

# Learning to Drive **Part 3**

In our third and final instalment of our learning to drive feature with Christine and Douglas, we find out what milestones they have reached together with Joey, their plans for the winter and the events they are aiming for in 2017.

**W**ith the winter nights drawing in, the amount of driving that Christine and Douglas will be able to do is limited, though they are thankful for the weekends where they will be able to get out a bit more and will be aiming to work Joey three times a week. "Over the summer we have been trying to get out four or five times a week; during the week we do half an hour but it's quality over quantity and at the weekends we go off for a few hours but we have to go on main roads to get to the nice bit of driving.

"We have the confidence in Joey and in ourselves now that we are able to do that," said Christine, who tries to work him as much as possible in driving. "I am predominantly the main driver, but Douglas does a lot of the driving too and we will take it in turns in the winter. We have been going out in all weathers to prepare for the unpredictability of winter," she added.

Such is Christine's confidence in Joey now that they have even gone for a blast in a 20 acre field that runs alongside the M69. "It really helped his stamina and our confidence, I came back with a massive smile as he always gives his all," said Christine, who is planning on using a nearby competition centre over the winter to keep up his fitness work and put in some dressage and cones practice.

## Practice makes perfect

Christine and Douglas try to expose Joey to as many different experiences as possible, putting out cones, barrels and flags. "When we go in the field for practice, we always go in with a plan which can be anything from working on straight lines to bending around cones. We have always had regular lessons from Sue throughout and we try to be realistic with our aims and we aren't afraid to ask for help," said Christine, who tries to ensure



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they have solid foundations in their schooling work. "If something doesn't go right then we take a deep breath and try again. If I feel there is still a problem then I give Sue a call as I don't want it to build into something more than it needs to be and usually it is something we are doing wrong rather than Joey. Sue always manages to identify the problem and sometimes it is just a small change that needs to be made to make it all work," explained Christine.

Christine and Douglas have been lucky with Joey in that he has been an outstanding driving pony for a fairly novice pair of drivers, despite being only a novice himself. "We sometimes forget that he is only six years old and we try not to take him for granted by keeping his workload varied, but he hardly puts a foot wrong," said Douglas, who added: "There was something that kept startling him and it took us a while to figure out it was actually just his own shadow, but now he realises that he is absolutely fine. Christine struggles with him on the left rein so she has to work a bit harder on that, but doing twice as much

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work on the challenging rein than the easier right rein has meant they are balancing it out now."

All horses learn differently, but so do people and Christine finds it easier to identify her mistakes when she can see them. "I have always been a very visual person so I find it much easier when Douglas videos Joey and I and then I can watch them back to see what the problem is. It is very helpful for me," explains Christine.

### Highlights

From their nervous beginnings of going into a completely unknown sport, Christine and Douglas have shone in every aspect from learning to harness, putting to, buying a pony, remembering a dressage test and practising cones courses. One of their biggest highlights of the year was taking Joey to the Grimsthorpe drive. "He had never been in company with other horses and there were dogs

and sheep and huge open spaces. We came up with excuses of not going too far but we ended up doing the whole 25k drive and came back to the trailer as fresh as a daisy. He exceeded all our expectations, doing everything we asked and loving every minute of it. Every time we do something with him he just surprises us," said Christine.

Having experienced local events without Joey, by stewarding for their local carriage driving group to watching at Catton Park, they have been able to see all the different conditions that can affect performance and how the competitors dealt with it, as well as meeting new friends along the way. However, all the watching and not participating has made Christine hungry to compete Joey. "Over the winter we are planning on doing as many clinics as possible, such as a backstepping clinic and going indoor driving to experience driving on a different surface," said Christine, who added: "Overall, we feel confident and safe to know that we will be able to meet any challenges in the future.

"We have a new carriage on order, a Bennington Spirit, which is a three phase carriage that will allow us to step up to competing next year. We will be keeping the Bennington Fun Bug for using out on the roads, but as soon as the Spirit is ready we will be having lessons in it."





## Future plans

Christine and Douglas are planning on joining West Midlands carriage driving group as they host several training clinics at Catton Park and events local to them, as well as joining Midlands carriage driving. "Whatever events are on we will be aiming to go to them, I would love to do the Grimsthorpe drive again next year. We never got a chance to go for a long weekend in Norfolk with Joey, but that is most definitely still on our to-do list!" said Christine, whose main aim next year is to compete in the one day event at Belvoir Castle.

Christine, Douglas and Joey have been enjoying regular training sessions with Sue at Bennington and having practised a dressage test, done some work through cones and started to look at working round and through obstacles, the pair finished by having some fun going through the water splash and up and down banks. "Sue said she was really surprised by how much more confident we were as

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that was our first time going through the water complex, but she keeps me grounded and gives me pointers and things to work on at home. We practised dressage around obstacles which is really useful for helping Joey stay balanced. We love having some fun at the end of our training sessions," explained Christine.

## Give driving a go

"We have been so fortunate in having found Joey and Sue. The Bennington family are such a fantastic support network that has really made a difference to us, offering as little or as much help as we need and the people we have met along the way have been so encouraging; we have been to lots

of events to watch and everyone has been so welcoming and friendly no matter the level," said Christine.

"Finding the right pony and the right coach can make all the difference to the learning experience. We wanted it to be safe, but also have fun and Douglas and I spend quality time together. Joey never lets us down and always gives us so much, but being realistic and honest with yourself, as well as having a strong support network, is the real key to enjoying the sport," finished Christine.

As this is our final part in exploring Christine and Douglas' learning to drive journey, it is clear to see how far they have come since their first 'Try Driving' day. It is thrilling to see how much more their confidence has grown since purchasing the superstar Joey and how much of a difference all those extra hours of tuition and practice have made. We would like to wish them both the very best of luck with all of their goals next year. We will be aiming to keep our readers up to date over the following issues with their foray into driving competitions.

## Sue Mart at Bennington Carriages

Sue has been an invaluable asset to Christine and Douglas' training from the very beginning at the 'Try Driving' day to helping them find the perfect pony in Joey and coaching them all along. Sue said: "Christine and Douglas have made great progress since our last session, I can see they have been working on straightness and rhythm which was their homework from the last session. Their confidence has grown so much and look forward to working with them in their next session. It has been great to see them at the National Carriage Driving Championships at Cirencester, the BDS Championships at Addington and club events gaining an insight into the sport and giving them direction for next year's achievable goals."

