

Jada's navigator, her husband Matt, gets wet feet as Hank charges through a water hazard at the Hickory Knoll CDE.

Photo by Randy Farwell, used with permission.

BY MARY WINTER

Jada and "Hank" ... well on their way!!

It's a long way from Iowa to the 2011 World Ponies Four-in-Hand/Pairs/Singles Competition in Europe. But it's a trip Jada Neubauer of Ames hopes to make next summer with GS Thunderboy Henry (known to his friends as "Hank"), a 13-year-old Trottingbred gelding. Jada's business, Midwest Driving Company (www.midwest-driving.com) combines training horses and teaching their owners to drive. Now she and Hank (owned by Three G Farms Carriage Driving Center) are developing a reputation as fierce competitors in Combined Driving Events (CDEs).

As in three-day eventing, a pony and driver compete in three different events: driven dressage, the marathon, and obstacles, consisting of up to 20 pairs of cones with tennis balls on top. Hank clearly has the speed and agility to place high in the marathon phase of the competition. A trotter, he competed in sulky races before his purchase by Three G Farms. But the key to his strong performance in the marathon is that he has come to trust Jada so much that he will head toward a solid wall in a hazard at full gallop *knowing* that she will turn him out of the blind alley before he

hits the wall. Hank has the speed and Jada has the skill, for the cones course, so they are usually double clear (no balls down and within the allotted time).

Their challenge has been in dressage. Getting a relaxed, confident performance from a former race horse has been an issue, but one that Jada and Hank are overcoming. Their mentor is Robin Groves from Vermont, who represented the U.S. at the 2008 World Single Horse competition in Poland.

The first clue that Jada and Hank were something special was in the fall of 2007, when they won preliminary championships at both the Longview Lake (Kansas) and Cowboy Country (Oklahoma) CDEs. When they won the preliminary championship at the 2008 Birds Hill International CDE near Winnipeg, we began to think big.

Their first competition at the intermediate level was the 2008 Cowboy Country CDE, which they won handily over the other four intermediate competitors. Clearly, they needed stiffer competition, which they got at the Katydid CDE in Aiken, SC, in November, 2008. And they did

it again: winning the overall intermediate championship in a field of 25+ competitors, with some of the top names in driving.

Their goal for the 2009 season was to compete successfully at the advanced level. They set their sights on Lexington CDE at the Kentucky Horse Park in October. At the advanced level, dressage tests are more complicated; cones are closer together and more speed is required; and each





The advanced dressage tests require the driver to focus, as evidenced by Jada's expression at the Longview Lake HDT. Her groom is Christie Loiacono.

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hazard in the marathon has six gates (A-F) to be negotiated. A groom rides with the competitor in dressage and cones, as well as in the marathon. Carriages for dressage and cones must be a standard width, not less than 138 centimeters at the wheel base, because cones are set at 158 centimeters, allowing less than 8 inches of clearance. Additionally, competitors are required to have lamps on their dressage carriage.

Even though it was a little scary competing against the top pony drivers in the country at Lexington, Jada and Hank did well. Her dressage left something to be desired, as did her cones run. But she did very well in the marathon, finishing fourth behind the three people who represented the U.S. at the 2009 World Pony competition.

Robin is encouraging Jada and Hank to try for the 2011 Pony Team. The plan is for the duo to compete in advanced at four CDEs in the summer and fall of 2010. If they are successful at those events, then we need to figure out how to get them to Florida early in 2011, when the selection trials begin. We will cross that bridge, etc....

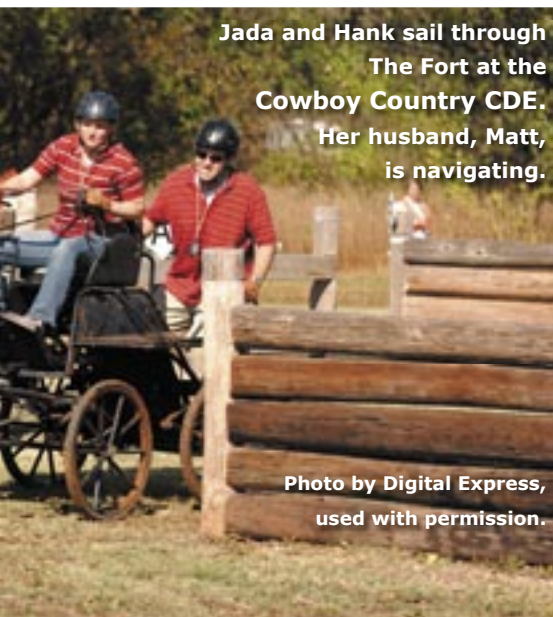
Although it is Jada's knowledge and skill and Hank's athleticism that are on the line at the competitions, there are other people involved as well. In advanced, Jada needs a marathon navigator that she trusts completely to keep the back wheels of her carriage on the ground and clear of wheel-catching posts, to help her find the best routes through the hazards, and to keep track of time. Her husband, Matt, fills that role very well, but he has a full time

job that he needs to work around when accompanying her to competitions.

The road cart she uses for dressage and cones (built by Three G Farms) needs to be rebuilt so that it is 138 centimeters wide at the wheel base, and no wider. A carriage wider than 138 centimeters means less clearance. Rebuilding is the job of Earl, Tad, and Ron Morris, at Three G Farms Carriage Works. Pat Ketterer, Lincoln, NE, has lent us her carriage lamps, and Tad Morris fashioned brackets for them.

The Neubauer kids, Xavier, 6, and Molly, 4, need to be considered in the travel plans. Other important folks are Hank's farrier, Mike Stanley of Winterset, and his veterinarian, Dr. Linda Thompson of the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine Field Services. And, of course, Earl and I, the owners of Three G Farms, play important roles in keeping Hank healthy, shod, and trailered to the competitions.

The journey to the Worlds is long, with the potential for a bazillion bumps along the way. But we cannot think of a better team to try to make the journey than Jada Neubauer and GS Thunderboy Henry!



Jada and Hank sail through The Fort at the Cowboy Country CDE. Her husband, Matt, is navigating.

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