

Avoiding the Most Common Beginning Driving Mistakes

By Michelle Blackler

Driving a horse is a rewarding pastime that can be enjoyed by almost everyone. But for the inexperienced, there are some common pitfalls that can turn a pleasant afternoon drive into a nightmare. Here are some of the most frequent mistakes to help you avoid a potentially dangerous outcome and provide you and your driving horse with many hours of enjoyment.

Poorly Made, Ill Fitting Harness

It is imperative that you invest in a well-made harness, either used or new. If you find a brand new harness on ebay for \$100, you might be really lucky OR you might be getting a harness made in Kazakstan by a goat herder, constructed of yak hide. Buy a harness from a person who makes or sells harness for a living or from a site with classifieds by other drivers. The American Driving Society has lists of dealers and classified ads, as does CarriageDriving.net. Amish-made harness is usually fine, but get recommendations from other drivers; don't just go order something unless you have a really good idea of exactly what you want. Expect to pay between \$500-1000 for a good harness. It will last many years with proper care.

Next, it comes time to fit the harness to your horse or pony. So often, this step is overlooked or not done correctly. The bit is too low in the horse's mouth, the blinkers are above or below the eye, the neck collar is too big or small or the breast collar is too low, the traces are too long or too short, the britching is too low or too loose. If something looks sloppy, it needs adjusting. Each part of the harness has a purpose and incorrectly adjusted harness is incapable of fulfilling that purpose. If in doubt, ask an experienced driver or get a professional evaluation. Think of it as a life insurance policy.

Harness and Vehicle Incompatible

If you have a bicycle-wheeled sulky, a carriage harness will generally not work with it. Ditto if you have a Surrey With The Fringe On Top - a fine harness won't be strong enough. Please do not take one half of grandpa's draft horse harness and try to put to a Doctor's Buggy. Harness is quite specific to vehicles and you should do your homework to determine if you have compatible equipment. Some vehicles do not need britching; some require it. The same holds with breast collars and neck collars. Some vehicles are designed for pairs, some for singles, and the harness is different for each.

My Husband/Brother/Father/Neighbor Built My Cart

I don't doubt that your husband/brother/father/neighbor is a very handy chap to have around, but unless he is Todd Frey, who has spent years researching, restoring and engineering carriages, this probably isn't such a good idea. So much goes into building a good horse drawn vehicle that most husbands/brothers/fathers/neighbors who know this wouldn't even entertain the idea of undertaking the task. Wheels can come off or collapse. Shafts can snap off if the weight isn't balanced correctly. Buy a vehicle from a reputable dealer or from an experienced driver.



Inexperienced Driver, Green Broke Horse

You've bought a horse that the previous owner said was hitched a few times and "Goin' good." Say you found a nicely used harness, a sound top buggy and you read a book on harnessing. Ready to go! You hitch said horse, go around the yard a couple of times; everything is going great until you realize you are going to hit a tree unless you veer sharply to the left. The wheel hits the roller on the side of the buggy, but you keep steering hard left, the vehicle buckles, the reach snaps...Please go take some lessons.

By engaging in some education and following risk reduction practices, driving can be a very safe recreation for the whole family. It can extend the career of the grandkid's pony, long after they have outgrown him or her. Cross training for dressage horses enhances their conditioning. And driving can extend the rider's career with horses: Prince Phillip retired from polo decades ago, but retired from carriage competition in his late eighties.

So follow the old adage: *Don't put the cart before the horse.* Whatever your chosen style of driving- from Draft to Very Small Equines, heavy to fine harness - research it well, invest in some education to avoid these common mistakes, and you will discover the many joys of driving.

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