

# Cones!

By Myrna Rhinehart

When most people start driving, they tend to begin with exercises on the rail of the arena. This is good to develop rhythm (steadiness and consistency) with the horse and to teach the horse and driver the required gaits without having to do a lot of steering. However, eventually the horse and driver may want to experience the challenge and thrill of obstacles!

## Starting the Horse with Cones

When I start a horse with obstacles under harness, I have already had him going through pairs of wide cones while long lining. I use cotton long lines with rolled ends that slide through the harness terrets (or the tugs [shaft loops] if you put the reins there) easier than flat lunge lines. At this step, I tend to use small, cheap soccer-type cones so if they get stepped on, I don't care. If those aren't available, plastic milk cartons with some sand in the bottom will work, too.



A student practices long lining through the cones at Young Drivers Camp.

Line up to the set straight and drive through the middle. Once you have the vehicle attached, you have to account for the width of it, and your horse will learn where he needs to be in the set. I use the verbal cue "through there" when I line him up for the set. The horse quickly associates the verbal cue with the rein cue to find the obstacle I am asking him to go through. I continue to use this verbal cue for all of his obstacle driving. He also learns to go through the set instead of bumping and knocking the cones into his legs. Of course, before I start him long lining through cones, I have introduced him to the cones in a halter and lead.

For a horse that has been under harness for a while but hasn't worked with obstacles, I start with very wide cones set up closer to the middle of the arena instead of the rail. Two sets are sufficient. Keep them very wide so that the horse (and you) can feel successful. Just like a barrel racer doesn't drill turning three barrels over and over, neither do I just work on cones separately. A driving horse needs to heed every cue the driver gives. He cannot make decisions about where and how fast to go, so I incorporate cones into my lessons with the horse. After the horse is warmed up, we calmly walk through the sets of cones. Then we go back to the rail. I don't want the horse to associate cones with excitement and stress. I may work the horse on the rail at a walk and trot for a while and then "pick up" (drive through) a set and back to the rail. When the horse is driving a few sets calmly, I will add more sets. A "sea of cones" can be upsetting to a horse at first, so we add them gradually, keeping the cones and the course wide. We never pick up a set any faster than a working trot at this point.

IVC Carriage

© IVC Carriage

E9432A SOUTH AVENUE • REEDSBURG, WI 53959

608.393.0598

[www.ivccarriage.com](http://www.ivccarriage.com) • [info@ivccarriage.com](mailto:info@ivccarriage.com)

A horse who bends well will ultimately make a better obstacle horse, and every horse has a preferred side. Understanding this will make your drives considerably more successful, because you will know which side is tight and can work on that from the start. A horse that is tight on a side will “dive” or “fall in” to make a turn to the opposite direction, and is more likely to hit cones in the process. Although the bend actually develops in the horse’s hind, you want the horse’s head to be going in the same direction as the bend. You can help create the bend by asking him to move his middle to the side with the whip lash on his lower barrel. It helps to put your reins in the left hand and cue the horse with the whip in the right hand, as then you won’t be dropping the rein in his mouth to use the whip. It is imperative that checks not be used, as they will inhibit the ability of the horse to bend properly. It is also important that breeching be used in a single cart because the horse will be controlling the speed of the vehicle with his meaty haunches instead of his boney withers.



Bending the horse is very important.

One exercise for bending uses cones set up in a large “clock”, usually in a 20 meter (66 ft.) circle, with sets or individual cones at 3, 6, 9, and 12. First drive outside the clock, then move to inside the circle, and spiral your way back out. Do this exercise in both directions. Do not drop the outside rein, meaning when turning left, pull the left rein back but do not let the right rein forward like you would if you were riding a bike. This keeps the horse on its inside hind leg to balance his body and make the turn. There are full books wrote on bending the horse, so this is just basic technique. Bending is something you practice with every drive no matter where you are, i.e. even on the trail. It will make your horse better in every aspect of his driving performance, no matter what the style, because he will feel (and be) more balanced.

If the horse hasn’t bumped a cone with the vehicle, it is good to practice knocking them in a controlled situation. The first time this happens can be distressing to the horse because of the noise and the vibration of the cart. Hitting a tall cone directly with a low vehicle can overturn the vehicle, so be careful to just practice ticking the cone. That is another reason why I prefer driving with short, cheap cones when first starting a green horse or driver.

## Go Faster and Tighter

Once the horse is fully comfortable with driving simple courses confidently without hesitancy, we can start adding tighter turns, speed, and more strategy. To add speed, I again use my strategy of working the horse on the rail and picking up sets in the middle during the lesson, only now I will pick them up during the strong trot. Meanwhile, we have also been working on our bending and getting the horse to track up and push the vehicle from his hind, which will increase his speed and fluidity at the strong trot. A horse that is on his front end won’t be able to turn tight sets of cones well and provide the launch necessary to “attack” the cones. For the average amateur driver, getting the horse on his back end can take a couple of years to

IVC Carriage

© IVC Carriage

E9432A SOUTH AVENUE • REEDSBURG, WI 53959

608.393.0598

[www.ivccarriage.com](http://www.ivccarriage.com) • [info@ivccarriage.com](mailto:info@ivccarriage.com)

develop properly. We don't use any extra peripherals (checks, side reins, etc.) to accomplish this; only circles, hills, transitions, and proper Dressage work getting the horse to lift his back and be "round" (not "hollow"). Slow to moderate cantering can also help get him on his rear.



Don't look at the cones!

For strategy, I need to plan my route. It is of utter importance NOT to look at the cones as you drive through them...unless you *want* to hit them. When you look at a cone, your eyes will drop, then your shoulder, then your hand, then the rein ever so slightly, steering the horse into the cone. If I have a particularly narrow set through which to drive, I will force myself to look at the winker stay buckle on the crown of the bridle. This keeps my eyes up and my horse's head straight...and it takes practice. As I approach the

set of cones, I tell myself (and my students), "Line

up, Line up, Line up" [to the set], "Look up, Look up, Look up" [once in the set]. If I am driving a wider set, I am looking towards my next set while still completing the one prior to plan the path I am going to take. If we are making a left turn in the process of going from Set 1 to Set 2, I will drive with my wheel closer to the right cone of Set 1 instead of the middle, as then I am less likely to hit the inside cone.

I am also aware of which side my horse is better at turning, so I know that I can turn tighter on that side. If my horse is particularly tight on a side, I may have to turn him wider towards his "bad side" so as not to hit a cone. Of course, this takes more time, and therefore, if my horse turns better to the left, I try to plan my routes (if the class rules allow) to make turns mostly on the left rein. Generally, changing rein (direction) is time-consuming, especially with larger horses, and increases your overall time in the course. Staying on the same rein is faster.

## First Show

Some shows allow you to walk a course on foot to learn the course and plan your route. It is important to walk the course with the same arcs you will drive it and not walk straight line short cuts between cones. Look up to see and plan where you need to be to line up straight with each set of cones. Remember to take into account the width and length of your vehicle and horse, and where you sit in the vehicle. Plan where you will make your cues to the horse as well. It is not uncommon for me to be visually imagining how I will cue the horse while walking the course, so you will see me holding my hands up like I am holding the reins and whip, using my verbal cues under my breath. Try to avoid distractions while learning the course, like talking with other competitors, etc. If possible, physically run the cones once you know your route. This helps you realize that the sets will come faster than you expect once you are driving the horse at a trot.

IVC Carriage

© IVC Carriage

E9432A SOUTH AVENUE • REEDSBURG, WI 53959

608.393.0598

[www.ivccarriage.com](http://www.ivccarriage.com) • [info@ivccarriage.com](mailto:info@ivccarriage.com)



Once it is your turn, put the horse in the trot before you get to the Start where the timing begins, and don't start slowing down until you are through the Finish if there is room. However, don't charge into a crowd of horses or people watching, either. Thank the volunteers helping with the course on your way out. Be aware if the judge needs to speak to you as well. This can be good or bad. I've had judges tell me how I was eliminated from the placings by missing a set of cones or driving them backwards, and have had judges complement me on how I drove and the route I took. It's a good idea to have someone video your course just in case there is a concern about how you drove it.

At the horse's first show, I never push him through the sets, but let him pick his way through with me gently giving him direction on where to go with lots of verbal reassurance. There is enough stimuli at a show without me "railroading" the horse through the course. Horses that are run through their first competitive courses tend to develop anxiety that may be hard to get over in the long run. Your placings may not be wonderful at first, but he will be a much better obstacle horse if he is allowed to develop his confidence in the courses at his own pace.



Usually, the horse is ready for more speed after the third show or more. He can usually tell you when he is ready to go faster by expressing less hesitancy and much more confidence in the course and the show environment. Your horse may enjoy obstacles so much that he seems to anticipate his go and appreciate the opportunity to see something other than the inside of the arena. When that happens, it is so much fun that both you and he will look forward to the next show!

*Myrna Rhinehart started driving in 1990, showing horses, ponies, and minis she trained in local open and breed shows. She began competing in American Driving Society carriage shows in 2000. Myrna has shown successfully at prestigious events such as the Villa Louis Carriage Classic (WI), the Walnut Hill Carriage Driving Competition (NY), and the CAA Carriage Festival (KY). In 2011, she earned an ADS Pleasure Driving Achievement Award. She was elected to the ADS Board of Directors in 2011, was the Chair of the ADS Education Committee, and still serves on that committee. She currently owns IVC Carriage with her husband, Chad.*

IVC Carriage

© IVC Carriage

**E9432A SOUTH AVENUE • REEDSBURG, WI 53959**

**608.393.0598**

**[www.ivccarriage.com](http://www.ivccarriage.com) • [info@ivccarriage.com](mailto:info@ivccarriage.com)**