

Driving ambitions

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In our third and final part in this training series, Sue Mart from Bennington Carriages Driving Academy, a UKCC Level 3 coach, explains how to prepare for your first club level one day event.

About Bennington Carriage Driving Academy

The Bennington Carriage Driving Academy offers an extensive range of facilities and training for all levels of driver. A wide range of Try Carriage Driving experiences are available for those new to the sport or for those who would simply like to 'have a go' for the first time.

For more advanced drivers, there are a wide range of facilities to help improve performance and develop skills at our purpose built facility. The centre is set in 10 acres of picturesque countryside and is extensively equipped to help maximise your enjoyment of the sport. Ample parking, wash down facilities, toilets, tea, coffee and kitchen facilities are available, as well as expert advice from Bennington staff who are always on hand to help.

The Academy is also the home of our showroom, where an extensive range of carriages and accessories are always on display.

Preparing for your first One Day Event

Whether you have a small pony, cob or horse, there are events to suit all shapes, sizes and levels of turnout. In addition to one day and two day events, you may also find that some clubs offer 'inside out events' or 'fun days'. These are similar to an ODE but the emphasis is on fun and commonly there is no timed

section for the marathon. This is perfect for the small pony and newcomers to the discipline, but still with the full cones course and dressage test.

Get involved

The first step is to find the nearest club to you by referring to the British carriage driving website; www.britishcarriagedriving.co.uk, where all the registered clubs are listed.

By speaking to your local club secretary you will find out what they can offer you and how to get involved. Put their event dates into your calendar and go along on foot to some of the events and volunteer. The

organisers will be pleased to see you and are likely to buddy you up with an accomplished steward which is an excellent way to learn about the sport, the rules and meet with like-minded people.

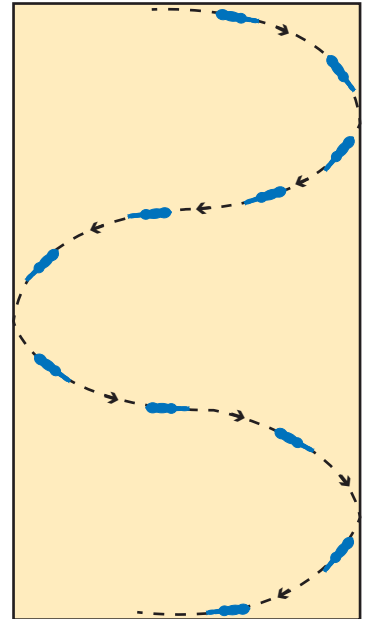
Preparing to take part - Factors to consider

Remember to be realistic each student and turnout will develop at their own pace and a lot does depend on a variety of factors, including the competence of the driver, the standard of the horse and how much time you can devote to training and do you have a competent back stepper?

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A novice competitor at a club event



You need to have an understanding of the rules, but my philosophy is get out there, enjoy the sport...

Negotiating an obstacle

Serpentine exercise

When a client starts a series of lessons with their turnout, we sit down and discuss their short, medium and long term goals which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic within a Time scale = SMART.

So your goals may be:
Short term - compete a Catton Club event with Midland Carriagedriving, doing the dressage and cones only.

Medium goal - compete at Belvoir event with Midland Carriagedriving and compete in the one day event.

Long term goal - go compete back at Catton at the end of the season and compete in the two day event.

The skills required by the driver

You need to have an understanding of the rules, but my philosophy is get out there, enjoy the sport, take part and learn from your experiences. We all have to start somewhere, and we have all been eliminated at some stage in our driving career. It's team work, you have to be organised and communicate well with your team. I love check lists and have a packing check list. Even running up

to an event, our team gets together and we make a diary plan leading up to the event. This helps spread the work load and doesn't leave everything to a last minute panic.

Remember we do it for the fun, so make the whole process of getting to an event and competing as easy as possible. Make it an enjoyable experience for your crew too, appreciate them, we can't do the sport on our own.

Preparing for your dressage test

You don't need a full size arena to practice your dressage. If you have a flat area you can practice elements of your test. Here are four really good exercises to work on at home and helps practice the obedience and way of going:

1. Trot - halt on the centre line. Play with your speed control in your trot and vary the length of the halt. Remember we are looking for straightness, attentive halt, square and on the bit. Good secure move off into a forward trot. Remember before the exercise, communicate with your backstepper and agree your goal for the exercise, is it 'SMART'?

The scale of Marks is as follows

10	Excellent	4	Insufficient
9	Very good	3	Fairly bad
8	Good	2	Bad
7	Fairly good	1	Very Bad
6	Satisfactory	0	Not performed
5	Sufficient		

2. I love to use serpentines this is a really good warm up exercise, to get your horse bending, engaging and test the straightness. You can play around with the exercise with walk and even halt transitions on the straight lines. This really tests your bends and straightness.
3. Once your horse is warmed up, then test your speed control, working in and out of the trot, but making sure you pick a point to simulate a dressage marker, and make the transition clear and defined, with the change of rhythm happening when the horses' nose is at the marker.
4. Practice your rein back. So many drivers forget this movement. Think about the quality of your halt first and how you are communicating with your horse, never

pull your horse back, simply squeeze and give, remember to talk to your horse too. Play around with the length of the rein back so your horse doesn't get used to just reining back three steps.

Keep your dressage sheets and discuss with your trainer at your next training session.

Look at two movements you need to work on and use that as a goal for your next test - work on improving and beating your own score - 'I am going to get an eight for these movements next time!'

Practice cones at home

When training ideally extend your track width to the regulation width for the event you are preparing for as this will help you get your eye in. Also, if possible, have a few balls on top of the cones, as this will be the test to see if you are clear.



Halt or rest area



Stewards will start you off on each section

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back stepper have the same terminology for the harness parts. Try and rehearse and hopefully these situations will not happen.

Carry the relevant spares and take a bottle of water for yourselves; it's amazing how thirsty you get whilst out on the sections.

Have at least two stopwatches with you, just as back up (and check the batteries before the event)

Fitness Levels

The fitness has to be a gradual process; I tend to start around January with walking the ponies out under saddle for two weeks, then gradually building their fitness up in the carriage. When out training take a stop watch and time your trot, so in your plan you can build up the trot, say trot for five minutes walk for two minutes, then gradually build this up. Hill work is really beneficial and walking up hill, really builds the horses muscles.

Measure a kilometre in your car or with a GPS so you can time yourself, we train at four minutes a kilometre, which is a good gauge so you know the speed you need to trot at in competitions

For pleasure driving and club days, if you drove your pony three to four days a week, doing five to six miles a day, it would be at a realistic level of fitness for an event. If you can drive off road all the better

as this will help improve the fitness and even driving in the field schooling for dressage and cones will also help with the fitness. Remember to feed your horse appropriately for the work he is doing.

Negotiating obstacles

Walk the obstacles as much as you can with your back stepper and ideally, on your last visit on foot, run the route. It's amazing how soon the turns come up and this will give you a pretty good idea how it will feel when you drive the obstacle. This might flag up tight turns and you can look at options to make the turn more flowing.

Don't forget to cycle or walk the routes between the obstacles, noting any compulsory flags and remember the short route in the obstacle is not often the fastest. Look for the most flowing route, ideally on the same rein. Think of the turns as circles as this will help your horse to remain in balance.

It is important to communicate with your horse and have commands for left and right as they really respond to this. Always look ahead for the next turn, turning your body to follow the curve taking into account the terrain when deciding the route discussing where the backstepper needs to be standing on the back step.

Don't over drive your horse during the early stages of its

training, the speed and canter will come once you both build up your confidence and trust.

Give each obstacle a name ie. 'bank' or 'trees' as this will help you both to remember the obstacle when visualising back at your lorry or when you are coming up to the obstacle. Remember to relax between each obstacle talking through the next obstacle between you both ie. Into A by the banner, left after A, B and left outer circle. You will develop a system which works for you.

On the obstacle section it is a good idea to build up some extra time say 1 ½ mins so you can give your horse a breather in between each obstacle and work out your times and have them written down for the backstepper to read. We use a times wallet which is brilliant and has a clear waterproof sleeve.

And finally

If you have a video camera or iPad why not video the obstacle whilst walking it and you can then study the footage when you are back at camp in the evening.



A smart turnout for the dressage phase

You don't need a full course, I would suggest set up six pairs and you can then play around with a few combinations and work on accuracy and approach.

Remember, the essence of driving cones is driving through the cones square, look ahead all the time and allow the horse to go forwards. Don't look down if you think you may have knocked a ball off as this will be a distraction and set you up wrong for the next pairs of cones. Finally, remember to breathe, relax and smile."

Marathon tips

This is the fun bit, but remember to drive safely according to the terrain and conditions and spend time with your back stepper at home training around obstacles.

Go through some 'what if' scenarios with your back stepper. For example; what to do if you get stuck on a post, what to do if there is a situation when the back stepper needs to get to the ponies head. Know the safety procedures and ensure both driver and