



Road Safety Series

Part I: Planning Ahead

Whip Stacey Driscoll and her passenger Katie Kashner are prepared for a safe drive with Audrey Bostwick's pony, Oreo. Both are wearing protective headgear and reflective vest, and the orange flag adds to the cart's visibility.

BY JOANNE BELLION-POVENSKI

Have you grown bored with driving on your farm? Are you looking for a more economical way to run errands? Would you enjoy a relaxing and satisfying drive on a warm, sunny morning, actually going somewhere? Think how nice it would be to listen to the rhythm of your horse's hooves and appreciate the beauty of nature . . . If you can do it without worrying about your horse becoming the next Rocket Man.

My purpose in this series is to help you prepare to drive in the most "non horse friendly" environment you can imagine: the public roads. When I was asked during my professional carriage-driving career what it is like to drive in city traffic, I described it as similar to navigating a sailboat in a crowded harbor of power boats.

Motorists do not realize (or care) that unlike a machine, the horse has a mind of his own. In their eyes you are driving him, therefore you must be in control. (We know that is true, but only to a certain extent.) Automobile drivers will not notice the plastic bag blowing across the field and heading straight for the road in front of your carriage. Kids on a school bus will not be the only occupants of passing vehicles to yell, and possibly throw things at you. There are people of all ages in this world who think it is funny to see your horse bolt, as a result of something they did. (Worse yet is the prankster who spies a horse tied outside a store and turns him loose only to laugh as he runs away.) By end of my career as a professional carriage driver, not much about the behavior of people toward horses surprised me.

Horses have the right of way on many states' roads, but most motorists do not know it. I would rather be the one to yield, than stand my ground (like a sailboat asserting its right of way over an oil tanker!) and risk getting hurt. Don't expect any considerations and when you do experience them, make sure to signal your appreciation.

"Real World" Road Perils

Air brakes on trucks and buses: These always seem to hiss when right alongside the carriage. Consider yourself lucky if these vehicles even slow down.

Engine brakes or "jake brakes": An 18-wheeler whose driver is applying these sounds like a huge, growling animal.

Roadside equipment: Beyond the bend is a landscaping crew with mowers, trimmers and blowers all going full tilt. They are too busy to look up and notice a carriage coming down the street, nor can they hear anything.

More: Vehicles pulling noisy trailers, dump trucks with debris dropping off the back, sirens blasting on emergency vehicles, dogs barking and/or chasing the carriage, huge motor coaches, riders on bicycles and loud motorcycles are just a few examples. The better you prepare yourself and your horse to deal with the public-road environment, the more you will be able to enjoy the very real pleasures of driving in it.

Make Yourself Visible

Increase visibility by attaching a flag in a conspicuous color like blaze orange or neon green to the carriage on a tall pole. Wear a safety vest with reflective tape, hang an SMV sign on the rear of the carriage and put a banner on the back of the carriage asking motorists to pass wide and slow. Attach reflective and/or neon green tape on the banner to make it even more noticeable. Bicycle shops carry battery-powered clip-on blinking red lights that will attach to the carriage. Put reflective tape on your helmet, and reflective bands on your horse's legs and bridle.

It's good to be audible as well as visible: Put sleigh bells on the harness to make your presence known to humans and wildlife.

Photo by Joanne Povenski

On the road with Dana Bright and her pair of ponies, Cubbyhole Kestrel aka Katie (left) and Cubbyhole Osprey aka Repeat (right). The ponies are standing as they're trained to do, although Katie's body language says she would rather not.



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PART III: Roadworthy Details

BY JOANNE POVENSKI

Your Vehicle

Take a look at the carriage you plan to drive on the road. Two-wheeled carts are fine, as long as your horse is not green or does not have a problem making a tight turn with it, something you will need to do sooner or later. Teaching him to side-pass first will help considerably.

If you are driving a four-wheeled carriage, remember that a carriage with a 'fifth wheel' (a bearing for the undercarriage and front axle assembly attached to the front of the carriage body underside) and 'cut under' design (allowing the front wheels to turn under the carriage body) requires far less room for a turn than something like a surrey or runabout that has a reach, no fifth wheel and is not cut under. The more maneuverable cut under vehicle with a fifth wheel is also less at risk of overturning.

This close-up shows a fifth wheel's advantages for making tight turns. Notice that the carriage is also cut under, allowing the wheel to turn under the body of the vehicle.



Both of these charming carriages, a picnic wagon (above) and a runabout, have a "reach," a construction feature that greatly increases their turning radius. Photos by Ruth Graves.



Photo by Dana Bright.

Other considerations:

A vehicle tall enough to allow you to look out over the horse's head is preferable to a sulky in which you ride closer to the road.

Restored antique carriages are a joy to drive as well as to look at. Careful maintenance and inspection will help you feel confident that the vehicle can stand up to frequent use on all types of terrain.

A Word On Brakes

First, avoid the mistaken assumption that the carriage brakes will slow down the horse! If your foot is on the brake and the horse pulls on the traces hard enough, the harness will break and you will soon be alone in the carriage, with no horse. The driving horse needs to learn to keep the carriage from bumping him in the hindquarters by leaning back into properly adjusted breeching. When traveling down a steep grade, use the brake gently to put some slack in the traces, allowing the horse to "float" in them while supporting him with your hands.

Shoeing

My advice on shoeing is simple. There are studs, drill tech, rubber shoes and borium. The latter gets my vote. In my experience, borium is most effective when used on all four feet, at the toe and heels. The horse needs traction all around to stay balanced. Put on properly, borium should not affect how your horse stands or his way of going. The farrier can use a leather or silicone pad on top of packed Oakum for added comfort on hard surfaces. Before making a final decision, research these options, consult your farrier and ask others who drive regularly on pavement about their experience. (For an experienced farrier's perspective on best shoeing choices for traction, see the sidebar at right.)



Shoeing for Traction: Tips from farrier Stephen Bright

Photos by Dana Bright

Q: When are studs better than borium?

A: Studs are usually more useful on turf as opposed to paved road. Gobs of borium may be suitable for horses that spend most of their time on the road (such as Amish buggy horses), but for sport horses that work on a variety of surfaces we generally use less borium, and sometimes none on the toe.

Screw-in studs, by virtue of being removable when conditions change, allow you to change the amount of traction by varying the size of the studs or removing them altogether. Studs are also more uniform than borium; even as a stud "ages" and its soft metal components wear away, the tungsten carbide tip stays intact. Borium does tend to lose some traction after three or four weeks.

Horses with some age and/or developing soundness problems may be better served with studs than borium, again because traction needs can be tailored.

Shoeing for traction becomes a trade off between gaining grip, and losing ability to slide a little, or roll over at toe smoother.

(Studs do come small enough for smaller feet, like those of my wife Dana's 12-hand ponies.)



Two shoes with studs on the left, shoe with borium on the right.



Two shoes with different sizes of studs



Various sizes of horse shoe studs.

Road Safety Series



Part II: Training for the Road

BY JOANNE BELLION-POVENSKI

Desensitize your horse or pony to strange objects at home before taking to the open road. Here, whip Katie Kashner and her passenger Stacey Driscoll are letting Audrey Bostwick's pony, Oreo, get a good look at a scary sheet of plastic and some "monster" milk crates.

Control

Working well in long lines is an important step in training most horses to harness; working perfectly in long lines before being hitched to a vehicle for driving on the road is paramount. Therefore, it may be necessary for you to revisit this stage of your horse's training before the two of you can play safely in traffic. Your goal is to establish control from the ground, as you work your way through simulations of "terrors" you may encounter on the road, before trying it in a carriage. Schedule your work sessions when there is the most commotion going on at the farm and enlist help from friends or fellow boarders.

First, ensure that your horse has a rock-solid "whoa button," a must on all good driving horses. Your safety depends on his standing completely still in EVERY situation, until he is told to move on! Some breeds are taught to "stand up" (standing with all four feet placed squarely underneath them) or "park out" (standing with the rear legs placed slightly behind the vertical but with all four feet evenly placed). The horse must step out of the "park out" position—by bringing his hind legs up underneath himself—before he can move off, and you therefore have a chance to make a correction before he moves. For this reason, I suggest you teach your horse to "stand up" squarely or to "park out." (I am told that when women rode aside, the horse was taught to stretch out to lower his back for easier mounting.) The "park/stand" position, in addition to providing a "whoa button" for safety purposes, is useful for keeping your horse quiet for mounting, hitching, photographs and many other purposes. (Find tips on teaching your horse this simple but useful command in the page 62 sidebar.)

Finally, your ability to read your horse's body language is key to safe driving because it equips you to anticipate his actions and prevent problems before they happen. When mounted, a rider can feel the horse and know what to expect. Seated in the box we must learn to recognize what the horse is telling us with his body language. Everything the horse feels and thinks is revealed in this way, creating a unique understanding between human and horse.

Desensitization

Can you desensitize your horse to street noises and sights at home? It's impossible to reproduce all, or even most, of the potentially frightening sounds and sights he'll encounter on the open road, but by exposing him to a wide variety of stimuli—and calmly handling his reaction—you can help him learn to expect the unexpected and to know it's not the end of the world because he can rely on you.

Give him a chance to hear fireworks, loud music, yelling, clapping, a chain saw—anything you can think of. It sometimes works best to lead him to locations where he can hear such things as a flag snapping in a strong wind (which sounds like a gun shot), a dragging muffler on the pavement, a branch chipper or jackhammers at work—all noises that can cause him to orbit the moon if he hears them for the first time in harness and on the road.

Soundtracks designed to desensitize a horse to unusual noises are available. The theory is that, if you play the tape or CD in the barn while grooming your horse and outside when schooling him, he will eventually become accustomed to the sounds on the recording. You can find these sound tracks in tack shops and online. One source is www.

rickpelicano.com. Rick Pelicano is the author of *Bombproof Your Horse*, a book on desensitizing, and his Web site offers the “Spook Less Sound Conditioning” CD. Before buying these or other products, however, talk to someone who has used them and can tell you about the results.

Your horse can be just as scared of something he sees as he can of a sound, especially when away from the security of the farm. The bottom line is that the more you expose him to, the better. Make items such as a beach ball, an umbrella, a tricycle or anything else you can think of normal parts of his landscape.

Desensitizing Exercises

Drive your horse in long lines for these exercises. I recommend using a round pen whenever possible.

“Sacking Out”

A plastic bag tied securely to the end of my driving whip is a great substitute for all kinds of scary debris Oreo will encounter on the road, including wind-blown objects that may brush his legs.



Your goal is to help your horse understand that almost anything can touch his head, ears, legs—his entire body—without hurting him. Start by attaching a plastic bag to the end of a whip. (Store your horse’s favorite treat in the bag for a few days before “introducing” it to him. Take the treats out of the bag for the exercise.) Keep your body at a 45-degree angle to his shoulder, which removes you from the danger zone. Allow him to smell the bag first and explore it with his nose. Gently rub the bag on his body, paying particular attention to his legs. When he moves away from you, go with him. Do not chase him, but move with him until he stops. Watch for signs of relaxation such as licking his lips or a cocked foot. These will be signals that he is no longer afraid of this item. If he shows any signs of being afraid, such as becoming a bug-eyed statue, stop and take the “booger” away. Keep sessions short.

Blowing Leaves

Have a friend stand outside the round pen while you drive your horse around the inside perimeter in both directions. Ask her to toss a handful of leaves in the air as the horse approaches, changing her location frequently so the horse will not learn to anticipate the flying leaves in the same spot. Your horse will probably react by raising his head, shying away from the leaves and moving toward the center of the pen. Anticipate this reaction: begin to speak soothingly to him and give him strong signals to stay as close to the rail as possible before the leaves fly and he spooks. “Tickle” the bit in the horse’s mouth to encourage him to direct his attention away from the scary thing and toward you. When you become the leader of the herd, he will look to you for security and not try to think for himself.

Overhanging Branches

At some point, when you are driving him on a road with low-hanging foliage, your horse may need to go underneath low-hanging branches that touch his body. You can create the same effect using an obstacle I once saw; it consisted of strips of fabric hanging from a high clothesline. The horses had to pass through the strips. Construct a similar obstacle by using pieces of thick cotton or canvas fabric that are the same length—except for one section in the middle, which is shorter. Your horse can poke his nose through this “hole” and decide if it is safe to go forward . . . or not.

Begin going through this exercise with the “clothes” short enough for him to pass under without their touching him, lowering the fabric a bit more each time. Keep your horse moving forward in any direction, just as long as it’s forward.

Water

Train your horse in all kinds of weather, daytime as well as night. When you’re out driving, the perfect day can turn ugly with little warning and darkness—or rain—can come sooner than anticipated. Which brings me to the subject of water on the road. A horse can be fearless with a puddle, pond or creek in his pasture, but on the road? Now that is totally different. Standing water on the road is in his blind spot when he is up close to it.. Work on teaching him to walk over a black plastic tarp on the ground, or make your own puddle. If he refuses, walk him toward the puddle or tarp and turn him away before getting to it (so that you are directing him before he has a chance to stop). Work closer and closer each time, until he puts a foot into the water or onto the tarp. Continue this and eventually he will walk through it. Don’t make the mistake of trying to coax him through the water from a standstill; that just makes matters worse. For the same reason a person “heading” him through the water won’t help. You want the horse to do this of his own free will. A header is leading him, therefore he is not doing it on his own. To follow another horse would be much more successful than using a helper. He must do this unassisted by a human other than the driver. Again, keep the horse moving and paying attention to your commands rather than his fears.

Avoiding Slip-Ups

When the pavement is wet, any horse—even when shod with street shoes—can fall if his driver does not support him properly. Think of the support you give him



Use caution here! Painted lines and letters on pavement are slippery.

with the reins as being like taking a person’s elbow to help them cross the street—not too slight and not too strong. You are supporting, not pulling, allowing the ‘person’ to walk on their own. Make your transitions as smooth as possible and focus on keeping your horse from falling on

his forehead, lurching forward or going too fast around corners. Wet bricks, flat stones and road markings painted on the pavement are all extremely slippery; bring your horse to a walk or avoid them altogether. If driving a pair, try to keep one horse on a dry and/or safer surface, if at all possible.

No Baby Talk!

Many drivers make the mistake of constantly talking to their horse. In the wild, however, horses only “speak” to each other when there is something meaningful to convey. If (for instance), when he is trotting, you keep saying, “trot-trot-trot-trot-trot,” sooner or later your horse

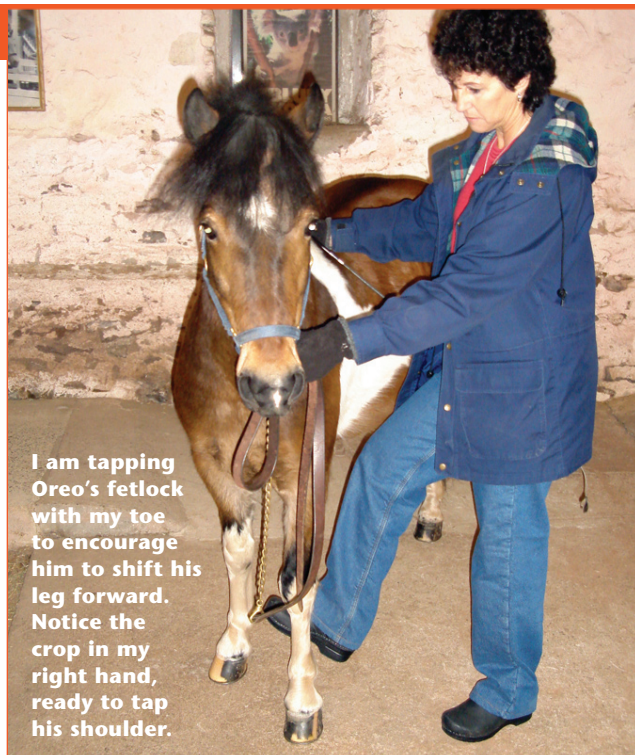
will begin to view this constant verbiage as meaningless noise and tune it out. He will stay sharp and responsive when your commands are kept short and consistent.

Tone of voice when speaking to your horse is also important. The equivalent of a soft nicker means one thing, and a loud whinny means something else to a horse. When a faster trot is wanted say, “trot ON,” each and every time. When you want to slow down say, “SLOW now,” or whatever you want, as long as you have a downward tone to your voice. Preface every command using the horse’s name. The horse will give the driver his attention in anticipation of the next command.

Teaching the Park/Stand Position

Working the horse with halter, lead and riding crop: Stand the horse perfectly still, then push the lead rope under his chin, toward his chest so he will take a step back. Do this ever so slightly to get his rear feet evenly placed. You will have to work hard on this by asking him to come forward a step or backward a step to get his back feet even with each other. When this is done, give him a pat and a “Good Boy.” Do this several times until he understands what you are asking. The next step to teach is how to move his front feet. Square up his rear legs, put your right hand on his withers and push away from you.

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I am tapping Oreo's fetlock with my toe to encourage him to shift his leg forward. Notice the crop in my right hand, ready to tap his shoulder.

This will shift his weight off the near leg you are trying to move. With your left foot, tap the fetlock until the horse moves it, then push it forward with your foot and tell the horse to “come-up,” “stand-up” or any other word you want to use, as long as it is the same every time. You can also tap him on the shoulder with your crop as part of this command; later, you will be able to use the same aid and voice command from the carriage as a signal for your horse to stand or park. (Remember: Consistency is key.) If he keeps placing his foot back in the same spot, when his leg is in the air, pull his withers toward you to encourage him to put weight on it. As soon as he places his foot forward, even if it is only a half-inch, pull his withers toward you to move his weight onto the near leg and off the far leg. Do the same thing with his off leg as you did with the near leg and withers. When both legs are forward, command, “Stand” and give lots of praise. If he does not understand what you are asking with the tap of your foot, tap harder or use the butt end of a crop so you don't break your toes. 🍌

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Check Out the Route

By driving your planned route in a car, you can locate potential advantages and hazards. Riding a bicycle along the route may be even more useful as the slower speed will enable you to see more—and your perspective from a bicycle will be similar to what you see from a carriage. On the positive side, look for places where you can turn the carriage around, or get off the road safely. Wide shoulders, driveways and parking lots are ideal, but stay off private property unless you have permission from the owner. As possible drawbacks, look for such things as ditches, blind curves, potholes, unguarded drop-offs, culverts and anything else which could cause a major problem.

Before starting out on your carriage drive, always tell someone which direction you are going and what time you expect to return—or leave a note to that effect. A stated “drive plan” makes it easier for friends or family to look for you if necessary.

Choose Your Time

The time of day you drive can make a big difference in what you will encounter on the road. Go out between morning and evening rush hours, and in the late morning on Sunday. Motorists are more likely to be considerate and willing to share the road with a slower-moving vehicle when they are not late for work, in a hurry to get to the soccer game or trying to beat the crowd at the yard sales. Some drivers will slow down out of curiosity, while others will be anxious to pass because you have the audacity to be in their way.

If there are hunting seasons in your area, find out the schedule and avoid all roads while the season is in progress.

Signal Your Intentions

Prepare to be the best and most defensive, courteous driver on the planet by learning standard hand signals, the same that were routine for automobile drivers before the advent of flashing directional signals. Executed as follows, your hand signals will be clear, leaving no doubt of your intentions. Prior to signaling, put the whip in your right hand along with the reins. **ALL SIGNALS WILL BE MADE WITH YOUR LEFT ARM** unless you have a passenger, as noted below.

- **Turn to the right:** Extend your left arm out straight at shoulder height and bend your forearm upward, creating a right angle.
- **Turn to the left:** Extend your left arm straight out at the shoulder with no bend at the elbow.
- **Stop:** Extend your left arm out straight from the shoulder and bend your forearm downwards.
- **Intersections:** As you would put your horse in danger by driving far enough into an intersection to see clearly from the box, ask your groom to get down and guide the carriage safely through. If traffic is following behind, allow those drivers to make their own choices.

3 very important signals

1 Right Turn

Katie signals correctly for a right turn.



2 Left Turn

This signal tells other road users that the carriage is going to turn left.



3 Stop

Katie's arm position indicates that the cart is about to stop.

Joanne Povenski holds 'R' judge's cards in Pleasure Driving with the American Driving Society and the United States Equestrian Federation and serves on the ADS Nominating Committee and the Safety and Education Committee. She has judged at many major shows nationwide and has written extensively—and given clinics—on carriage driving, training and showing. Her driving experience includes driving a pair in the commercial carriage business. This is the first of a four-part series on Road Safety.

When the Open Road Won't Do

Laws in most states do not prohibit horses from the public roadways, but would you want to drive where traffic is moving at a high rate of speed? Shoulder or not, it is far too dangerous and not worth the risk. If your horse swerves to avoid a roadside hazard, that puts you directly in the path of vehicles traveling in excess of 50 miles per hour. It can happen so quickly that a motorist would not be able to avoid a collision.

If driving on local streets is not feasible, consider hauling your horse and carriage to another location. Possibilities include private estates, public parks,

“multi-use” hiking or nature trails and unpaved roads in the country or on government-owned land. State parks often have miles of well-maintained and clearly-marked roadways ideal for driving. Check first to find out about things like fees, limitations on where driving is allowed, or a curfew when the park closes. Free maps are usually available at the visitor’s center. Some roads are only open to the public upon request. Horses are increasingly being banned from using some state lands because of numerous complaints from hikers, campers and bicyclists, so be very considerate and don’t give other users anything to complain about.

NEVER wave a motorist to pass! This action could result in a lawsuit, should an accident occur.

If you have a passenger sitting next to you, ask the passenger to execute the signals. Motorists are unlikely to recognize who is driving the carriage and will expect a hand signal from the left side of a vehicle as they would from a car. (When given on the right, signals can also be hidden by foliage or misunderstood.) At the beginning of every ride, assign only one person the responsibility for signaling and ask any junior passengers to keep still.

Drive the carriage in the center of the lane as you would a motor vehicle. (All roads have a crown for

drainage, in the middle where the centerline for the road is painted. Normal grade for this crown is 2 percent, or about 1/4 inch for every foot of road width, not enough to make a noticeable difference for a carriage.) Look ahead as far as possible for potential problems, giving yourself maximum time to decide on any needed course of action. A friend or family member following no less than 100 feet behind you in their vehicle, with emergency flashers on, is a great way to create a buffer zone. It is well worth the extra precaution! And never engage in a confrontation with a motorist; your horse will get excited and it is a no-win situation for you. Instead, carry a pen and pad to jot down the license plate number and make a report to the police as soon as possible. Better yet, keep a camera handy.

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Carriage Association of America

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Prepare for Problems en Route

• **Dogs:** What to do about dogs who bark and chase the carriage? Consider carrying a can of pepper spray, but use caution with this type of deterrent. Turn away from the direction of the spray, especially on a windy day (and avoid spraying into the wind). Resist the urge to hit a dog with the whip, or use anything which makes noise—your horse could react in an undesirable way, and it’s off to the races! Check with local law enforcement agencies to find out the best way to repel dogs chasing the carriage; they may have an idea that would work better for you. The last thing you want is a citation for hitting someone’s dog with a whip.

• **The manure problem:** If you drive in residential areas, some neighbors might feel a pile of horse manure on the road in front of their house is reason enough to call the police to complain, so consider training your horse to wear a diaper. The best design in my experience is a nylon bag with a zipper on the bottom for clean, easy manure disposal. The diaper fits snugly under the tail, straps adjust to fit almost any pony or horse and it is virtually unnoticeable with the harness. These bags are washable, keep the manure out of sight, don’t leak and will last a long time.