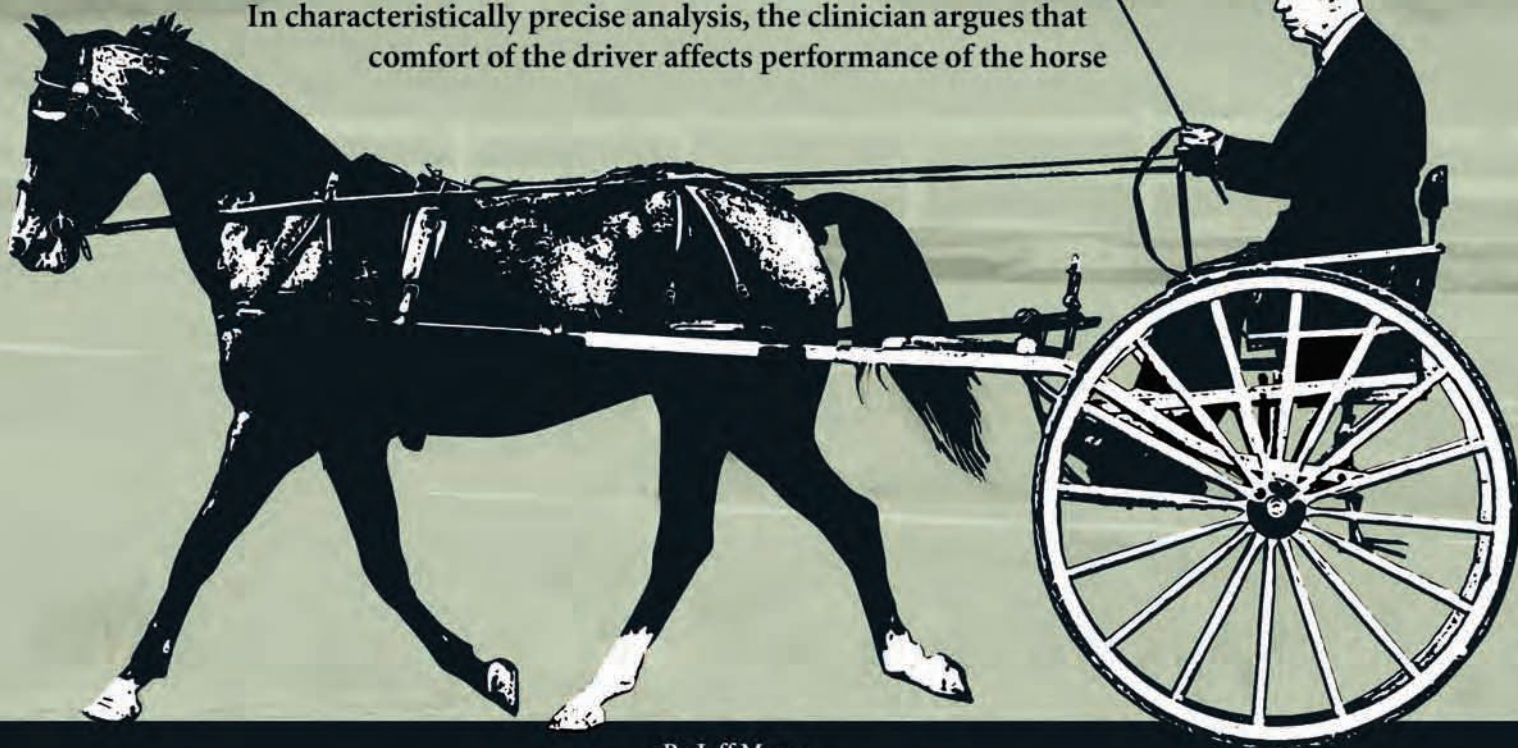


# Creature Comforts

In characteristically precise analysis, the clinician argues that comfort of the driver affects performance of the horse



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**T**he act of driving your horse is supposed to be a comfortable experience for both horse and driver. On the surface, this seems obvious. In fact, it is so obvious that some important ramifications are often overlooked.

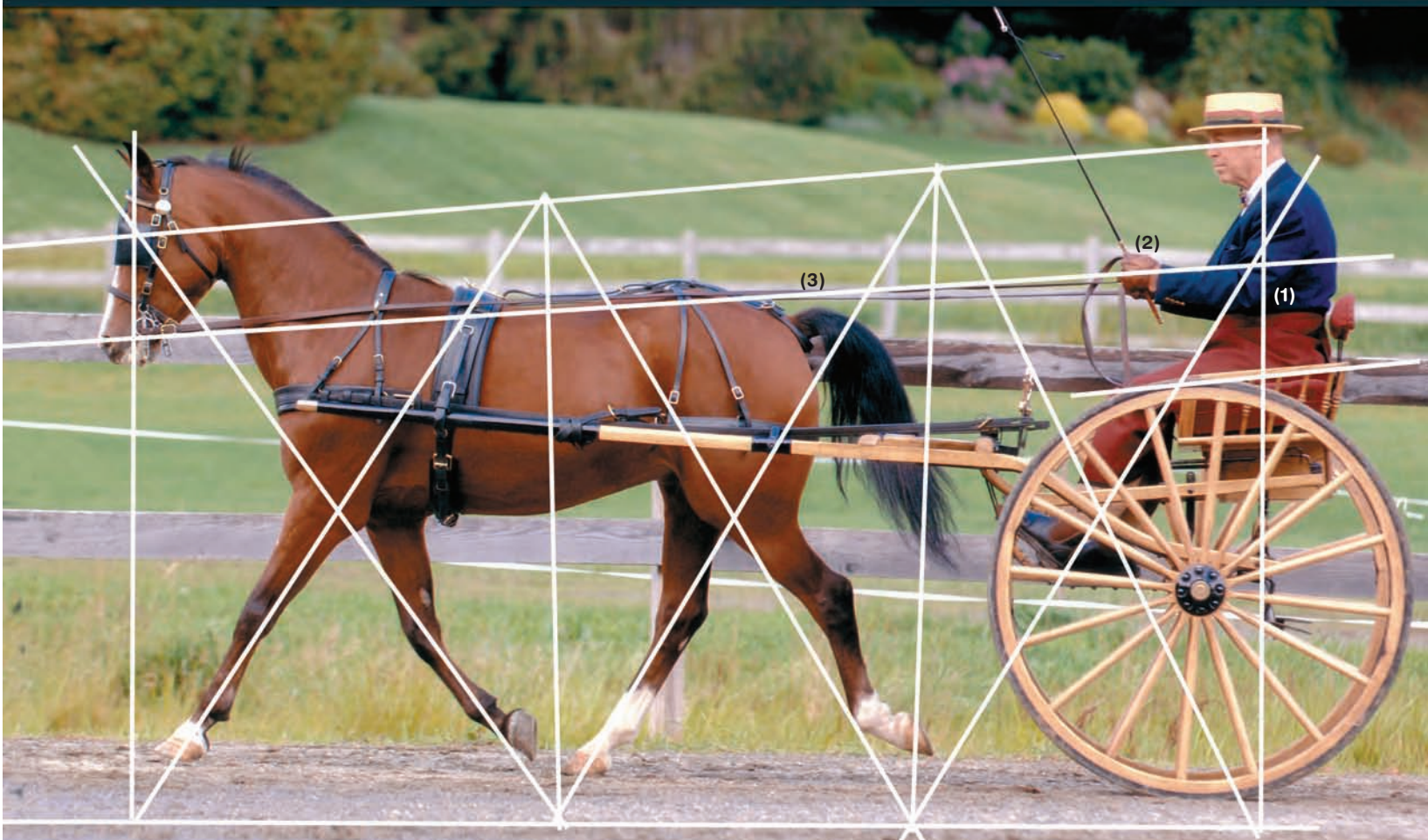
If you are not comfortable in the driver's seat, your horse will feel it and, in many cases, react in ways that, at the very least, will affect his efficiency to do the job you are asking of him. He may react even in ways that jeopardize the safety of you, your passengers and your neighbors. If you are tense, bracing or trying to hold yourself in some awkward position while driving, you will not be able to take full advantage of the remarkably responsive and cooperative capacity of the horse's mouth, body and brain. Your tension will interfere with the delivery of subtle, yet powerful, instructions from your brain to your hands and through the reins. Your horse will either object because he knows how the instructions should feel when delivered properly or the instructions will be confusing and perhaps even punishing to his mouth, potentially causing an adverse chain reaction through his entire body. His ability to work in self-carriage may be unnecessarily compromised.

If your hands are extended too far in front of you, they will become heavy and your arms will quickly become tired. If you have stiffness in your back and/or shoulders, these will become sources of aggravation and not only will your horse's performance begin to suffer, you will begin to find driving more of a chore and

increasingly less enjoyable. In addition to the whip, the reins and the voice, body position and control are the Fourth Aid in driving. Body position and the knowledge of what to do with your body while driving does not have quite as dramatic an effect on horse performance as a rider's body position, since there is no physical contact except through the reins. Body position and control are crucial in terms of forming the most effective relationship with your driving horse. Because you have fewer direct ways to influence your horse, body position and control may be even more crucial in terms of what is available to you for producing the best performance of your horse.

## Signs of Discomfort

If your horse is physically or mentally uncomfortable, one has to question if it is unfair to ask him to work. He likely cannot deliver his best performance. It is important that you check your horse for pain, discomfort and stiffness. One of the best times to do that is while grooming him. By reading the horse's body language, you will be able to tell if and where he is uncomfortable, if you know how to listen. Pay attention when he moves away from your curry or brush. If he curls his body away or moves parts of his body away from you as you groom him, that may be a sign of discomfort, not that "it's just the way he is" or "he just doesn't like stiff brushes." Remember, horses actually like to be groomed. Mutual grooming



*Marle Hill Concert Master, owned by Dennis & Laura Tatro, was champion at his very first carriage show, the 2008 Massachusetts Morgan Horse Show, in the following classes: Arena Driving Obstacles Section A, Reverse Complex Obstacle Section A, Pick Your Route Section A, and Cross Country Obstacles Section A.*

**Comfort By Design:** *The slope of the seat platform is slightly forward, rotating the pelvis to enable weight to be placed in the feet when needed and the bulk of the driver's weight to be placed in the buttocks, providing stability for the driver. It allows the driver's back to remain upright, neither leaning forward or back. (1) Note the vertical line from the driver's ear, through the shoulder, through the leg joints in the pelvic area and downward just behind the axle, providing a counterbalance so that no weight is placed on the harness saddle which in turn allows more comfort and freedom of movement for the horse. (2) Note the hand is higher than the elbow joint which is placed against and slightly forward of the front of the rib cage allowing for easy flexing of the elbow which is critical to responsive rein control and ultimately creating light feel of the mouth. (3) Note the very direct and uninterrupted line of the rein from the hand, through all the harness terrets to the bit. This is accomplished by having a seat platform elevated high enough to allow it. The horse will feel any interruption of this direct line and be affected by it. This line, when extended backwards, passes through the center of the driver's back which is where movement of the hand originates. Note how all this coordinates and synchronizes with the intersecting and parallel lines of energy, movement and weight of the horse.*

is one of the ways horses give each other pleasure in the pasture. If he pulls away, the horse may be indicating that his muscles or joints are not feeling right. When you put on his tack, does he move away or flinch when you approach? Does he dance around when you girth him up? Does he argue about putting the bridle on? All of these reactions can be signs of discomfort. If you are unsure about the fit of his harness, ask someone with experience to help you. There is nothing like the guilt associated with having asked your horse to perform while you were oblivious to his discomfort all along.

One of the most important areas in your examination of your horse's comfort is his mouth. My best advice is to have someone who has a lot of successful experience with using many different bits help you find the one that is best for your horse. With so many

bits to choose from, bit fitting and selection can be a mysterious art. A clinic or lesson with a professional trainer will be well worth the money for this subject alone. Be advised: horses express anxiety in their mouth, and what at first glance appears to be discomfort in the mouth may in fact be the manifestation of discomfort or pain elsewhere in the body of the horse.

### **Self-Awareness Exercise**

Here is simple, two-part exercise that you can use for the rest of your life with both riding and driving horses. You should use a horse that is well broke to drive and familiar with his surroundings. Drive him into a field or in a large ring and set him in a straight line at the walk. Close your eyes. You can open them at any instant and opening your eyes is one of the fastest things you can physically do!

**Part I:** Driving with your eyes closed, begin at your feet and check yourself for tension and comfort, making any changes that seem right. Place one foot forward and one foot back underneath you. This will give you the ability to support yourself in any direction as you are jostled about in the vehicle and will help prevent you from getting too braced or top heavy. Lift your feet off the floor and set them back down lightly. Taking the weight off your feet will allow gravity to place all your weight in your seat and keep it there proving the stability needed to drive well. Move up your body, checking for flexibility and releasing tension as you go. Let the motion of the vehicle move your body. Sit up a little taller and find your balance. Play around with leaning forward and back and from side to side until you find a balance that feels right. Our upper body tends to lean forward as we drive and focus on correcting issues we see with our horses. Periodic correction is necessary to return to a more effective driving position. Pay special attention to your middle and lower back. Release tension and stiffness there. Hang your elbows at your side or slightly forward of the front of your rib cage. Spread your hands about shoulder width apart. Point your thumbs up and slightly inward. This may vary depending on how you are holding the reins and your own conformation. In general, look for a position for your arms and hands that feels comfortable yet allows you to keep the bend in your elbow, carrying your hand just a bit higher than your elbow joint. Open your eyes. Now look at your horse. Nine times out of 10 he will be more relaxed, more supple, more responsive and will have lowered his head and neck.

**Part II:** The next time you do this exercise, give a quick check of yourself as described above, and then pay attention to what you can feel in your hands. Your horse uses his head and neck to help him balance as he walks. You should feel his head moving through the rein in your hand. Let that motion move your hands and arms by allowing your elbow joints to flex as your hand is moved, while at the same time maintaining a fairly constant connective feel with your horse. We are looking for a responsive rein more than simply a light

contact. Lightness comes after responsiveness and effectiveness. This may take a little practice, but it will plant the feel of this kind of connection in the subconscious part of your brain. If you try to too hard to work at that connection or force it to happen, you will not be successful.

Ride the seat of your vehicle like you were riding the movement of a horse you were riding under saddle. Go with the motion you feel. Listen to his foot falls. Try to separate the sound of each footfall. When a horse is at the walk there should be four equally timed footfalls each with the same sound. An odd or irregular sound may mean there is a lameness or developmental issue to be investigated. (Unsoundness may be easier to discern at the trot, which is a two-beat gait). Training your mind to be subconsciously aware of irregularities will notify you immediately of potential discomfort and lameness issues that may be developing. And once again, when you open your eyes, your horse most likely will have changed in a very positive way.

After your drive, pay attention to how you feel. Often in the "heat of the battle," our attention is focused so intently on the horse in front of us that we fail to pay attention to some aspects of ourselves which have powerful influences on how our horse behaves when we drive him. Are your fingers cramped, tired, stiff or sore? Are your biceps tired? Your forearms? Is your back stiff? Do you find yourself stretching out stiffness when you get down from the seat? Are your extremities cold (poor blood circulation can be sign of stiffness and tension)? Does your neck hurt? The source of these discomforts may be in the way you control your body or may be the fault of poorly designed equipment such as inadequate seat height, the wrong slope of the seat, poor position of the back rest, the floor too close or too far away, tight fitting gloves, reins that are too wide or too narrow. The list is endless but fixing these minor discomforts can pay big dividends for you and your horse. Next time you drive, close your eyes and you should be able to find the source of your discomfort and even that of your horse. Neither you nor your equine partner should feel stressed after driving. Driving should be comfortable for both of you! ■

## GREEN MEADS FARM

Where carriage driving isn't just a hobby, it's a way of life.  
Thanks, Jeff, for your hard work, guidance and dedication. We had a great summer!



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