

Tips for Pony Pleasure Drivers

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Who hasn't had visions of driving or riding a pony? It is one of the easiest, most economical and most rewarding horse experiences you can have. A pony offers endless hours of companionship, experience, pleasure and peer recognition, both in casual pleasure use and in organized group activities.

If you're a beginner, consider well-trained ponies for the activities you choose. Avoid spoiled ponies while gaining experience. If you're experienced, you may wish to train a pony from the beginning to better develop it according to your own wishes.

For showing, your pony should be sufficiently trained to both your and the judges' satisfaction. It should start easily, walk, jog, extend the trot, be willing to stand quietly and back readily. Your pony should also behave in the presence of other ponies.

During practice, work your pony on as many different surfaces as you can, including sand, gravel, sawdust, clay and turf. This practice will improve its ability to start cold under most conditions and accustom it to working with other ponies.

Preliminary ring inspection

If possible, check the arena you will show in ahead of time. Notice the type of surface, puddles and hard or rough spots. Whenever possible, work your pony in the arena before your class. Be especially careful of deep paths worn near the rail by riding animals. Your pony may want to travel in that path, but it usually doesn't leave room for the cart to clear the rail.

It also can be hazardous if your wheel or wheels on the rail-side ride in this path. The rut can tilt your vehicle and put awkward pressure on your pony's side. This pressure will make it nervous and also make it difficult for it to turn, keep a balanced cadence or rhythm of its trot.

Besides surface quality, be aware of objects just outside of the arena such as bleachers, tents with flapping parts and other animal displays. Many ponies have never seen a goose or goat. Don't let their first encounters be at the fair! See that your pony has been exposed to as many of these things as possible. Most of all, make certain that

your pony is willing to trust your judgment and go past such hazards readily just because you say to. This kind of rapport can only be established with lots of kind, firm handling.

Select the correct harness

The harness for pleasure driving may be the breast collar type with thimbles, the breast collar type with breeching or a collar and hame harness for casual driving. No matter which harness you choose, you must meet several basic requirements for pleasure driving competition.

Your bridle must have square blinkers, an overcheck and a snaffle bit. A snaffle bit is any bit with moving bit rings for attachment of the lines and bridle. It never has shanks, curb chains or straps but may have a straight bar or a jointed mouthpiece. An overcheck bit or bradoon is optional. The lines may be attached to either the overcheck or snaffle bit, but some experienced drivers prefer to attach the lines to the overcheck bit.

Finally, the crupper must be a standard buckle or turn-back, but it cannot be a spoon crupper. Spoon cruppers are built up directly under the tail to encourage the pony to carry its tail higher than normal.

There are a wide variety of snaffle bits, and one will be suitable for your pony. Most pony harnesses have a simple snaffle bit with a jointed mouthpiece and "O" rings at the ends. The bridle, overcheck and driving lines are attached to these rings. Some snaffles have twisted mouthpieces, but the Wilson Training snaffle is designed to be easy on a pony's mouth for training purposes.

Snaffle bits often have metal extensions at the base of the ring where they attach to the mouthpiece. Half-cheek snaffles have a single extension on each side that points toward the ground when mounted in the pony's mouth. Full-cheek snaffles have two extensions and are better at preventing the bit from being pulled through the pony's mouth from heavy pressure on the lines.

Although they are driving bits, the Liverpool and the elbow bit are now snaffle bits because they have long shanks and curb chains. Such bits can exert great pressure on the pony's mouth, and the farther down the shank the lines are attached, the greater the pressure becomes. They are sometimes used in fine harness and coaching classes, but seldom in pleasure classes. The exception to this rule is if the lines are attached to a Liverpool bit in cheek and if no curb strap is used. This way the bit acts as a snaffle. You may get by with this arrangement in a pleasure class. However, most driving snaffles are inexpensive, easily obtained and more accepted by judges.

There are several options for outfitting your harness. A cavesson or nose band is nice if your pony has a tendency to go with its mouth open or its tongue hanging out. Another option you may choose for better control is a running martingale. The martingale should be high enough so that the lines are in a straight line from the pony's mouth through the martingale rings to the rein terrets. If the martingale is set too low, a judge might suspect that the pony has difficulty tucking its nose, that the driver depends on the martingale instead of proper training or that the pony is a head tosser. So if you choose this option, be sure the martingale is adjusted properly.

A whip can be a real asset. It should be held in the right hand along with the lines, not in the whip socket. It should be as upright as possible with just a bit of a forward incline. In this position, it will not interfere with other ponies and is in a position that permits easy use in any direction. Drivers have fewer aids than riders because they cannot shift their body weight or use their legs or heels. When driving animals, the whip is used as an extension of the trainer's arm or to replace a leg or heel. It is used to urge the pony up into the bit and increase speed. Although a good pony should respect the whip, it need not fear it. Some ponies will allow whips to swish away biting flies or to ward off loose dogs who could otherwise cause difficulty.

Racing silks, trotting boots, false tails, tail-sets, wigs, docked or cob tails, chains, rattles or weighted toe clips are restricted from the 4-H pleasure driving.

Select the correct vehicle

The vehicles you choose for pleasure driving are almost limitless. However, there are two vehicles that are not permitted in 4-H classes. They are the fine harness show buggy and the viceroy. The most obvious reason for restricting these vehicles is that they are too expensive for most participants. If permitted, the winners of the classes would soon be the ones that could afford the most expensive outfits. Lots of hard work and common sense can overcome the need for expensive items. Another reason for restricting these vehicles is that they require greater driving skill to prevent them from overturning.

The all-purpose cart is ideal for pleasure driving. It is rugged enough to travel easily over different surfaces, and it has room for more than one passenger. It also has a guard rail around the seat, a dashboard to protect the driver from dust and mud and a large area for the driver's feet. It also looks nice enough to compete in the show ring.

The light racing sulky and similar roadster carts or bikes are very acceptable in the pleasure driving arena. A four-wheeled farm wagon is also quite acceptable in 4-H pleasure driving classes and would look appropriate with a pony turned out in a collar and hame harness. And what driving enthusiast wouldn't like an antique wicker runabout? It is appropriate in pleasure driving classes. Give special consideration before choosing to use antique vehicles. Iron rimmed wheels are sometimes a drawback in deep mud or sawdust, and some four-wheeled vehicles are quite large and can be a hazard because of their size. At a recent sale, a parasol-top buggy sold for little more than the more expensive roadster carts. However, this is likely to change as these antique vehicles become harder to find and more expensive. They will soon be in the same category as the viceroy. Even now, many horse and pony shows put these fine vehicles in separate classes.

But whatever vehicle you choose, whether it is two- or four-wheeled, factory made, homemade or antique, it must be neat, clean and safe and acceptable to the show management. Check your tires frequently for proper air pressure, and keep nuts and bolts tight.

Preparation for showing

Your pony must be properly cleaned and groomed. Its bridle path should be clipped. Noses and chins can be pretty hairy, so they should also be clipped. Clip the long hair out of the ears. If your pony spends a great deal of its time in a pasture, do not remove all the hair because it needs it for protection from bugs and flies. Remove the long hair from the back of its legs and fetlocks.

Your pony may be either barefoot or shod. If shod, the weight may not exceed 4 ounces or be more than a keg shoe, which is its normal size. The length of the hoof should not exceed 4 inches in small ponies, and on larger ponies it should appear natural and not overly long. Hoof polish is optional.

If the show is late in the fall or early in the spring, your pony will have long hair. If your stabling facilities are not warm enough to permit you to give it a body clip, a "v" clip is permissible in pony classes. It helps show off the pony's neck and head and may make it easier to fit the bridle. This type of trim lets the pony retain the most needed portion of its winter coat. Unless the weather is unusually severe, the pony may be turned out part of the day without endangering its health.

You may wish to braid the forelock and the first lock of the mane below the bridle path. The forelock ribbon can be tucked neatly around and under the bridle on the mane side.

When your pony is ready, how about you? It is important that you dress properly for the show arena. The basic clothing includes a long-sleeved shirt, dark pants and boots. If you want to, wear a hat, tie or blazer. If you choose to wear a blazer, you need not buy one just for the show ring. There might be one that will do somewhere in your wardrobe. If you wear a blazer, you may add to your comfort by wearing a short-sleeved shirt, since your blazer will provide the necessary long sleeves. You may elect to wear the traditional saddle seat suit and derby. If you have a western pony, it is fine to dress accordingly, especially if you are driving a farm or ranch wagon. Whatever you wear, do not dress so flashily that you detract from your pony and your driving ability.

Long dresses and big hats may look appropriate in an antique vehicle parade, but they are definitely out of place in an afternoon pleasure class for 4-H, where safety is given special consideration. A long dress is more acceptable in an evening class, but if you are going to dress like this, be prepared. The judge has every right to ask you to dismount from the cart to see if both you and the pony can deal with the additional hazard. Remember, no one can come into the arena to head your pony while you dismount.

Showing

When the announcer says, "Bring the pleasure driving ponies into the ring," your number should be pinned to the center of your back. Enter the arena and turn to the right at a slow trot unless the ring master directs otherwise. Hold the reins so they do not sag on your pony's back. Make sure your feet are firmly placed for balance even if you know you have a well-trained pony hitched to a strong vehicle.

To determine where to hold your hands, pretend you are at the table and have just finished eating. Push your chair back a bit as if to get up, but instead place your wrists on the edge of the table. This is the position your hands should be in while driving. Hold one line in each hand, and never slap your pony with lines to make it move. Talk to the pony, or cluck and ease the lines slightly or release the pressure on them to get it to do what you want.

Be ready to do a flat-footed walk; don't prance. A slow trot or jog is required, and an extended trot in both directions may be called for. The pony will be penalized for breaking its trot to lope or for dropping to a walk when it should be trotting.

Look at the judge and ringmaster periodically to see if they are watching you.

Try to maintain the largest circle possible, especially in a crowded class. Keep well spaced, not bunched up against other participants. This will show your pony at its best. Do not be afraid to pass another pony, especially if your pony is well under control. It is best to pass on the inside.

When asked to line up, do so immediately. Complete your turn around the arena and get into a line facing the judge. Never cut through the line and turn around to get back into line. Your pony is required to come to a nice quiet stop and to stand quietly without someone coming to its head. Stay in your cart unless asked to dismount.

When you are asked to back your pony, it is permissible to say its name to make sure you have its attention. You may even ask it to step forward a bit first, especially if it is parked or stretched. Watch for the judge to nod or move on before returning to the line.

Unless the class is large, show your pony at all times. Even though judges may not appear to be looking at you, they may be watching you out of the corner of their eyes. Remember to look at the judge and ringmaster periodically to see if they are watching you. They may ask certain ponies to perform again.

It is acceptable for your pony to stand square for inspection instead of parking. But some judges may use parking as an additional training test to decide which of the two ponies to place higher.

Try to remain cheerful; after all, it is a pleasure class. Be a good sport; don't blame others or your pony for your mistakes. As smart as ponies are, they cannot anticipate everything you are thinking.

When you leave the ring, keep moving through the gate and away from it. Many otherwise perfect classes have been spoiled by hazardous congestion near the exit gate.

Lots of hard work and a bit of luck may bring you great satisfaction as well as a beautiful trophy. For extra experience, you may want to show in a local show before it is time for your 4-H competition. Many other shows include other classes just for 4-H projects. Feel free to write or ask individuals or organizations promoting shows about driving classes. Unless you ask, they may not be aware of enough interest to warrant putting driving classes into their shows.

Pleasure ponies need not be expensive, fancy, professionally trained animals. If you have a good rapport with your pony, you can get it to do its best and look its best. Many ponies that are capable of winning ribbons and trophies are standing in backyards all over America. Give your pony and yourself a chance, and you may be pleasantly surprised.

If you don't care to show or if your area doesn't have shows, you may find the greatest pleasure of all driving with friends on city streets, along country roads or alone in an open field. Working with ponies can be both fun and educational for young and old alike. Ponies are inexpensive, easy for children to mount and less costly to maintain than larger horses.

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