



Letting the horse eat one meal a day wearing a light bridle helps him become comfortable with the bit.



Starting Driving

There are no second chances when it comes to training a horse to drive

By Ann L. Pringle

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Training your own horse or pony to drive can be a very rewarding experience. If you are successful, you and your partner will roll along for many happy years so it is critically important to get the job done right. Training mistakes - riding or driving - may mean your horse or pony may never reach his full potential, but when a carriage is involved, poor training may also lead to serious injury to the horse, driver and costly damage to harness and carriage.

Wiebe Dragstra has been training driving horses for over 30 years, and along with his wife Amy own and operate Blue Valley Farm in Vass, North Carolina. Dragstra first worked with driving horses at his family's Friesian breeding farm in The Netherlands, and then spent 10 years working at the Royal Stables in Holland before moving to the United States. The Dragstras work with horses and ponies of all breeds and have developed a reputation for giving them a good, solid driving foundation. While horses who get their start at Blue Valley Farm may find that Wiebe has a few training devices at his disposal that the owner/trainer may not have access to, most of the methods described here involve basic equipment and techniques that are available to everyone. The most important ingredient for success is time and patience.

Any horse or pony with a good mind and correct build can be taught to drive. If your goal is to train a horse that will eventually compete at a high level, then look for a horse with good movement and athletic ability.

The First Few Days

When a driving prospect arrives at Blue Valley Farm for training, the first few days are devoted to acclimating the horse to his new environment. Settling into the routine of the barn, the feeding schedule and meeting the staff are all part of the introduction for the horse. For the trainer, this time is spent observing the horse, his habits, manners and idiosyncrasies.

Before any kind of bit is put into the horse's mouth, it is important to have his teeth checked. Introducing a bit to a horse with dental problems can negatively and permanently affect how the horse will accept the bridle. The Dragstras strongly recommend having a good dentist look at your horse's teeth and have him remove any sharp edges and correct any other problems. If this is overlooked, the horse may fuss or jump around which might be interpreted as bad behavior instead of a dental problem.

the Horse

Dragstra puts a riding bridle with a light bit but without a noseband on the horse in his stall and lets him eat one meal a day with the bit in his mouth. The horse should not be left unattended while wearing the bridle to ensure that it doesn't catch on something as this would create a negative experience connected with the bit. This exercise allows the horse to get used to the bit and to learn to use his tongue correctly and not put it over the bit. He will associate the bit with something good - his food, and he can't eat when his tongue is over it. Contact is lost when a horse has his tongue over the bit and becomes unsteerable, so it is very important for him to become comfortable and accepting of the bit. Not everyone uses this technique, but it is a method that has worked very well for Dragstra.

The First Few Steps

Next, Dragstra longes the horse in a round pen. The horse wears an open bridle and a bit in his mouth. This is done for about a week to let the horse find his comfort zone, get comfortable working with the bit and learn to follow basic commands such as 'walk', 'trot' and 'whoa.' A surcingle and crupper are added, and the longeing continues. Many horses will buck or kick at first until they are used to the crupper. This is the time that you want to deal with kicking and bucking issues, not later when the horse is hooked to the carriage.

Each session usually lasts from 30 minutes to an hour and it is essential to stop on a good note. If everything is going well after half an hour, stop. Some horses with shorter attention spans need more sessions of shorter duration. Others can work for longer periods. Learn the signs that indicate the horse has reached his learning limit. Pushing a horse beyond this point is a step backward.

Dragstra uses an exercise mill to help the horse improve his condition and become more comfortable with the parts of the harness that have been introduced thus far. An exercise mill is a round pen with pie-shaped dividers that move mechanically. The horses walk around the edges within the confines of the space. "The horses can work freely in there," says Dragstra. "The walk is very important and this work makes the horse quiet, happy and mellow." The harness can flap around and if the horse objects and gets excited, he is safe and confined. There is no pressure on his mouth, which is especially important for a young horse. Because he is not tied to anything, he doesn't learn to resist. The mill works well at Blue Valley Farm; Dragstra often has several horses in training at one time and finds it difficult to give each one the amount of exercise needed without it.

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Dragstra ground drives his horse in a large circle using double longe lines. Notice the horse is wearing an open bridle with a simple snaffle bit. The reins are run through the terrets on the breast collar and then through the tugs. Breeching has not been introduced.



This is the kind of reaction a horse can have when a rein becomes caught under his tail. It is vitally important to get the horse used to this before attaching him to a carriage.



The singletree is clipped to the ends of the traces with binder twine. The assistant holds it off the ground. As the horse becomes comfortable with the traces rubbing on his sides and legs, the assistant will begin to pull back which puts pressure on the breast collar. This is a step that Dragstra doesn't use with all horses, but often does with lighter breeds that tend to stop when pressure is felt through the breast collar.

Of course not everyone has such equipment so this step can take place in a round pen or a small corral.

Open and Closed Bridles

Open bridles (without blinders) are generally not worn by driving horses, and most trainers and drivers strongly advocate the traditional use of closed bridles (one with blinders.) There is always the exception, of course.

Dragstra believes in training driving horses in open bridles in the early stages until it is time to introduce the horse to the carriage. The horse becomes comfortable seeing what is going on behind him. After successfully completing all the training steps up to attaching the horse to the carriage, Dragstra puts the closed bridle on the horse. He then long lines the horse with the closed bridle. It is important to have an assistant approach the horse carefully from the side, speaking to him, so that he isn't startled as he becomes accustomed to wearing the blinders.

The Assistant

For much of the training only one assistant is required. He should be quick and agile, and attentive to the trainer and the horse. His primary job is to stand at the horse's head with a lead rope attached. The lead can be attached to the bridle if the assistant is very experienced, or it can be attached to a halter worn under the bridle. The assistant must be aware that he is there to assist in case something doesn't go quite right, but the trainer should be the one controlling the horse from behind. The assistant will walk along for the first few minutes (or more) as the horse adjusts to whatever is being introduced. When the trainer thinks the horse has accepted the new situation, the assistant will be asked to step aside and release the lead. Occasionally an additional assistant is needed to help attach the training equipment as it is introduced and eventually the carriage. The trainer maintains control of the horse through the long lines.

Don't think that just because everything has gone perfectly thus far, that an assistant isn't necessary. It may be tempting to work a horse without an assistant if everything has gone well. Dragstra resists that temptation because it only takes a second for a horse to wind himself up in the long lines, get a leg over a trace, or a rein under the tail. It's just not worth the risk.

Pressure and Weight

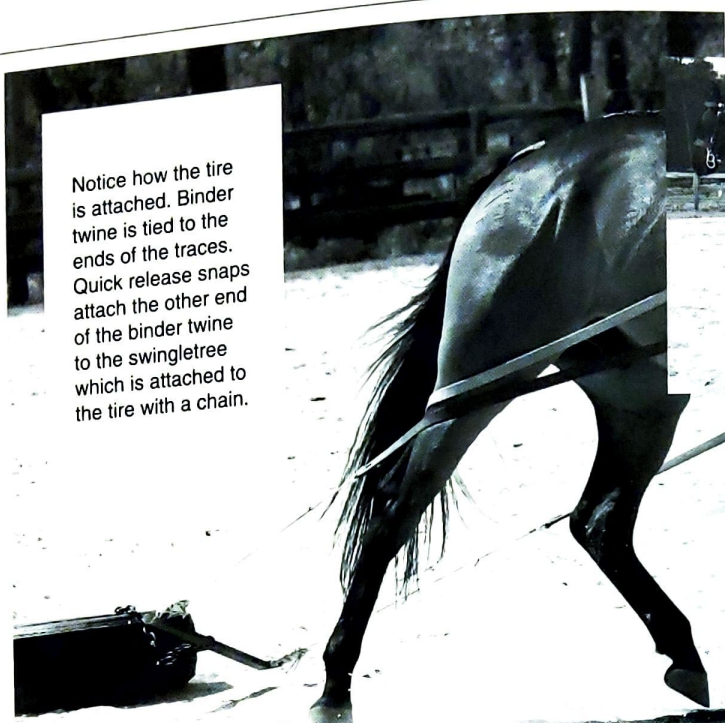
Next double long lines are introduced. These long reins also simulate traces and it is important for the horse to get used to them hitting his sides as he is being ground driven in the paddock. The work continues with large circles and figure eights.

When the horse has accepted the double long lines, a light breast collar is introduced. A singletree is attached to the traces which have been extended with binder twine and an assistant holds the singletree off the ground with a leadrope. The horse is driven with the long lines while the assistant walks along holding the singletree, letting the traces touch the horse on the legs. Eventually he pulls back on the singletree allowing the horse to feel tension on the traces and pressure on his chest - creating the sensation of light pulling. Some horses, especially the 'lighter' breeds will stop when they feel this pressure. They must learn to go forward even though they may think they're being told to stop. The command to stop must come from the reins and the driver's voice.

This is when Dragstra introduces the breeching. Breeching should be attached in such a way that it applies pressure to the horse and mimics what will occur when the horse is put to the carriage.

Once the horse is comfortable with this little bit of pressure, a tire is added. A regular car tire with the rim is fine. The rim adds extra weight, otherwise the tire may bounce and hit the

Notice how the tire is attached. Binder twine is tied to the ends of the traces. Quick release snaps attach the other end of the binder twine to the swingletree which is attached to the tire with a chain.



This horse is standing quietly with his near hind leg over a trace. He's done this before, which is why an assistant isn't at his head.



horse. Use baling twine to attach. Why baling twine? It is strong but light and in an emergency it can be easily cut or will break on its own. Attach a rope to the tire and have the assistant hold the rope to keep the tire from hitting the horse right away. If all goes well, remove the rope. Drive in straight lines first, then big circles.

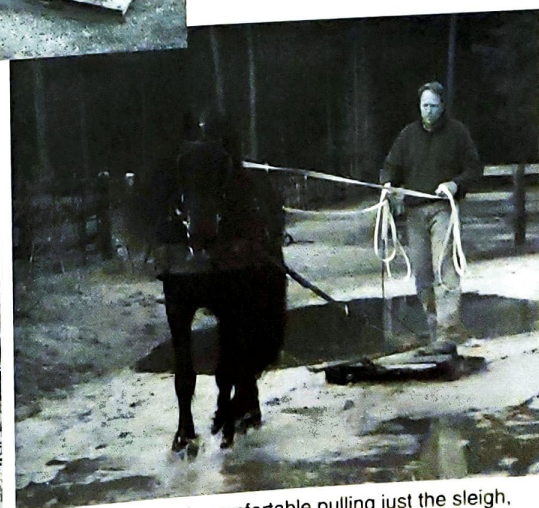
Dragstra likes to ask the horse to step over a trace to become accustomed to the feel of a trace between his hind legs, so when and if it happens later, it will be no big deal. While this is an important step, be prepared for a reaction - maybe a strong one, from the horse.

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With a lead attached, the assistant walks beside the horse at his head while the trainer ground drives from behind the sleigh.



The sleigh is introduced. It is attached in the same manner as the tire.



Once the horse is comfortable pulling just the sleigh, Dragstra adds more weight by standing on it. Notice the horse is expected to drive through the standing water in the ring.



When the horse is behaving well and doing everything asked, Dragstra ground drives the horse onto a gravel driveway and other areas to experience changes in sounds and variety of terrain. As always when introducing something new, the assistant attaches a lead and walks along as the horse leaves the comfortable environment of the training ring and hears new sounds as the tire drags over different surfaces such as gravel or pavement.

Repetition Leads to Acceptance

Don't move on to the next step after just one session. Even if the horse doesn't react the first time something new is added or he is asked to do something different, it doesn't mean he is totally comfortable yet. Repeat each step several times. Horses don't always register what is going on the first time; the second and third time is the test for the horse's acceptance of the training. He may seem totally comfortable after a couple of sessions, but the third time his attention may be drawn to something which will cause a reaction. Don't look at this as a bad thing, but as an opportunity to fix the problem now instead of later when it will be ten times harder. "Once in the carriage, the issue becomes dangerous," says Dragstra. "Take more time with ground work and testing. You only have one chance. After a traumatic experience, your chances for success are cut in half."

The Whip

Dragstra advocates carrying a whip during ground driving and training. It is part of the training for the horse to get used to the whip. The whip is an important aid and the horse should be comfortable feeling the lash on his body. The closed bridle prevents the horse from anticipating its use.

The 'Sleigh'

Dragstra then attaches a "sleigh." This is a simple device with two runners under some boards and it is a little heavier than the tire for the horse to pull. The driver can stand on it to add more weight or he can walk along beside the sleigh. This is the final preparation for what is to come next - the carriage.

Introduce the Carriage

According to Dragstra, 99% of the time, if the training has been done correctly, introducing the horse to the carriage is not a problem. At this point the horse should

- ❖ completely accept the bit, direction (turning left and right) from the long lines, and respond to commands to move forward and stop.
- ❖ be unconcerned by the movement or pressure of the harness, long lines and traces.
- ❖ be relaxed even when the noise and pressure changes. He should stand quietly while being harnessed and attaching equipment and walk off when asked.

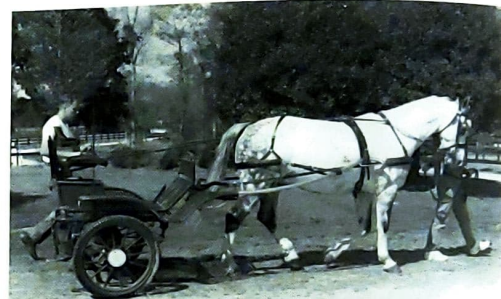
The first carriage the horse should be attached to is a two-wheeled carriage, hopefully something specific for the purpose, but NOT a Meadowbrook. The carriage, or cart, should be light, and easy for the driver to get in and out of. If possible, it should be equipped with a brake. The brake helps hold back the cart at

first so the cart doesn't put too much pressure on the breeching until the horse becomes accustomed to the pressure.

When the horse has been put to, the assistant leads the horse with a halter and lead rope while the driver ground drives from behind. If all goes well and the horse is quiet, relaxed and accepting, the driver can mount the vehicle.

Continue to drive in big circles and figure eights. Avoid making sharp turns at first until the horse gradually gets used to feeling the shafts touching his sides. Today many modern carriages don't have the long, straight shafts that once were the norm, but still the horse must become accustomed to having something solid along his side.

The assistant is at the horse's head with a lead and the trainer drives from behind as the horse takes his first steps with the carriage attached.



The trainer adds weight by sitting on the side but is ready to step off quickly if necessary. It is important that the first carriage be easy to get in and out of.

If everything goes well, the assistant detaches the lead and quietly walks away, but remains attentive to the situation.



After working in an arena or paddock, the horse is slowly introduced to traffic. At first, he is driven in a paddock which is next to a road. It is even better if the horse can be turned out in a pasture next to a road so he can hear and see the sounds and be comfortable with them. This phase may take several weeks. Don't be too quick to head out onto the road.


Once the horse has reached a point where he can be driven quietly around the farm and down quiet roads, from then on it's "common sense, regularity, and mileage," according to Dragstra. "Time will build up the horse's confidence."

Professional Training versus Do-It-Yourself

Training your own horse to drive can be a very rewarding experience and can build trust between you and horse. It may seem expensive to send a horse to a professional trainer for two or three months, but considering that one mistake on your part may take months, years, or maybe never to correct, it may be cheaper in the long run. Consider whether you have the time, patience and equipment necessary to see the job through from start to finish. If you are fortunate enough to have a local trainer who can mentor you through the process, so much the better. If you don't live in an area populated by professional drivers, there are many books and videos available that will add to the information given here.



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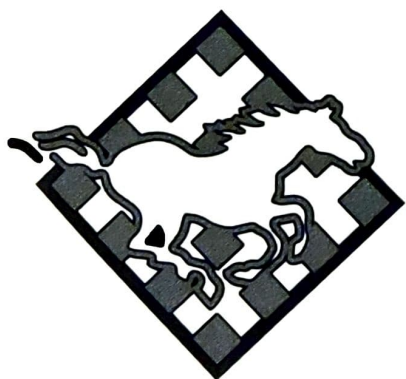
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