



# See the changes

A few tiny tweaks to your driving skills and turnout can make a dramatic difference to your overall performance, says *Sue Mart* from Bennington Carriages. Here are some helpful considerations.

**W**ith the season now underway, hopefully you and your driving team are fit and raring to go. You may be oozing confidence and can't wait to show off your turnout to the judges, or the thought of doing so might be pushing you out of your comfort zone. Either way, it doesn't hurt to make sure you have everything covered, giving you and your horse the chance of having a successful – and more importantly a fun – day out.

## Are you sitting comfortably?

A secure position on the carriage is paramount to your performance and will improve the overall look of your turnout. Two golden rules

to remember are that your hips should be higher than your knees and you must keep your weight through your feet.

To help you constructively analyse your own driving position, dig out some recent photos or videos to see where you can improve. Of course, your regular coach will be able to offer valuable feedback too.

Sometimes, a fresh set of eyes can provide a different perspective on things, so consider booking a session or two with another accredited coach to pick up some new ideas.

## Top transitions

Sharpen up your transitions to improve the communication you have with your horse.

This is not only a safety issue (for example when approaching road junctions) but sharper, more obedient transitions will also gain you extra marks in a dressage test, help you impress the judges during your show and ensure you have better precision driving the cones or marathon courses.

The following simple exercise is a terrific way to get you and your horse thinking and help you be more creative during schooling sessions.

1. Mark out a dressage arena in your field or arena.
2. Place three cones or markers in from the track at H, B and K (allowing enough room to drive around the outside).
3. Starting on the right rein, drive a three-loop serpentine in trot making a walk transition each time you cross the centre line, as shown in the diagram on the next page.

*Being in harmony makes all the difference.*

The simple diagram shows the exercise movements as a guide for you to follow.

- You can adapt the exercise however you want, including halt to trot transitions as well as between walk and trot. You can start the exercise on both reins from either A or C.
- If you don't have space for a dressage arena at home, make your transitions at specific markers, such as gateways or telegraph poles, on your drive outs.
- Make the exercise more fun by communicating with your backstepper, asking them to score you out of 10 for each transition. If your marks start to improve then you'll know everything is going in the right direction.

### Confidence counts

I try to 'drive big and in the green zone' for a short period of time during my drive or schooling sessions. By this, I mean I imagine I am in the ring saying to the judge "look at our fabulous turnout". Showing off a little at home will prepare you better for doing the same in the ring.

Being positive in your thoughts and smiling goes a long way to helping your confidence, too – never 'apologise' for being in the ring. Practise confident driving and be proud of how you and your horse look and perform. The more confident you are, the better impression you will have on the judge.

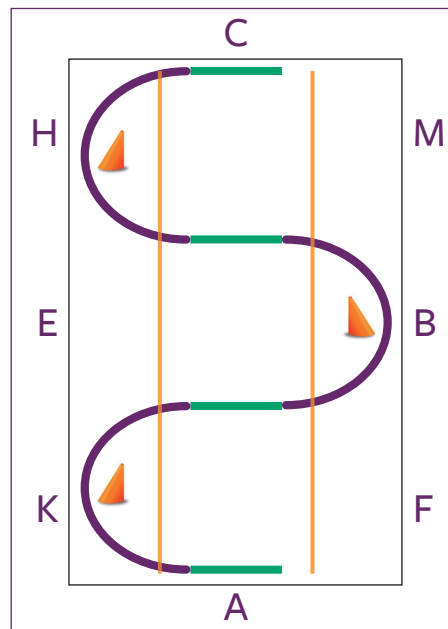
### Train, observe and volunteer

Why not organise a group session with your fellow drivers, inviting your local accredited coach along for extra guidance? Or consider visiting your trainer's establishment and have a 'play day'. Not only will you improve your skills but supporting others and allowing them to support you can act as a great confidence boost and is a good chance to practise driving in company.

Visiting a local show or driving trials event will give you the opportunity to watch and observe others. Pay particular attention to the drivers who do well and try to spot why they are catching the judge's attention so you can do the same.

Another idea is to offer your volunteering services. You may be able to shadow more experienced volunteers and gain experience that way. Visit [www.britishcarriagedriving.co.uk](http://www.britishcarriagedriving.co.uk) to find out what's involved and how to link up with your local club.

- To find out more about the services we offer at Bennington, visit: [www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk](http://www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk) or call us on 01400 281280.



A wedge seat can transform your sitting position



### Top tips

- Remember to breathe, smile and have fun. And, at the end of the day, be proud of your horse and how far you have come.
- Allow yourself plenty of time on show days so you can stay relaxed and focused. This gives you time to hand walk your horse on the show ground, as well as getting prepared for the ring.
- Find a quiet place then visualise your dressage test from start to finish or your show, going through each movement one by one and seeing yourself driving it perfectly.
- Have a warm-up plan in place and stick to it at a competition. Your warm-up should focus on getting your horse more balanced, supple and connected.



### Join in with the fun

Keep an eye on the Bennington website for dates of training days run by the Bennington Carriage Driving Academy. Or why not make a stay of it and come for the weekend? We offer a range of experiences, from our 'Try Carriage Driving' days for those new to the sport, to training days for more experienced drivers.

- Visit: [www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk/driving-academy](http://www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk/driving-academy) for more details.

