



The American Driving Society, Inc.

Finding Your Driving Horse

“Green + green = black and blue.”

As new drivers begin in the sport, often with a budget, there is the temptation to start with a less experienced animal as they typically are cheaper. Unfortunately, you often get what you pay for. While it is possible for you and your horse to learn together, it typically is best to have a more experienced equine partner if you are new to driving. At the very least, it is highly recommended to work with a knowledgeable driving trainer as you go through the process. This is a caution as well for those experienced equestrians that have previously trained ridden horses as driving training does have some unique aspects.

When you are looking for your first driving horse be on the lookout for these qualities.

- Do they stand quietly for harnessing, hitching, and while getting in/out of the carriage?
- Do you have physical limitations that make it take longer to get in and out of the carriage? If so, the horse needs to be extra patient and behaved at the halt.
- Do they respect “Whoa”?
- Are they safe driving around both riding horses and other driving horses?
- Do they mind driving away from the barn without company?
- Are they calm and relaxed driving at their home farm? Does that change when driving at a different property?
- Do they have experience with the type of driving that you are interested in? While this is not a strong requirement if all of the other qualities are present, it is something to consider. The environment at a CDE versus a pleasure show versus a recreational drive do have significant differences.

If you have experience training and/or driving then it may make sense to get a greener horse. They often are less expensive and then you have more control over the experiences they have as they learn. If they are broke to drive, or green broke, it is still recommended to start at the beginning to check for holes in the training. Here are some recommended training tips and milestones to start your horse into its new driving career.

Environment

It is important to consider your surroundings when introducing new ideas to your horse. The ideal situation is an enclosed arena with solid walls (no studs or fence posts to get



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hung up on). But for most people “ideal” is not possible- which is ok! In that case consider:

- Is the area at least enclosed in some way? If a ring is not an option, consider a pasture, round pen, heck even at least knowing there is a fence around the property including the driveway gate.
- Distractions
 - Are there other boarders that might be nearby?
 - Will the other horses on the property spook at what you are working on with your horse?
 - Is there a busy road nearby or dogs that could come out of nowhere?
- What is the schedule at the barn? Are you asking your horse to be near horses being brought in for feeding when you know it upsets your equine?

The beginning stages of training are best with the least amount of unexpected distractions, though these are all situations that a driving horse should learn to handle eventually.

Ground Training

The foundation of all training should be respect and trust between the horse and the handler. These include:

- Respectful ground manners about personal space, responding to whoa, and your authority in general
- Non-reactive to unexpected sights and sounds around them
- Desensitized to having equipment touching them any place on their body

Lunging, Long Lining, and Ground Driving

Good preparation for hitching a horse for the first time begins with the ground work.

Lunging (one line) and Long Lining (two lines)

- This is the place to reinforce vocal commands for each gait (Walk, Trot, Canter, and most importantly- WHOA)
- Introduce each piece of the harness to the horse in steps- Saddle, crupper, breeching without pressure and then with pressure, breast plate and traces

Ground Driving (two lines following behind or working on more than just a circle)

- Respectful of your contact to the bit

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- Will halt whenever asked even if they are nervous, and will stand relaxed
- Comfortable with you walking behind them at different gaits
- Comfortable with noise behind them
- Comfortable with pressure on the traces. This can be accomplished with a second person carefully holding something attached to the end of the traces allowing a safe distance and applying pressure both to the horse's chest, but also letting them feel the traces around their legs and adding pressure to their legs.
- Comfortable dragging weight
- Desensitized to pressure from "shafts" on each side of their body

A Side Note: Bitless and/or Blinkerless Driving

Bitless driving

- Pros
 - Some horses object to a bit due to behavior or injury
- Cons
 - Potentially far less control over the horse's speed and steering especially if the horse is frightened
 - The bridle is easier to rub off (?)
 - Not legal at competitions
 - Unusual to see at events so even non-recognized events may not be comfortable with the idea- always ask!

Blinkerless/Open Bridles

- Pros
 - The horse can see more around them- some horses prefer this
 - Can be a useful tool for desensitization with the right horse during early training before introducing blinders
- Cons
 - The horse can see more around them- many horses do not like the sight of the carriage "chasing" them or being able to see other drivers approaching from behind
 - While legal for combined driving, it is suggested to speak with the TD as it's unusual to see
 - Discouraged for the majority of pleasure driving turnouts

At the end of the day safety is the key element of all driving. Take your time and make sure you and your equine partner are comfortable every step of the way. Drive on!