

AN INTERVIEW WITH... SUE MART

Margaret Brockie interviews advanced single pony driver Sue Mart.

Sue, was it inevitable that you would take up driving, coming from a family who run one of the best-known carriage making firms, Bennington?

I guess so, driving is in my blood. After grooming for dad (Michael Mart) in the early days of scurry driving and then driving trials at Osberton at an early age, I was set to take the reins one day. It still gives me as much of a buzz today as it did when I started all those years ago.

At what age did you get your first driving pony?

My first pony was Flicker – who took me through pony club while dad drove him as a single at driving trials. I then took over driving him at about 13 years-old. I have been very fortunate to own some fabulous ponies who have given me the confidence and skill to progress in the sport.

Who has been your favourite pony?

Our star pony has to be 'Mervyn' – a Dales pony who gave Wendy (my sister and groom) and me such fun. He really did look after us in our early days of driving and took us through novice into open. I remember we tipped up at a Midlands driving event at Lilford (many years ago) and Mervyn just stood there while we righted the two-wheel carriage before carrying on!

Today my current driving trials pony, which I compete in the advanced single pony class, is Steppers Viceroy (Zac) – a nine-year-old Welsh part-bred. He is the most rewarding and talented pony I have ever owned. It's been quite a journey, but the end result has been most satisfying and there is still more to come.

What has been the highlight of your driving career so far?

Winning the international single pony title at Royal Windsor in 2003 with Dillon. It was a fabulous win, one which I will never forget. It was, as always, a massive family effort with my loyal sister, Wendy, backstepping, mum, and dad supporting me. A close second was travelling to USA to compete at Gladstone and driving a 16.2hh fabulous horse called Arko. Finishing third in the advanced single horse class, I was nicknamed 'The little English girl!' It was a truly fantastic experience.

What is your role in the family firm?

As director of the carriage business, my role is highly varied. Typically it involves dealing with customers – including initial enquiries, sales and importantly, delivery – where we ensure that every customer's carriage is delivered and set up to their exact requirements. In addition, I spend a lot of time working with my dad and 'brainstorming' ideas – from new carriage designs to marketing ideas and ways to promote the sport.

A significant proportion of time is spent providing our renowned customer service – Bennington typically gets 50+ calls per day enquiring about maintenance, harness fittings, pre-owned carriages, how and where to start driving, etc, etc. In addition, it's also my job to ensure that every carriage we produce is perfect – so I keep a close eye on all aspects of production. Thankfully though, we have a fantastic team who, like me, are dedicated to making the best possible carriages.



Sue Mart with sister Wendy backstepping.

Is it difficult working with your parents and do you argue?

Having the entire family in the office (dad, mum, my sister and myself) we occasionally get the odd moment when we don't totally agree on a particular matter. Saying that, with 20+ years of working together, we are used to dealing with our own special idiosyncrasies and disagreements are rare. Typically we are so busy in our particular areas that we don't have time to argue – we realise it's counterproductive and rarely solves the problem at hand.

Many of our staff have been here for 20+ years and thankfully we all work together harmoniously! We are more likely to disagree about something on TV or in the news than something 'Bennington'!

Has the influx of vehicles from the Eastern European countries affected your business?

Competition is good for any business and forces you to keep at the top of your game. Bennington is constantly innovating and experimenting and never afraid to try new things – we firmly believe that there is no such thing as a bad idea. We realise that our carriages may not be the cheapest when compared to carriages produced overseas – but our Royal Warrant is testament to the quality inherent in a Bennington carriage and keeping our production local and in-house means that we can maintain total control – and deliver the level of service that our customers expect. The telephone is never more than 10 seconds from the individuals that designed, built, painted and assembled a particular carriage.

How do you combine your own driving training and competing with your work?

It's always a challenge but I am lucky enough to have a great team – family, staff, friends – all of whom 'get stuck in' to support Team Bennington!

What do you like to do when you are not involved in horses and carriage?

For the rare moments when I am not immersed in an area of the carriage-driving world, I like to relax with some soothing music (I recommend Chris Botti) and a G&T. I also enjoy flying in Simon's micro-light – which I love as it is so peaceful and, like driving, gives me a real buzz. During the winter months I take part in Salsa dance classes to try and keep fit and for a bit of fun too!

Do you have time for holidays and if so where do you go?

At the end of every season I try to get a holiday in. In February Simon and I went to Norway to see the Northern Lights, which we were very lucky to see. We like a bit of adventure too, sleeping out in a Lavue (wigwam) overnight – although even with a roaring fire burning, it was extremely cold! We often mix business and pleasure to visit Jean Kinsella, our agent in the United States to keep in sync with our American customer base and also to get a few days rest and relaxation.