



It's a full-on family affair

Sue Mart, Level 3 UKcc coach, talks to the Milner family about their meteoric rise to carriage-driving fame

What do you get when you pair a former British Rally Driving Champion and a 17-year-old carriage driving enthusiast?

A winning combination and possibly a few arguments! Steph Milner and her dad Jonny have been taking the carriage driving world by storm since they teamed up in 2012. Initially, Jonny was part of the support team taking his young daughter from competition to competition, but watching her miss out on wins through time faults eventually became too much to bear and he jumped on the backstep to help her to victory.

It's in their blood

The Milners are a competitive family. Mum, Tracey, competed at ridden dressage before turning her hand to breeding (mainly) dressage horses. Dad, Jonny, is a rally driver and manages the Merlin International rally team and was British Rally Driving Champion in 2002 and 2003. Eldest daughter Laura has followed mum into dressage and competes nationally. Steph has got the carriage driving bug and younger sister Katie has followed in her father's footsteps and is making her mark in grass track racing.

Perhaps it was inevitable that one of the Milner girls would combine the family love of horses with the love of driving. A trip out for Steph, when she was 11, with neighbours Penny and Ray Brad on their carriage and she was hooked. "I decided immediately that this was

what I wanted to do," says Steph.

For her 12th birthday she was given a Shetland stallion to get her started. Later she got a Welsh Section C which taught her everything she needed to know about driving naughty ponies. It was only when she got her current pony Josh, a Hackney/Welsh Section D cross that she really felt she had the right one to realise her ambitions. She set her sights on competing in Austria last July for team GB at the Junior World Carriage Driving Championships and she made it, winning the Derby as an individual and coming fifth overall. She hadn't even done a national competition with Josh at that time.

Steph attributes much of her success to her trainer Jane Wilson, who has supported and encouraged her since she started driving with the North East Driving Trials Club. Having her family's support with all their combined competitive experience has also helped.

The best for the job

Steph drives Josh in a Bennington Blaze carriage, recommended by Jane Wilson. "It's the comfiest carriage I've ever had," Steph tells me. "It fits Josh really well and I adjust the seat for each phase. We've got every extra you can think of on it, front and back brakes, suspension front and back, a turntable brake on the back, delayed steering. If it can help us get that edge, we'll use it."

Steph and her dad look after the carriage well too. Jonny, being a mechanic, is used to making

sure his machine is in top condition, and takes care of the technicalities and checks everything right down to the greasing of wheel bearings before every outing. "It's mostly preventative maintenance," he says. "When you are rallying, the car has to be absolutely up to the job for safety as well as the chance of winning. I treat the carriage in the same way. If a wheel bearing isn't sufficiently well greased or the tracking is a fraction out, that can cost us on the course. We need to have the best driver, the best horse and the best carriage. I think we've got that."

Real horsepower

How does backstepping compare to rallying? "I guess the main difference is speed. In a rally car I'm driving up to 130 mph, whereas carriage driving we might reach a maximum of around 20mph. And of course we are dealing with real horse power here, an engine with a mind of its own! The other difference is delayed steering, which stops the back wheels of the carriage turning too early and knocking the cones or the obstacle. We don't have that in a rally car."

Steph, Jonny and Josh have had six competitions this year and won all of them, so what is next for the dynamic trio? Steph has her sights set on the next junior international competition in 2014, having just won the novice pony class at the British Carriagedriving National Championships. They clearly have everything it takes to get there.