

Chapter Fourteen - Driving for Pleasure

Driving for the Joy of It

Driving, after all, is supposed to be fun -- for you and for your horse. Even the most seasoned show-ring competitor still enjoys the pleasures of quiet country driving. For some drivers, pleasure driving is merely an occasional diversion, but for many people, it is the ultimate goal and perhaps the only reason they have taken up driving.

One of the nicest things about having a carriage and a reliable country driving horse is that other people can share your activities. You can bring along a couple of children or a non-horsy friend, without having to provide extra horses or trying to teach everyone to ride well enough to manage a trail ride. Pleasure driving can also be enjoyed by people who lack the abilities to tackle the greater physical demands of riding.

From the Horse's Point of View

A great many horses seem to genuinely enjoy driving on the trails. Many horses very clearly indicate that they prefer driving over riding--there's no rider bumping and shifting around on top of him, no misapplied leg aids to deal with--and nearly every horse will prefer being on the trails to working in the ring. Even though most people drive a heavier carriage on the trails than they do in the ring, your horse will find it less tiring to travel on the trails because he will make fewer turns.

The straight-ahead nature of most country driving is far less taxing on his legs.

Your horse may become very bored by ring work. You'll want to spend time on the roads and trails as soon as you can, both to relieve the tedium of training sessions and to use hills to improve the muscles in his back and hindquarters.

The lazy horse, in particular, will find trail work a lot more fun than ring work; it will also help motivate him to go more forward without your constantly pushing him. Many horses who plod unhappily in the ring are delighted to find themselves on new and interesting trails, and actually "going somewhere."

The nervous horse, on the other hand, may be uncomfortable when he's outside the security of the ring's known territory. If your horse's nervousness translates into a head-high, back-hollow way of going, work on hills will not necessarily translate into correct muscle development. You must spend more time in the ring with this fellow, and make your forays into the countryside brief, well-planned, and following the same route for quite some time to provide him with reassurance. (Remember that sliding sidereins are also handy for re-establishing correct balance, and can be used quite comfortably in most road and trail work.)

You Know You and Your Horse are Ready When . . .

Before you drive on the roads and trails in your area, your horse should be familiar with them already through ponying, ground-driving, and perhaps riding. Then, taking the carriage out on the trails shouldn't be a terribly traumatic move for him. You do need to review a few things first, however, to be sure you're both ready.

If your horse is by nature willing, obedient, and very easy to control, you can consider going out onto the trails sooner than with a horse who is headstrong or has a relatively insensitive mouth. If he is nervous or spooky, especially, you had better make sure you've established the following conditions before you venture out of the ring.

Before you leave the relative safety of your enclosed training area, your horse should be able to pass eight tests.

1. Ground Driving on the Trails

He should ground-drive willingly and calmly on the intended route, and be able to accept the hazards of this particular trail or road (dogs, shadows, traffic). Riding and ponying will also help familiarize your horse with the trails, but there's no substitute for ground driving, because you are more closely simulating the actual control you will have over your horse when he's pulling a cart.

2. Secure Steering

He should steer well and safely. He doesn't have to be perfect yet, but when you tell him to turn right, he must turn to the right -- not only with his head, but with the rest of his body following. If you tell him to turn right, and he turns his head right but continues to travel straight ahead (or, worse, turns left and falls over the left shoulder) he is most certainly not ready for driving out of the ring.

3. Acceptance of the Bit

Your horse should accept the bit willingly. This means he must flex at the poll and yield in the jaws when bit pressure is applied, and he must submit to the command of the bit without fighting it, pulling against it, or becoming upset with it. If a young or green horse seems otherwise ready, but still has some problems with accepting the bit, you can drive him on the trails for a few times with the sliding sidereins.

Trail work should always be fun for the horse, and it should give him a break from the continuous demands of ringwork. In the ring, he must keep his head and neck in the right place and pay constant attention to the reins; on the trails, it is pleasant

for him if you can safely drive with only a light rein contact--but the emphasis must be on safety, and he does have to accept your commands to come onto the bit readily when it is required. Some horses find everything so interesting out on the trails that they forget all about listening, and begin to consider your rein aids as nothing but pure nuisance. The sidereins will help remind them that they still have to listen.

4.Obedience to Commands

He should obey all your commands willingly, especially the command to halt. He should halt when you tell him to, and should remain standing quietly for as long as you want him to--even if he's heading toward home.

5.Negotiating Tight Turns

He should be able to negotiate fairly tight turns to either side, being able to turn around on a narrow road if necessary. Ideally, your horse will already know how to do a 180-degree turn, more or less on the spot. *(Note: Read the article "Driving From The Ground Up" about how to teach the horse to make tight turns by asking him to move his shoulder with the whip)*

This last requirement can be a very valuable safety maneuver. On more than one occasion, we've gotten out of a tight spot simply because our still-green horse had learned this skill.

Once, we met up with a dogsled team rushing toward us. The sled driver yelled that he didn't think he could control his dogs and was afraid they might attack. Another time, a loose herd of cows moved our way. How nice it was to be able to quickly and calmly turn on the spot and trot away from danger!

How can you teach your horse to turn this tightly?

As soon as your horse is going forward willingly in the ring or field, and he understands bending through the actions of the inside and outside rein, you can attempt a tighter turn of about 90 degrees. Begin by slowing the walk almost to a halt, and then take up the inside rein firmer. Your outside rein yields, and remains passive in a light contact, unless your horse tries to move forward rather than sideways.

The objective is to pivot the cart, keeping the inside wheel pretty much on the spot, while the horse is crossing over with both front and hind legs on a small arc, looking in the direction he's moving, but without stepping either forward or backward.

As you begin to teach your horse this tight turn, it is okay if he steps forward a little at first, but he must never step backward unless you specifically ask him to do so. If he steps backward while you are trying to turn sharply, he can injure himself--and he can also back you into danger. Move him forward briskly if he starts to creep back.

If he moves forward more than sideways, use both reins to re-establish the near-halt, and begin the turn again. Be very

sure not to pull his head too far to one side, because then you will lose control of his body. The horse will fall over his outside shoulder and can then pretty much do what he chooses, perhaps moving straight ahead or going in the other direction. He may also hit his head or neck on the inside shaft (especially if the shafts are straight rather than curved). If he hits the shaft hard, he may become very upset about this uncomfortable restriction. If this happens, drive forward to straighten him and try the turn again a little later. Figure 14-1 illustrates this problem.

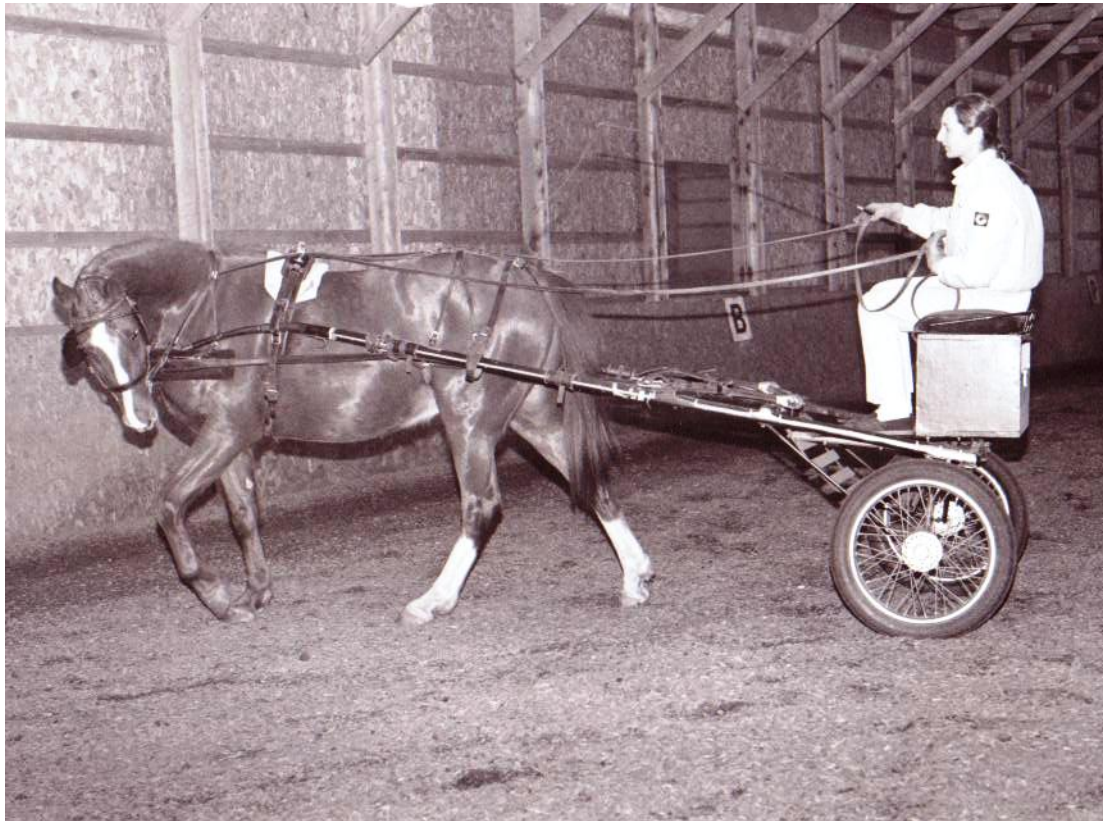


Fig. 14-1
This attempt at a 180-degree turn was made too early! He's obviously confused, over bending his neck severely to the left, and is in great danger of hitting the wall with the right shaft in his next steps.

Your horse may not understand what you are asking for at first. You can also touch him with the whip, fairly low on the outside barrel or on his shoulder, if you can reach it (on his right side if you are turning left) to encourage the sideways movement--but you should try this only if you practiced this move in ground work.

Some horses just do not understand what you are asking for, as the shafts can feel very confining and become very confused. If your horse responds with nothing but confusion and

frustration, postpone further lessons for a few weeks until his ring work is more confirmed.

You may also want to enlist the aid of a knowledgeable helper. Have your horse halt and then, while you are pulling gently on the inside rein, have your helper push the horse's barrel and the shaft sideways, a step or two at a time.

Be pleased with even a step or two to the side during your first attempts, and be sure you praise your horse for any correct attempts. It is very important that you never pull hard and long on the reins, even if the horse is slow in responding or does not respond at all. All rein action must be give-and-take. If a horse is forced into tight turns too early, he can become very frightened and begin to rear, balk, back up, leap forward, or try to bolt. Any sign of one of these problems is a signal for you to ease off. Either your horse doesn't understand what you're asking, or he's just not ready to deal with this maneuver.

Generally, the more advanced a horse is in his understanding of the rein commands, the easier it will be to teach him tight turning. Horses that have been ridden extensively (and well) before they begin to drive will usually have no problems with this at all

6.Backing Up

Your horse must be able to step backward on command at least two or three steps, and he must quit backing when you tell him to. He doesn't have to back perfectly yet in harness, but he should be willing and able to back a few steps, fairly straight.

Before you ask him to rein back when he is hitched, your horse must first be able to back willingly, straight, and for the required number of steps in ground driving. You should not be using the reins to pull the horse backward in ground driving; rather, he should step back willingly as a result of your voice and light rein commands.

Before he can push a cart backward, he must also be willing to step back into the pressure of the breeching. The first few times you ask him to back when he's hitched, be sure the cart is a light one. Lighten it even more by getting out to stand beside it, or ask a helper to assist the horse with the weight of the cart as he steps back.

The first few times you give the command to back up, ask only for a few steps--and don't repeat the command too often, no more than five times during a training session. Keep him calm and responsive, and don't ask him to hurry backward. Always let the horse walk or trot forward between practice for the reinback, and don't ask him to back every time you halt. It is very important that the horse not anticipate the command to back. Anticipating or rushing backward is dangerous, and should never be allowed.

If your horse does step back too quickly, too far, or when you have not asked him to, use your voice immediately and

strongly, and add a touch of the whip if necessary.

Once he has learned to move a few steps back in the light cart, you can add some weight to it, change to a heavier cart, and eventually ask him to back up a slight slope. (And if your horse is balky about a reinback in the cart, try asking for it on a slight downward slope at first so that gravity helps him. Then you can move to level ground when he is comfortable with this.) You may find yourself relying quite a bit on this skill when you go out on the trails.

7.Strength and Condition

Your horse must be in good physical shape. If your cart is very heavy or the terrain very steep, the horse must be in good condition or he may stall on you halfway up a hill, which can be quite dangerous. Pulling a heavy cart up a steep hill is difficult work, and a young or unmusclcd horse can experience serious problems. Many horses will not automatically have the desire to pull harder or put more energy into climbing a hill-- this is something that has to be taught. If they are also out of shape, they will be very reluctant to work at the limits of their physical strength.

Some horses, however, do seem born with the desire to tackle hills and hard work, and these are the horses that will put on condition more quickly once you do get out onto the trails. Any horse who shows an eagerness to climb a hill--within reason!--can be an absolute pleasure to drive.

A few months of regular ringwork should strengthen your horse sufficiently for the trails, but you must also pay attention to the condition of the ground. Pulling a heavy cart through deep mud can be much harder than being ridden or ponied through the same mud. If the weather and ground conditions make driving especially difficult, you may have to put the cart aside for a while and resume your ponying, riding, or ground driving along the trails until conditions are better.

8.Acceptance of the Whip

Your horse should accept and understand signals from the whip. (See Chapter 5.)

Once you feel you and your horse are ready to enjoy the great outdoors, you need to consider the following factors:

1. Plan the first route carefully. Don't drive through the center of town or along a busy highway the first time out, if you can possibly avoid it!

2. Choose the best time of day, and wait for good weather. Go at a time of day where you will meet the least commotion. The less your horse has to distract him for the first few outings, the better. Don't choose a cold, breezy, stormy day for

your trail drive, but wait instead for a calm day with nothing blowing around.

3. Look ahead of time for a suitable spot to turn around, if this is the only way to get back home again.

4. Make sure the person coming with you knows horses, is agile and courageous--and won't sue you if anything goes wrong. This sounds drastic, but "better safe than sorry." Of course, you would never go alone on your first outing.

5. Check your cart and brake to be sure everything is in good operating condition.

6. Check your "spare parts" and tool kit. In your carriage you should have: a halter and lead rope, sharp knife, pliers, hammer, hoof pick, spare trace, spare rein, hole punch, and plenty of strong cord or wire. You should be ready to repair anything that breaks or malfunctions.

7. If you feel your horse may need a stronger bit for trail work than he usually does in the ring, make sure he's accustomed to it before you go out on the trails.

8. You may want to ground-drive your horse along the route, then return to the barn to hitch him and repeat the same route, if you aren't completely sure of his reliability.

9. Drive your horse at home, in your ring or work area, for a few minutes first. You want to make sure everything works well and your horse is in a good, relaxed mood before you leave for the trails.

10. Be calm. Don't make the horse nervous with quick, erratic moves of your own. This is probably the hardest of all to do! It can be very exciting to take your horse out for the first time, but you do not want that excitement to be communicated to him.