

STARTING A HORSE TO DRIVE

By Wes Licht

Morab breeder Wes Licht of Rocking L Acres, McFarland, Wisconsin, has been riding and driving horses since the age of 6 under the tutelage of his horseman father on their Iowa farm. He perfected his driving and training skills through years of work with his friends in Dairyland Driving Club (he is a founding member) and through seminars and clinics with master whips such as Bill Long, Bill Lower, Heike Bean, and others.

Step one: Round pen work. In order to begin training a horse to drive, you must first train the horse to have good halter manners and to respect you as herd leader. I like to do this through the same type of round pen work that you may have seen done by John Lyons, Monty Roberts, Pat Parelli or Buck Brannaman. I control the horse's movement and he soon learns that coming into the center to be with me is a good place to be. I give him praise, pet him and he does not have to work so hard when he stands next to me. I don't let him into my space – I insist on good manners – but I am fair and consistent. After a few good sessions in the round pen, most horses will be submissive, and accept you as herd leader. (See details on round pen work in the Winter 2000 Morab Perspective.)



Step two: Halter work. After your round pen work, the horse should want to follow you around. Walk next to him. When you stop, he should stop. When you go forward, he goes forward. Put a halter on him and lead him around with a loose leadline. Practice leading from the right side as well as the left. Practice backing, too, so that a light touch on the rope will shift him into reverse. Teach the horse to move away from you when you lead him and move toward his head. With your lead hand, apply light pressure to the halter away from you. Use your other hand to firmly bump him high on the side of the neck right behind the ear to get the "move away" response. Emphasize stopping, and saying "whoa," and then reward him when he is responsive by rubbing him on the face and upper neck area. Touch him all over his body with the rope starting with the back and rump. Position yourself so if he spooks and jumps you are safe and he is held in a small circle going around you. Stick with working on each place until he shows some relaxation. Work on his head. Lay a rope on his head and take it off many times until he is comfortable with it.

Put it over his ears and take it off. Play with his ears and mouth. Rubbing or putting pressure on the girth region with your hand or rope is good experience. Rub the rump near the sides of the tail. In time



your horse will relax and lift up his tail and he will allow you to hold the hairless underside of the tail and flex it upward.

Step three: Spinout. One excellent exercise is to pass a 10-12 foot rope around the rear of the horse from the halter and have the horse spin out. This is done to remove fear of things touching the sides and back of the legs and aids in bending and turning. Stand quietly near the left shoulder and apply light pressure to the rope, which is looped around the right side of the horse. At first the horse may spin out rapidly going away from you. Bring the horse back to you and reward by rubbing the head or poll area. Repeat the process frequently on both sides to get the horse to quietly bend toward the pull of the rope away from you and then turn and come up to you as you bring in the loose rope. Desensitize all parts of the legs by having the rope higher or lower on the legs. This is great ground driving preparation. See photos 1-5 below.



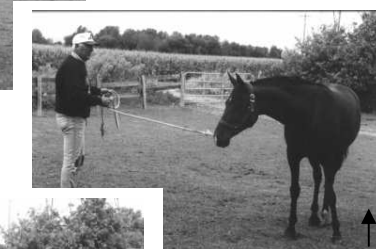
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Step four: Sacking out. You began this step when you touched his body all over with the rope. Use a plastic bag that you have tied to the end of a fishing pole or old driving whip. Stand by the side of his head with a short hold on the leadline and touch his back with it. If he doesn't bolt away, reward him by petting his neck or head. If he moves, keep him in a tight circle and keep touching him until he stops. Then remove the plastic and reward him. Slowly move it over both sides of his back and rump and take it away. Continue until he is comfortable and you can move it all over his body. Gradually increase the noise and movement of the plastic in future lessons. Further sacking can be done with the saddle blanket or cooler.



Step five: Introducing the harness. The sacking out in step four should help prepare him for this, but harness is different and will take some getting used to. It may be helpful to have the lead rope over your shoulder so you have both hands free to hold the harness. Rub his body with the harness. Put it on his back and take it off. Repeat and reward the horse each time for good behavior until he is comfortable with this. Put the backpad of the harness on him and buckle the girth. It should be snug but less tight than a saddle girth. Next, work slowly with the tail and buckle the crupper. A nervous horse will probably move away from this, but hold his tail and move in a circle with the horse until he stops, in order to complete buckling the crupper. When he is not afraid of the breast collar over his head, gently place it on him. Attach the traces from the breast collar to the breeching by running the trace through the shaft holder (tug) on the side and tie a knot in the ring of the breeching. Let the ends of the traces and the hold back straps hang down and touch his legs. Work the horse in the round pen or on a longe line at a walk, trot and canter to get him used to his "working clothes." Don't worry about him reacting to the harness by bucking or kicking. Eventually, the harness will become old hat to him and he will not fear it at all.



See harness parts on page 51.

Step six: Introduce the bit. Make certain the horse has no wolf teeth or sharp points that should be filed down by your vet. Introduce a gentle bit (I often use a full or half cheek snaffle) that

you have attached to an open (no blinders) bridle. Keep the halter on and put the bridle on over it. This is done to facilitate holding, leading, tying and working the horse without pulling on the bit. I buckle the nose band inside the chin strap of the halter so the halter ring is free to attach to the lead rope. Continue to do more round pen or sacking out activities with the bridle on.

Step seven: Ground driving. I ground drive the horse in the round pen or other safe area using long lines or 2 longe lines. I do not run the reins through the terrets on the backpad for ground driving. One rein comes directly back to me from the bit and the other from the bit around the rear of the horse to me. When I position myself near the center of the round pen and walk towards the hip of the horse, the reins form a "V." This way I can control the horse's movement left and right and I use my body position and whip to drive the horse forward. I work the horse in both directions at the walk with a lot of brief stops and starts and praise him after he responds well to the turning and stopping.

After the horse is turning well, I ground drive him with the reins coming from the bit through the tugs and then to me. There still is a small "V" made by the reins coming from the horse and I still have lots of control. But now the inside rein pulls straight back as in a more normal driving situation. A horse that has had significant direct rein riding experience should have no problem with this setup.



Time must be spent on ground driving with long lines. The horse must accept the bit and gain confidence by walking and trotting in both directions, turning and doing small figure 8's, stopping for longer periods of time, going faster and slower by reacting to voice and rein cues. Vary the ground driving by working in different and more challenging places, but do not over-challenge the horse. (For instance, a horse that is afraid of cars should not be ground driven in a roadside ditch until he shows acceptance of traffic when walking under control on a leadline.) With ground driving and all my other training activities I want to achieve relaxation, consistency and responsiveness building confidence in the horse.

Step eight: Introduce the cart. Introduce the cart to the horse at an early stage in training when the horse is on the leadline with or without his harness on. I begin by bringing the horse to the stationary cart just to see and smell, praising the horse a lot for getting close and not panicking. I challenge the horse more by tapping on the cart, wiggling it to add the natural noises that a cart can make. Each time I stop and rub the neck to reassure the horse that he is doing well. Then I repeat the noisy cart activity, increase it slightly and praise him again.



The next challenge level involves moving the cart and have the horse follow. I stand between the shafts and have the horse on the leadline about 2 feet out. Holding both the shafts and rope in my hands I start turning the cart in a tight circle (so tight the inside wheel rotates in one spot) with the horse following at about a 45-degree angle to the cart. I stop, put down the shafts and praise the horse, pick up the shafts and repeat the turning again. After a few times in one direction, I move the horse to the other side and turn the cart in the other direction, repeating the starting, stopping and praising. Little by little as I see the horse showing more acceptance of what I'm doing, I increase the intensity of the noise and movement, even to letting the shafts drop and bang on the ground right in front of the horse. I revisit this activity often during the early training so the cart's presence becomes as familiar as wearing the harness. I have found that my turning the cart is much easier and safer than having an assistant pulling the cart along side the horse. Therefore, I do it more often to the benefit of the horse.



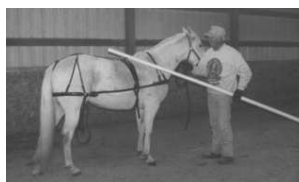
A third challenge involves moving the cart while the horse stands still. Use an assistant for this. Bring the shafts from the side up over the horse's back and rump, gently touching and rubbing those areas. The person holding the horse should reward the horse for standing quietly each time. Work with the cart from both sides of the horse and then from the rear. Each lesson can gradually increase the pressure of the shafts and the noise and movement of bumping the harness until the horse is completely at ease.

Step nine: Pulling a tire. Firmly attach a tire to an old double tree with 5-foot extensions that can be snapped to the ends of the traces. You need to allow enough room so that if the horse kicks he won't injure himself on the double tree. It is extremely

important to spend lots of time getting the horse comfortable with the movement and sounds of the tire and apparatus. I will use an assistant or pull the tire myself with the horse on a lead rope, until he is calm with the tire moving in front, behind and on both sides of him. When he is unconcerned, attach it to his traces. I recommend you have an assistant on his lead line and walking next to him to give him security while you ground drive behind. Stop frequently and praise the horse to boost his confidence. Practice only walking and stopping – trotting is not necessary and may be very scary for the horse. When the horse seems completely at ease retire your assistant. Come back to tire pulling in future sessions but always work in a round pen or safe area.



Step ten: Poling. Introduce a ten foot, 2-inch PVC pipe to your horse and rub it over his body. Then I pull it along as I lead the horse around. First I do this with my body between the horse and pole and then with the pole next to the horse as I lead him. Go slow with this work, making sure not to upset the horse. Both sides need to be poled. Another small step would be to have an assistant help – one person leads and the other holds the pole along side and touching the horse, alternately putting pressure on the shoulder and hip. If the horse is comfortable with this, the pole can be put through the shaft holder while the horse is ground driven. Have an assistant on the leadline at first and work the horse with the pole on the inside in both directions. Do not let the horse back when the pole is attached. If the horse shows confidence, then move the pole to the outside of the horse and continue going in a circle.



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Step eleven: Closed bridle (blinders). When the horse shows by his manners and attitude that he is ready to be hitched, introduce the horse to a driving bridle with blinders. I still ground drive with the reins through the shaft holders (tugs). I spend time driving the horse through the various exercises, including working with the cart that he was doing with an open bridle, to increase his confidence and relaxation with a closed bridle. Sometimes this step is very short (2 or 3 sessions) and sometimes a horse with blinders on needs lots more work if the ground driving activities with the tire, pole or cart unsettles him. Lastly, when I know I will be hitching, I will spend some time ground driving with the reins through the terrets, but I only ground drive. It is not safe to pull a tire, etc. with the reins in the terret



Step twelve: Building confidence. I like to introduce the horse to the furniture in the backyard, ground drive him past the mailbox and along the road, ground drive him in my arena over plywood "bridge," and rub my whip against the wall to make unexpected noise. I like to give him lots of experiences so he learns these things won't hurt him. These activities are done throughout the process, first building confidence with an open bridle and later with blinders.

You may have noticed that even after all these steps, the horse has still not been hitched to a vehicle and driven. All these steps are very important. They lay the foundation for a good, safe driving horse. You don't build a horse by starting with the roof. You don't develop a good driving horse by forcing him into pulling a vehicle before he is comfortable and confident about it. I encourage you to be patient and positive and work through the many small steps to fully develop your driving horse that will provide you with many pleasurable experiences.

Step thirteen: Hitching.

The horse is hitched with an assistant (two is better) heading the horse while holding the leadline attached to the halter that is under the bridle. I add a bucking strap attached to the shafts that runs over the horse's rump and is attached to the backstrap so it can't slip down. If the horse should start bucking he would have to lift up the cart up.



While my assistant is walking along side the horse with loose leadlines, I begin by holding the reins and walking behind the cart. We walk a short distance with the assistant staying a bit back, out of sight of the horse, and then we stop. My assistant pets the horse. When the horse seems comfortable, I get into the cart (wearing a helmet, of course!) and we continue this process. We only walk and stop for our first lesson. I make sure the horse is comfortable and we end on a good note. I generally use an assistant for the first two or three driving sessions, or more, depending on the horse.



Horses prefer to be hitched in the same place and I do so for quite some time. But I keep building on our driving experiences. First with an assistant. Then without. First just walk and stop. Then add the trot. First just in the indoor arena. Then in the small pasture. Then on the quiet dead-end road. Then in the noisy subdivision a mile from us. I work with a driving horse for brief sessions – usually 40 or 50 minutes five days out of the week, but will occasionally go longer to reach a more relaxed stopping point, and often for two months or three months just to have a well-started horse. I also like to give the owners several driving lessons and show them how to continue the training I have begun.

There is nothing quite like seeing the expression on an owner's face when she is able to take the reins and confidently drive her own horse who is relaxed and responsive. Don't hesitate to call with questions, preferably before you begin your work. Have fun and best wishes for successful training.



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