harnessed or being harnessed to a carriage, Groom(s) must at all times be in attendance and able to render assistance if needed. Whenever Horses are driven, a Groom must be on the carriage or if there is no seat available, at hand on the training field.**

(EDITORS NOTE: USEF and ADS modified this rule to not require a groom for singles at the lower levels.)

When I was in Europe last month, I saw a great way to encourage and comfort grooms to sit on the back of a marathon carriage. The FEI, USEF and ADS rules all state the groom must sit down on the carriage during dressage and cones. In a marathon carriage, they must pick a side (I always have them sit on the side with the most turns in cones to weight the carriage.) To make it more conformable for the groom to sit, the Europeans attach the marathon seat belt from the back of the driver's seat to the groom's handhold to make a sling to support the groom's back. It looks good, it gets them to sit up straight and offers a bit of support. And don't forget, according to the rules, all grooms in dressage and cones must have a jacket (no vests), hat (helmets are now being used most of the time in Europe and here) and gloves.

## **USEF DC913 Dress, safety and whips**

### **1. Dress in Dressage and Cones on a Dressage Carriage**

#### **1.3 Grooms must wear jackets or national dress, hats and gloves**

### **3. Dress for Juniors**

#### **3.1 At all times, while on a carriage, Junior Athletes must wear a body protector and a securely fastened Protective © USEF 2020 533 Headgear which meets or exceeds ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials) /SEI (Safety Equipment Institute) standards for equestrian use and carries the SEI tag. Infringement will result in Elimination.**

Step 5: Increase your safety. I just recently was at a USEF Developing Drivers clinic and we were talking about presentation carriage seats and I noticed that many of the drivers did not have their seats tied down to the carriage. This needs to be done as many modern presentation carriages and some two wheel carts do not have drivers seats bolted to the frame. It is often held in place with Velcro or just sitting on top. If you don't lose the seat to the wind in the back of the truck getting to the show, you are very likely to lose it (with you in it) while you are driving.

Unless your seat is bolted to the carriage, you need to use a strap (I use a stirrup leather) around the top of the seat and through the body of the carriage to hold the seat in place. If the body of the carriage is not open, add a "footman's" loop on both sides of the carriage below the seat and fashion a strap from one side to the other.

Step 6: Safety happens in the carriage. Keep those reins in your hands, not between your knees. One pull by the horse to swat a fly and you are now in the carriage with no reins or control. Always put your hat, lap robe (apron) and gloves on BEFORE putting the animal to the carriage. Then you don't have to put the reins down. After your settle in, pick up the end of the reins and place it in a safe place, under your body, or on your pinky finger. Do not let the reins dangle down around your feet while seated for you to trip over getting out or to be caught in the wheels.

Once the animal is put to the carriage, you are required by the rules to have a driver in the carriage or a groom at the head. I DO NOT recommend only a groom head the animal – and most officials here and in Europe agree. There must be a driver in the seat box. If you need to go to the bathroom, a knowledgeable person must be on the box with the reins in their hands.

Step 7: Always think about safety during your drive. Stay away from Volunteers, Tents and non-horsey areas. Do not drive your animal near spectators. It is unsafe as people could frighten your horse with non-horse friendly equipment like umbrellas and baby carriages. Moreover, many people at a competition do not have horse knowledge and could cause an accident.

When stopping, lining up or hooking, always position yourself to allow your animal space to move forward in case of an emergency. Never position the animal into corner that requires it to injure itself to be safe.

Step 8: Think if there is an accident. If you are near an accident, move away. Be proactive and get away so you are not injured and can assist as needed. If you are sitting down, stand up and watch. You might be able to assist or at least report what is happening or run behind the tree if the accident is coming toward you. Never jump in front of a runaway carriage! At all times, let the officials, who have a protocol in place, take control the situation. Do not call 911 unless instructed to make the report to avoid multiple calls with confusing information.

If you are driving always head away from the accident and the barns or trailers; most animals are trying to get back to their friends. If possible, get out of sight of the animal by going behind the barn or a trailer because they often gravitate towards other animals.

If you are involved in the accident, try to remain as calm as possible. Slow down and think. Allow others to assist if they are experienced and officials. Remember a very large amount of accidents result in no injuries when you remain calm and get help from others.

Finally, remember the best situation is to avoid the accident in the first place. Always remain conscientious for safety and continue to learn more and better ways to protect you and your animal!