

# Styles of Horse Driving

Many beginners come to the carriage driving world and want to learn to drive a horse. They may have wonderful nostalgic memories of riding in the buggy with Grandpa, or they realize that they are not as mobile as they used to be to ride their horse, so driving may sound like a good alternative. Whatever ways beginners come to the driving world, many don't realize that there are just about as many ways to drive a horse as to ride one. Some styles of driving are related to the breed of horse, such as Fine Harness for Saddlebreds, Hackney Ponies, and Morgans, and racing for Standardbreds. Some styles and activities can be done with most any breed, such as Carriage Driving and of course Recreational Driving. Below we will highlight the many different styles of driving.

## Carriage Driving

Since we are carriage drivers, we will start with that style (and its derivatives). Traditional carriage driving really started in the early 1800's in Europe. It was in its heyday during the Victorian ages, and this is where the traditions such as harness and vehicle styles & customs are really rooted. In current carriage **Pleasure Driving (PD)** competitions, we wear present-day conservative "dress-up/business-like" clothes but hearken to the 1800's in terms of harness and vehicle style. In Pleasure Driving shows, which are akin to riding pleasure shows, we drive the horse we have to an appropriate vehicle; we don't try to



make the horse into something he is not to suit a certain "frame". For example, if we have a low-going, flat-kneed Quarter Horse, he would be appropriate put to a family vehicle such as a Meadowbrook Cart which in its day was a "grocery-getter" vehicle. He would be entirely inappropriate put to a park carriage such as a Stanhope Gig or a Spider Phaeton. Higher-moving horses, such as Dutch Harness Horses or some styles of Morgans are appropriate for a "show-off" park vehicle. Within Pleasure Driving

shows there are a number of formats of classes, some being judged, and some obstacle classes being based on speed or accuracy or both. All sizes and styles of horses can be used for carriage Pleasure Driving, and many styles of traditional wooden vehicles, as well as a few modern ones (if show rules allow) are seen in the ring.

Other offshoots of carriage driving include Sleigh Rallies, Combined Driving, and Distance Driving. **Sleigh Rallies** can be in a number of formats depending on the venue and the weather, but basically it is like a carriage pleasure driving competition with a sleigh or cutter instead of a cart or carriage.

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**Combined Driving** has a number of formats within that title, such as Driven Dressage, Combined Tests (CT), Horse Driving Trials (HDT or DT), and Driving Derbies. Combined Driving was created in the 1960's and is patterned after the riding Three-Day Eventing (Dressage, Cross Country jumping, and Show Jumping). Obviously, we can't jump with a carriage, so the three "competitions" that comprise Combined Driving Events (CDE) are #1 - Driven Dressage, #2 - Marathon, and #3 - Cones obstacles. The horses used for such events tend to be very athletic with good stamina, and the drivers tend to enjoy the "need for speed" and the thrill of the drive, especially at the upper levels. All sizes and breeds of horses can be used, but some are definitely more suitable than others. It is hard for a draft horse to have the stamina to complete a 5–12-kilometer marathon, and a slow-going aged pony isn't going to have the forward momentum to be competitive, either. A super-hot, show ring Saddlebred may have a hard time settling down to complete a relaxed Driven Dressage test, but there are many Saddlebreds that are not as hot that compete in CDEs quite effectively. CDEs are the only form of International-level carriage driving competitions.

### **Driven Dressage** is

ultimately the basis for all formats of carriage driving competitions, as the dressage training scale is generally used to train a proper carriage horse. A good carriage horse should bend well in corners and circles without falling in,



push effectively from the hind, tracking the hind foot into the print of the fore (or maybe even overtrack), and develop good self-carriage. Good driven dressage training helps him accomplish that and will benefit him in all forms of competition, even speed events. Even if the driver doesn't compete in driven dressage competitions, it behooves him to learn and understand the basics of driven dressage. Since Training Level dressage tests usually consist of just the Working Trot, Working Walk, some large circles, and square halts, anyone who desires to compete in any form of carriage driving competitions can be adequately equipped to complete a Training Level test. Preliminary and Intermediate tests add other movements to increasingly prepare the driver and horse for the Advanced Level tests, which ultimately have tighter circles, lateral movements, larger trots, cantering, as well as other high-performance movements. It is perfectly acceptable for drivers to stick with the lower-level tests, as the Advanced Level tests require very athletic horses, more advanced equipment, and usually the retention of a good trainer/instructor with international competitive experience.

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**CDE Marathons** require equipment meant to take the brunt of sharp turns, slight downgrades, and sudden stops and starts. Lower-level competitors are allowed to trot only. Preliminary competitors and above are allowed (and really expected) to canter and gallop. Once drivers become fully involved in CDEs, they use what is called a marathon vehicle. For larger ponies to full-size horses, this four-

wheel all-metal vehicle has a low center of gravity and mechanical (usually) motorcycle brakes. It requires the use of a skilled Navigator on the back to ballast the load in hard turns and on hills. This vehicle can be used for all three phases (competitions) of a CDE at the lower levels, but the upper levels require a different, more traditional vehicle for Dressage and Cones. It is entirely inappropriate (and downright dangerous) to use a lighter-framed, breed show-type cart or purely recreational vehicle for the CDE marathon.

**CDE Cones** consist of about 20 sets of cones driven in consecutive order. Competitions have a varying degree of difficulty depending on the competition level. Training level courses have wider sets of cones and usually wider routes, longer allowed time, with the trot being



the fastest gait. Advanced level courses are tighter and faster with cantering allowed. Regardless of the level, good cones driving still has a basis in driven dressage.

A **Combined Test** is two parts of a full Combined Driving Event, usually Driven Dressage and Cones. A **Horse Driving Trial** (or **Driving Trial**) has all three phases, but is a shortened version of a full CDE, usually with a shortened marathon course. A **Driving Derby** is a thrilling high speed and accuracy event over a course of marathon-type obstacles and cones.

Another form of carriage driving is actually patterned after Endurance riding, **Distance Driving**. Quite a few Distance Driving events are even held in conjunction with Endurance competitions at the same venues. Many breeds of horses are also used for this sport, but ones who can go well for 10-20 miles are the standard. Many styles of vehicles are used

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for Distance Driving, but they need to be sturdy to be out on the extreme styles of trails at the venues. Extreme speed is not usually a factor in Distance Driving, but conditioning is.

## Draft Horse Driving

Draft horse driving can take many forms, but their competitions are comprised of what are known as Hitch classes, Farm classes, and Horse Pulling. I am, by no means, an “expert” in draft horse driving, so my nomenclature may vary from terms used in the industry.



**Hitch classes** comprise of draft horses in various configurations for show. The horses are usually ambitious and high-moving with a high head carriage required. The harness has quite a bit of “decoration” compared to carriage driving (above) or Farm classes. Horses are shown in Single Cart, teams, fours, sixes, and eights put to hitch wagons.

**Farm classes** can be held at draft shows with lower-going horses and less fancy harnesses. Farm-style classes can also be comprised of field work, such as plowing competitions. Draft horse

enthusiasts also hold Field Days where they get together and work crop fields without any competition. **Horse Pulls** are competitions held to see which teams of two horses can pull the greatest load the farthest distance. Some horse pulls even have pony & mini classes!

Draft style driving can also be seen at some breed shows, with non-draft breeds being tacked in draft-style equipment for judged arena classes.

Many draft horses are also used for commercial driving in cities or events, where they give rides to customers for payment. Draft horses are used for their stable temperament and ability to pull larger loads since speed is not needed in these environments.

## Breed Show Driving

Show driving has been in existence for quite a few years, ever since people wanted to get together to see who had the best horse(s). Many early 1900’s carriages were built specifically to compete at Madison Square Garden with high-actioned horses and ponies. As the years went on, the vehicles became lighter and more “spindly” in order to have the horses pull less weight and be able to free up their motion. In these styles of competitions, Viceroy and two-wheeled Pleasure Carts are used with minimal harness material on the horse.



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The horses are in the ring for a minimal amount of time, driving in a flat circle. Much of the judging is dependent on flashy movement of the horse. The judging criteria is actually quite different from that of carriage driving, where again, there is more basis in driven dressage for the judging. Some breed show horses may be able to cross over into carriage driving, but the equipment is so different that it would not be appropriate to use at a carriage show. The breed show harness is considerably more refined than the carriage harness needed for more structural vehicles, and most carriage driving shows don't allow the pneumatic tires found on the typical breed show cart.

In a true **Fine Harness** class, horses are actually put to four-wheel Viceroy's, and are very high headed with high motion. Other breed show **Pleasure Driving** classes are an offshoot for less-high moving horses, with the horses put to low two-wheeled "pleasure carts", with carts made by the Jerald Sulky Company being the most typical. The attire the drivers wear is more along the lines of formal evening wear or business dress-up clothes.

While breed show driving did start with the high-actioned horses, other stock-type breeds such as Quarter Horses and Paints have added Pleasure Driving classes to their breed shows, using the same Jerald-style pleasure carts and minimally styled harnesses. These horses move most like Hunter horses found in the riding pleasure show ring. Other breed shows have even created western driving classes for the lowest-going horses that move more like Western Pleasure riding horses.

Some breed shows have added obstacle driving classes as well. Some of these classes are judged like a riding trail class, and some have other judging criteria more akin to obstacle classes at a true carriage driving show. The competitor needs to be familiar with the rules for those classes before they enter.

Certain breeds, such as the Morgans, Arabs, Welsh, and most recently Miniatures, have added Carriage Driving classes to their breed shows. These classes allow the same traditional wooden vehicles we see at the carriage driving shows, although the judging may differ slightly from carriage shows usually based on what the judge is used to seeing.

## Harness Racing

Even in the 1800's, people got together to see who had the fastest horse. Just like the typical breed of horse used in saddle racing is the Thoroughbred, the typical horse used in harness racing nowadays is the Standardbred. While a "retired" racehorse can be used for other forms of driving, it is not common for a current racehorse to be competing in any other form of driving while he is in training for racing. Some other breeds do have harness racing competitions, but they are definitely not common in the US. Harness racing equipment is specialized and inadequate for any other form of driving.

## Recreational/Trail Driving

Any breed of horse can be used for non-competitive recreational driving. Many people and horses never enter competitions, just enjoying the time driving. Some current show horses and drivers also enjoy getting together with friends out on the trail once in a while. Some competitors also use trail driving as a form of cardio training for the horse.



Recreational drivers should strive to use good, sturdy, comfortable equipment. Since many trails can have hills and bumps, quality substantial harnesses with breeching and adequate padding will provide the horse with more comfort, and avoid sores and breakage. Vehicles should be sturdy so as to bear the brunt of ruts and other rough surfaces.

Many a driver has been so unfortunate to have to walk the horse home while leaving their inadequate, cheap, broken vehicle on the trail.

While it is illogical to use a fancy, high-end show vehicle on the trail, there are some vehicles that can cross over into certain competitions so the driver doesn't require possession of a multitude of vehicles in order to participate in different forms of driving (although vehicle collecting can be fun as well!). (See our article on [Selecting a Carriage](#) for more information on vehicle types.)

Some recreational drivers also enjoy participating in parades as well. Caution should be taken that the horse(s) is well-schooled for such an event. The traffic and commotion can be quite upsetting to a horse that hardly ever leaves the farm.

## Summary

With some proper planning and research, new drivers can determine which form(s) of driving best suits their goals and personalities, their breed of horse and its skills, their available time and resources, and their budget. It is beneficial to talk to many people who participate in a form of horse driving you are considering. If you think you might want to compete, go to some events and see what styles of horses and vehicles are placing well. Connect with a local driving or breed club to make contacts with other drivers. They can help you decide if that form of driving is right for you. They can also connect you with good resources for equipment and training, not only for your horse, but for you as well! Making those contacts will help save you time and money in the long run, and make it more fun for you and your horse! 😊

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