



≈ CARRIAGE CLINIC ≈

The Art of 'Letting Go'

Self-carriage: What the term means. How it is achieved.
How it applies to the discipline of carriage driving.

By Jeff Morse

Author's note: The ideas presented here, although focused on driving and, more specifically, carriage driving, are relevant to most styles of riding.

“Let go.” This counterintuitive instruction is often given by instructors to riders and drivers who are intent on controlling their horse. How can the horse possibly be better controlled by giving him more control of his own power? Giving, allowing, offering, and responsiveness are the keys to self-carriage. Taking, resisting, holding, forcing, and tightness kill self-carriage. Although it takes skill to achieve it, the simple definition of self-carriage is: the horse carries himself. He cannot carry himself unless he is allowed to do so.

To let go does not mean throwing away all contact or

disengaging the established connection with the horse! The horse never takes a step where effective control is not maintained. The major distinction between riding and driving is that a rider has physical contact and some level of control through the seat and leg aids. Riders can therefore afford to let the reins drop to all but the weight of the rein on the bit. The driver, on the other hand, has only rein contact as a physical connection and it is important that the horse feels the presence of the rider's hand (both left and right) and that the driver feel the presence of the horse's mouth in each hand for every step.

What separates the truly great drivers from the merely good ones is the timing and quality of the offer of the aids, primarily the rein aid, to the horse. Almost everyone can instinctively “take” rein. The well-honed feeling of how and when to “give” the rein is

ABOVE: Amos H. Rockwell driving a pair of Morgan stallions without bridles, Morgan Tiger, son of Gifford Morgan and Morgan Star, son of Black Hawk. He does, however, carry a very long whip enabling him to reach their heads and shoulders. Although lacking in physical contact, he has established 'effective control' through training. Both stallions were owned, trained, and driven by Amos H. Rockwell. They were never driven with the use of bridle or full harness, only a 10 foot whip. The pair were exhibited in every state in the Union—except during the Civil War. Excerpt from *Country Life*, vol 17, 1910.



SBS Risky Business driven by Jeff Morse, New England Morgan Horse Show, 2006

The driver is maintaining effective control with a light, offering, allowing and responsive connection between horse and driver. The quality of the rein connection between the horse and driver is only enough to provide guidance and instruction to the horse for management decisions: where to go in the dressage test, how fast to go for the specific movement required in the test, and to direct the horse about when to change his speed, tempo, and gait for the specific movements in the test. The horse is taking an efficient stride in balance and self-carriage. (Photo © Denlore Photography)

the path to self-carriage. As adults, we have spent years honing our self-preservation skills in our attempts to maintain control of our personal situation. Part of our brain senses some inherent danger in giving a head start to a horse outweighing us, being connected to him only by two thin reins, trying to communicate sophisticated ideas about when, where, and how fast he should move through a piece of metal in a mouth made for eating, cutting off half or more of his visual field with blinders. This causes most adults to approach driving by wanting to take, hold, resist—in short, to be defensive. These are the enemies of self-carriage. To give, allow, and offer in order to create an improved performance for the horse are learned skills that take time, practice, sensitivity, and, for most of us, guidance from a good instructor, to master. Just as piano players can always improve on what they do when hitting the keys and with the quality of the space in between, just as the advanced athlete can always improve her timing and balance, so too can the driver always improve on the quality and essence of letting go.

EFFECTIVE CONTROL

Effective control simply means that the horse understands—and appreciates—who is in control. For most well trained horses and drivers, this means the level and quality of contact can be light and even ethereal in nature at times but nevertheless still always present. There are some rare exceptions.

THE SEPARATION OF LABOR AND MANAGEMENT

Much of the teaching of drivers is about establishing and maintaining an effective connection. Most drivers instinctively understand the need to be light with their hand. Many simply are light because they do not want to hurt their horse's mouth. Noble goals, but, most often, inexperienced drivers are too light before they become effective. Better to be firm and responsive than light and ineffective. If the rein instruction is not effective, the horse has, in effect, been given permission to make management decisions they are not qualified to make. The driver is not driving the horse as much as he is being taken for a drive. In this situation, the horse may be performing in self-carriage at times but not at the direction of the driver and will inevitably descend into non-self-carriage.

As much as we like the idea of being in partnership with our horses, there are very specific roles for each to play in that relationship. Most professional horseman would agree there is a separation of labor and management in the partnership: the horse is labor and the driver is management. When those roles are not clear or even are assumed by the wrong partner, bad things happen and self-carriage will be elusive or non-existent.

The proper role for the finished horse and driver is that the driver offers nothing but pure instruction to their horse and that the horse's only agenda is to use their athleticism to operate according to those instructions. As smart and clever as many horses are, they



UVM Promise driven by Percy Locke, Eastern National Morgan Show, 1971

In this victory pass photo of Promise, the overcheck rein is not holding his neck in a position. The martingale is adjusted long enough so he is not leaning or balancing on it. It only changes the rein leverage slightly. The traces are slack. Promise is not restricted by his equipment in his effort to find self-carriage except by the strong contact with the reins. The driver is using his arm strength and the counter-balancing weight of his upper body to hold the horse in this position. This is an animated stride, not one of efficiency as desired with a carriage driving horse. Promise was a very powerful, fully fit, athletic horse trained for the stamina of competing through any work outs required by judges, which they asked for regularly when he was competing. Even so, he would tire if asked to perform this way over uneven ground for a long time. This animated trot is an entirely different job than that of a carriage horse trot. (Photo © Freudy)

are not well equipped to make management decisions about when to go, where to go, and how fast to go, although some become very good at reading our minds and anticipating what we are about to ask. Don't fall for it! You will both pay a price eventually. Those management decisions are not decisions that driving horses should even understand they are or even might be allowed to make.

Ideally, drivers should not physically hold their horse back from travelling too fast or support their horse by attempting to hold him in a position or hold him at a speed. Why? Because that is doing the horse's job! Instead, drivers should communicate to the horse through effective application of the aids what they wish the horse to do and then allow the horse to do it. That is quite different from making a horse do it or physically holding a horse back through the reins. Instead tell him, get out of his way and let him do the work.

Once horses are convinced that the driver is making effective and intelligent management decisions, you can almost see them give a sigh of relief: "Thank goodness I don't have to worry about all that stuff!" Horses actually like having a manager. The Alpha mare watches over the herd. The herd then drops their anxiety level to become the grazing animal. It is that horse with the lowered anxiety level that we want to create for carriage driving. The high anxiety horse will always have more difficulty performing in self-carriage.

The most difficult horse to ride or drive is the one who is conflicted about his role. We do not want the horse asking: "Am I

labor?," or "Am I Management?," or "What management decisions do I make, can I make?" Any question about who makes the management decisions should not exist in the riding or driving partnership. That does not mean the human is a dictator or a military commander. Nor does it mean the human is unfair by asking for responses from the horse that they have not been trained to understand. Sure, sometimes you have to be firm with your horse. But you can be firm—and kind and fair and responsive at the same time—as you guide your horse to the idea that he can function in a more efficient and balanced way in self-carriage.

SUPPORT FROM EQUIPMENT

The US Dressage Federation Glossary of Judging Terms defines self-carriage this way:

"Self-carriage: State in which the horse carries itself in balance without taking support or balancing on the rider's hand."

This would be altered slightly for driving sports: "*State in which the horse carries itself in balance without taking support or balancing on the driver's hand or equipment.*" Equipment is included in this definition mainly because of two devices commonly used for certain forms of driving: the check rein and the running martingale. These two devices are not often used in carriage driving competition with the minor exception of authentic harnessing for certain formal turnouts. Neither is allowed in combined driving, driven dressage



SBS Risky Business driven by Jeff Morse with Jen Morse, World Equestrian Games, 2010

The driver is allowing the horse to use his power and balance to gallop at full speed while still maintaining effective control. The whip, the voice, the allowing reins and the body position and control are all providing forward instruction to the horse in self-carriage. Because the horse is in self-carriage, even at a gallop, he will be responsive enough to change direction immediately and adjust his speed as quickly as he can using his own strength and athleticism to change the momentum of his body weight.

and for almost all aspects of carriage pleasure driving. The primary reason for that prohibition is that they interfere with self-carriage. Horses can readily learn to rely (lean) on them for maintaining their balance. This is not much different than leaning on the hand for support and balance.

The running martingale does have a place in the training of carriage horses if used temporarily for safety and adjusted with care to make a point to the horse when necessary. It may be prudent to use a running martingale for young, inexperienced and problem horses as a safety device that provides the driver with downward leverage on the mouth when a horse tries to physically assume a flight mode frame: head above the bit or neck inverted, for instance. It provides the driver with more physical advantage. When that same horse is travelling as he should, the martingale is properly adjusted to be present but not engaged. It is as if the horse is not wearing one. It can and should be dispensed with when the horse has become reliable and/or has learned his lesson.

The check rein—either side check or over check—is used to restrict the range of motion of the head and neck. There are those who use one with the idea that if a horse is not allowed to lower his head and neck, he cannot buck, kick or bolt. This may be a false sense of security since the very first piece of harness to fail if a driving horse really wants to escape is usually the check rein.

The ears, eyes, and nose are the horse's radar devices used to gather information for making flight mode decisions. They are mounted on the end of the neck so that they can be lifted high to hear, see, and smell better. Horses are wired so that when their

radar is higher, they are more alert, when lowered they are more relaxed. Using a check rein to keep a horse physically closer to flight mode might make sense if one is racing or working for a specific type of animated performance, but perhaps it makes it harder for the horse to guess the right answer if we are asking for a relaxed, mannerly, efficient performance over an extended period of time without tension and resistance.

Horses can be taught not to rely on check reins for their balance and for the check rein to only serve as a reminder of the limitations of his head and neck carriage for a brief period of time. He can travel briefly in self-carriage, but over an extended time and over uneven terrain the horse will tire and will be inefficient in how his body is used and eventually will lean on the equipment for his balance and support. He will then lose self-carriage. He will not be truly carrying himself.

THE CARRIAGE DRIVING FRAME

There is much published and taught about the dressage frame or the hunter frame. The carriage driving frame is the position the driving horse assumes in which he is most efficient performing his job (labor). Several factors come into play that affect how the horse will carry himself: his conformation, strength, athleticism, his understanding of the job, the footing and topography where he is working, his age and development, the job and the gait he is being asked to perform. And, that position will change over time as he develops physically and mentally. A few simple examples: a horse does not carry himself in the same way going uphill as going

downhill. A two-year-old will not carry himself in the same way he will when he is more physically developed and trained at six years old. A horse with short legs, a thick neck, and short poll will not carry himself quite the same as a leggier horse with a graceful arched neck. Morgans, having their characteristic upright neck, will not carry themselves quite the same way as breeds without that characteristic. In short, there is no one single driving frame.

Carriage horses should not be forced to assume a particular driving frame. Carriage driving, unlike show ring driving based on the saddle seat tradition, is not done only on level ground. The efficient frame is different for each gait: the walk, working trot, collected trot, lengthened trot, and so on. The horse must be free to find the position in which he is most efficient for pulling a vehicle at every step. This is not possible with a check rein. They should be guided to the positions we know are generally efficient for them to pull but they should be allowed to discover what is going to work best for them individually. They should be allowed even to lower their head down to the ground in their exploration of what will work best. They won't stay in that position long because it is not efficient and their job will be more difficult. They will find the easy way if allowed to explore.

This does not mean we cannot guide them to positions we know from experience work better. That's called training. Once they understand they are free to find what position works best for any given situation, they will become a wonderful, willing partner because the driver is then freed from the task of guiding them as to how carry themselves and can focus on the major management tasks of when, where, and how fast to go. The horse will find and prefer to operate in self-carriage because it makes their life easier.

EFFICIENCY AS THE REWARD

Fortunately for us, horses generally want to be efficient. Since the dawn of time and up until fairly recently, calories were generally not easy to come by for the horse. The horses that did not make good use of their calories are not with us any more! So, in an evolutionary sense, horses are inherently wired to be efficient. If they are developed through training by allowing them to explore positions that are more or less efficient, they will most often assume the most efficient position in the end because it makes their job easier.

Self-carriage is generally perceived by the horse to be efficient. Any athlete will tell you it is much easier to be balanced and unrestricted while they work. The same holds true for the horse. In the training process, the horse may have to be guided to that experience with enough repetitions in their work that they gain an appreciation for the improvements made to their job. Thankfully, efficiency is the reward to the horse of self-carriage.

BETWEEN THE AIDS

Our definition speaks about the horse carrying itself in balance without support from the hand or the equipment. In other words, the horse operates balanced in all directions and between the aids. For the carriage horse, our available aids are the reins or hand, the voice and the whip and a fourth aid rarely mentioned but no less important than for the rider: body position and control.

The whip is generally a forward aid. It has no capacity to restrain or block forward movement. It can be used to block or initiate lateral movement and is the primary reinforcer of the voice (verbal aids).

The voice is a wonderful tool at the driver's disposal since it has no capacity to physically disrupt the momentum or physical balance of the horse, unlike the rein aid. It merely affects the horse's own response to it. The voice can be a forward aid (the "cluck" being a prime example) or a blocking aid ("whoa") or a reinforcing and maintenance aid ("steady, good boy").

The rein aid is easily understood as a restraining aid, but often not so well understood or applied as a forward and allowing aid. A primary example of this: executing a turn is accomplished more by releasing the outside rein than by pulling on the inside rein. The outside rein must get longer because the outside of the horse's body gets longer as he bends correctly in the turn. Fail to give and offer the outside rein and the horse will be stiff and straight, even counter-bent, going around the turn. In effect, he is taken out of self-carriage and is balancing or leaning on the outside rein and hand. He is restricted from finding his self-balance. Once the horse is convinced the lengthening of the outside rein will happen for him on every turn, he begins to expect it and will reach around the turn to find the bit and balance himself correctly around the turn.

Even though the driver is not in physical contact with the horse (as opposed to a rider), body position and control are similar to these other aids in the sense of blocking and encouraging or allowing desired behavior. The fully-trained carriage horse operates in a balanced way—in self-carriage—while performing in between these forward, restraining, blocking, allowing, and encouraging aids.

The application of the aids must be consistent and clear. They must be used in a manner that makes it easy for the horse to guess the right response. For in the beginning, it is just a guess on their part. All our aids are capable of being applied in a range of quality, basically from light and responsive to harsh and restrictive. If the aids are not clear and consistent, the horse will have a difficult time understanding the spectrum of quality. For example, if I say "whoa" to halt, "whoa" to slow down and "whoa" to stand, there is a good chance the horse will misunderstand at times since the same sound has been used for three different desired responses. If the rein aid is randomly holding back and then at times disconnected, the horse will be easily confused as to the desired result. If an aid is given repeatedly with no response, the aid is no longer effective. It has lost the power to guide the horse to self-carriage.

LET GO

There is much more to self-carriage than we can cover here. As is the case with most all equine subjects, it is a subject both simple and complex. It is difficult to adequately describe, yet easily recognized and appreciated when it is achieved. Without it, the horse will eventually grow resentful and sore. With it, the horse can control his own power and change it on command. Understanding and achieving self-carriage with your horses is a necessary component of good horsemanship. You can improve on it with every horse and for your entire life with horses. How do you get there? Let go. ■