

Hold Your Horses

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As a horse lover, I thought riding was the only way to go, until I discovered another dimension to my favorite animal. On my first trip to Amsterdam in the 1980s, I saw a parade of enormous black Friesian horses pulling carriages with flickering coach lamps. At a fair in Maine that same year, I saw my first pulling contest. Then one morning I left my Manhattan apartment and bumped into a mule. ("Ragtime" was being filmed around the corner). Draft animals became my next big thing.

On the Web, Rural Heritage magazine (www.ruralheritage.com) let me track heavy horse events all across the U.S., every weekend if I chose. At one show, I copied a phone number from a trailer belonging to a Farmer Brown of Hunt, N.Y., and drove 300 miles to see him. I found the modern charioteer in his logging cart behind a team of burnished gold Belgian draft horses so huge I couldn't reach their backs. James Brown, a national plowing champion, offered me the reins, and I froze. All that size and power, the gleaming brass knobs, jingling chains, creaking leather, and mysterious hardware were part of an arcane code I suddenly yearned to crack. Was there any way of learning to drive a team of horses if you hadn't done it all your life, or was I a hundred years too late?

There are roughly 70,000 registered draft horses in the U.S., as well as many more crossbred work horses, up from the nadir in the 1960's when they nearly disappeared. Burgeoning interest in alternative power, low-impact tree culture, and organic farming is fueling a working animal renaissance; the Amish, of course, never gave them up.

All I had to do was answer an ad.

Rural Heritage (the retro-chic Small Farmer's Journal would also have worked) led me to Fair Winds Farm in Brattleboro, VT. Owned by the Baileys, a Quaker family, Fair Winds offered beginner classes in driving draft horses, with a student limit of six. "Driving for Riders," which lasted two days instead of the usual three, sounded perfect. What sold me, though, were the horses. Many drafts, like the Budweiser Clydesdales and Farmer Brown's Belgians, are nine inches higher than a riding horse and twice as heavy. Fair Winds breeds Suffolk Punch horses. They're rare—maybe 1,000 in the United States and less than half that in their native England—and just over 15 hands high. A Suffolk Punch looks like an overgrown chestnut pony, but with wider shoulders, a chunkier rump, and a longer, more dignified face. Just meeting one would be worth the trip.

April is dicey in Vermont, and I careened eastward over the hogback mountain on Route 9 through a snowstorm, contemplating one advantage of horses over cars: horses don't skid. After doing two one-eighties on my downhill slide toward Brattleboro, one into the path of a dairy tanker, I pulled up in the Fair Winds parking lot amid a cluster of immense, weathered barns. The snow had erased all the ruts and bumps of the landscape; it all but buried the outbuildings, trellises, and fences that bounded the Baileys' 40 acres. In warmer months, I was told, the place would be vigorously blooming, with 20 acres in hay and a couple for organic gardening, chickens, pigs, and flowers. The remainder, Jay Bailey said, is woodlot, "the land that holds the rest of the world together." His wife, Janet, was tending baby plants for her perennial business when I arrived. She led me to the farm kitchen, where class was already in session.

The Baileys' walls were thatched with pictures, mostly of animals. Mittens and hats cascaded from the mud room shelves. Wire baskets of new eggs waited by the door. Two

giant cast iron stoves were lit. The weather had cut the student body down to three women, and still it snowed. Not to worry, said Bekah Murchison, the Baileys' eldest daughter: first we'd master her indoor exercise to get in synch with the horses. In blinkers and harness, they can't see much on their own. We'd take turns blindfolding each other, using twine to drive our sightless ``horses" through the house.

It was tough. Without being able to touch my animal the way a rider does, it took longer to communicate the need to turn or stop. ``A driver has to develop a whole different set of senses," Bekah explained, amid the bumping and swearing. When it was my turn to be the horse, I balked. I could hear the kettle hissing on the stove and worried about burning myself on the hot metal fenders, yet when told to ``step up" (go forward), ``gee" (turn right), ``haw" (left), or ``whoa," I was expected to obey.

It wasn't until the blindfolds came off that we got a chance to introduce ourselves. However, Jay had apparently sized us up and decided we couldn't afford to waste our time on formalities. As he herded us out into the snowstorm, we determined that one of us worked in property management and another taught Alexander Technique. All were experienced riders who'd experimented with driving on our own and wisely decided to take a class before trying again. Inside our next classroom, the haybarn, swallows divebombed us from the rafters; two kittens watched from a windowsill. A few sets of reins, called 'lines' when used in driving, were tied to posts in the barn. We practiced picking them up, then swiftly crossing our hands over each other, grabbing a handful of leather each time—not easy in gloves—in order to manage several feet of lines in a second or two.

The ideal Suffolk Punch, says an old breeding manual, is ``a short, fat fellow." Bekah led in Stella, who, though not a fellow, was certainly stout. She was also red, wooly as a bear, and, At 21, a great-great-grandmother, too.

The fully-harnessed Stella would teach us about maneuvering in tight spaces, indoors. We were to 'ground-drive' her, or follow behind on foot, guiding her through the barn with the lines. Our first assignment was to steer her through a series of plastic buckets 4 feet apart, a transaction she seemed to regard as only mildly annoying. When I asked her to zig-zag in tiny steps and pivot in a tight circle, we only kicked two buckets. ``Loosen your arms and shoulders," Jay advised. "Take bigger steps, and breathe." Then we tried it backwards.

Next, we tackled the same exercise with Stella and her sweetly ursine daughter Bonnie. Together, they maneuvered in less space than a tractor would, crossing their ankles like skaters. They were obedient, but not robotic: I ground-drove them out into the parking lot alone and Bonnie immediately started to overtake Stella and nudge her into a snowdrift. I envisioned equipment breakage, chaos, doom. I should have pulled back on both lines, not just one, but didn't know that yet. How did Farmer Brown make this look so easy?

At least when I brought the team back to the group, they were calm. I wasn't. Filling the hay racks and buckets in the horses' stalls before dinner was more fun. I knew how to do that. The rest of the evening, including the Greek salad, spaghetti with homemade pesto, and fresh bread, vanished in a tired blur. I went back to my modest hotel room and, horseless, crashed.

After our farmhouse breakfast, Day Two began with a few minutes of country biofeedback. The six-horse herd, including a muscular stallion named Acer, munched in their stalls, blew out snorts of steam, radiated their musky fragrance. I could have admired them forever, but Jay handed us each a currycomb, and we groomed them all before

backing two out to be harnessed. Normally we'd bump around the pasture in a wagon, but we still had snow. This was better. We'd have to hitch up the sleigh.

Anybody who thinks farming is simple should try this. The collar goes on before the belly band, britching, crupper, and about a hundred other parts that have to be threaded through assorted buckles and rings. New-fangled drivers use nylon equipment. "But I like leather," Jay grunted, hoisting the hames—the two-pronged arrangement that fits over the collar—into place, then spreading out the 50-pound tangle of harness along Stella's back. It was then I realized how strong he was. Driving is hard work. You need your whole body, not just your arms.

My job was to turn Bonnie and Stella to the sleigh and step them over the pole that attaches to the vehicle's undercarriage. My movements were jerky. They protested, but stood motionless while the harness tugs were connected and every loose end secured. When Jay snugged up a strap attaching the neck yoke to the harness, the whole interlocking puzzle snapped into place. I felt it. Every piece was taut and solid.

The four of us climbed into the box-like vehicle. "You're on," Jay told me, patting the driver's seat. I remembered the time a schooner captain asked me to take the wheel. I couldn't believe he was letting me do it. I picked up the lines. "Step up," I said, giving the start command, my voice an authoritative squeak, and off we went.

Every yard of rolling pasture presented a different challenge. If I sat and did nothing, the lines would loop around my legs, or my tension would get uneven and the horses would start to turn. But we were traveling. Wild turkeys scattered ahead of us toward the woods. The snowscape bounced beyond the horses' stubby corn-cob ears, and as the day was warming, they began to sweat.

"Use your space carefully," Jay warned. "Remember, you're driving a semi."

Good advice, as we had to cross a bridge with no railing. In order to aim the procession down the middle, I had to swing the horses beyond the beaten path and force them under a tree. The exaggerated arc kept the sled's runners on the track, and we sliced the bridge neatly, though I was unable to repeat my feat of placement on the other side and almost wrapped the sleigh around a stand of pines. I was better on the straightaways. We stopped to rest on a sunny ridge. I could hear the traffic on Route 30 below, but didn't dare take my eyes off my team.

Learning a motor skill as an adult is wearing, and this one's a monster. The Baileys assume a high level of knowledge in "Driving for Riders." They have to be flexible, though; nobody approaches this discipline from the same point. I'd tell anyone unfamiliar with anatomy and what equestrians call "contact" to take the beginner course, spend time getting comfortable with horses, equipment, and dirt. A dressage queen would faint in the Baileys' cobwebby barn, but I can't imagine another place to step into a rhythm that must be engraved somewhere in our limbic brains. Mine, anyway. Besides, New England was meant to be seen from between two pairs of patient ears.

After lunch, we split the group and played follow-the-leader with two sleighs. My team was the very pregnant Dancer, accompanying Rachel, who is only 2 years old. I swung them across the bridge, aced it, clumsily cut a corner on the way home, and finally did a snappy U-turn in the driveway. I thought that was cool until I saw a nervous student barge Bonnie and Stella through the cavernous south door of the hay barn and pop out clean on the other side. It was like something out of a movie. Next time out, I've got to try that.

