

Driven A Passion for Coaching

Story and Photos by
Lauren R. Giannini



Grooms, horsemen and volunteers worked together to take care of the horses during Saturday's luncheon at Llangollen Farm. There was plenty of fresh water for slaking thirsts. Throughout the coaching weekend, the horses enjoyed carrots, apples and lots of admiration

The National Sporting Library of Middleburg, Virginia harvested the benefits when 27 road coaches and park drags, along with enthusiasts from around the world, gathered for the Coaching Weekend at the Upperville Horse Show grounds on September 28-30. They enjoyed camaraderie, celebration and specially routed daily drives, such as Saturday's al fresco luncheon at Llangollen Farm, owned by Donald and Patricia Brennan. That evening, whips, guests, sponsors and other revelers returned via more modern conveyances to Llangollen for the black tie gala featuring Peter Duchin

and his orchestra.

The main attraction that lures coaching enthusiasts from as far away as Colorado and Florida, Massachusetts and the United Kingdom is the opportunity to drive through the Piedmont countryside. Here, where time seems to stand still against the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains, many roads are still gravel and dirt. The ringing two-beat clip-clop of sixteen steel-shod hooves on pavement changes to a muffled rhythm on gravel where the shooshing of spinning wheels reaches the passengers' ears. Their eyes, about 12-feet off the ground, see the world

from a unique perspective. Guests often use the words "mesmerizing" and "magical" to describe their experience. It's easy to wax poetic. After all, the coaches move at a pace that the mind can most easily absorb.

"This is our big tour de force," said Jacqueline Ohrstrom, co-chair of the event and a whip for nine years. Her late husband George L. Ohrstrom, Jr. co-founded the National Sporting Library with Alexander Mackay-Smith in 1954. "It's really thrilling and a great opportunity to get together with wonderful people. Nothing's prettier than our countryside – it's the ultimate coaching experience. If I

can't be foxhunting, I love to be driving."

This small but growing sport harks back to early nineteenth century England. At the height of coach transportation and mail delivery, approximately 1,000 coaches left London every day for all parts of the country. By the 1830s the newly-invented steam engine eliminated the need for road coaches. Half a century later, affluent gentlemen took up coaching as a sport, driving elegant teams of four hitched to park drags, lighter vehicles with subdued paint schemes, or the larger traditional road coaches.

"When we started, there were only

turned out."

The horses are the heart and soul of coaching. They require many hours of care to keep them fit and healthy. Related chores include polishing the brass, cleaning the harness and maintenance of the vehicles. Staff might include several grooms and a professional horseman. According to coaching enthusiasts, the rewards outweigh all the effort and expense. "I won't ever miss out on a drive if I can possibly help it," said Dr. Gary Montsdeoca, who made the trek from Florida. "My horses are my children – we've been together eight years – and I think they are so beautiful."

That sentiment was echoed in the "Oohs" and "Aahs" of the spectators who flocked to Upperville on Saturday morning for the special parade under the stately oaks of the historic horse show grounds at Salem Farm. The scene harkened back to a Cecil B. DeMille Hollywood extravaganza, complete with elegant teams of four, the sartorial splendor of ladies and gentlemen, and grooms in formal livery. Top-hatted tootlers, often serving as the brakeman, provided music on their long brass horns.

The whips admit that they drive for pleasure, but please do not confuse them with frivolous roués. Coaching encourages



five four-in-hands in the country," said George "Frolic" Weymouth, co-chair of the event, artist, and the impetus behind the Brandywine Conservancy in southeastern Pennsylvania. "Now there are 53 members of the Four In Hand Club. It's wonderful the way it's grown. The quality of the horses is so high, and every team is immaculately

Middleburg artist and horseman Charles Matheson, a former president of the Four In Hand Club, served as whip, and William Staples of The Plains provided the horses hitched to Matheson's Viking road coach.

a sense of responsibility and guardianship of the land to conserve our rural byways and lifestyle. "Everybody who owns property ought to be involved in conservation," said whip Jim Hundley of Richmond. "I've been involved with horses all my life, and my wife Kathie showed horses all of her life. That's how I met my wife. We hunt

Dr. Gary Montsdeoca of Sebring, Florida is both skilled whip and gracious host to guests aboard his 1903 Brewster Park Drag. His honored guests were sponsors Ann Calder and her husband Don.



with Princess Anne and we both drive.”

“I met Frolic Weymouth in the late ‘80s when I was invited to Winterthur Races to join his drive,” Hundley added. “I participated in the first coaching weekend in 2004. Hector Alcalde is one of the key people, along with Frolic, Dick Sanford, and Doug Kemmerer. This year, even though I had an obligation all day Saturday, I paid my fees and went up there to drive Friday and Sunday and enjoy friends I might not see for another couple of years. It’s like going to a family reunion.”

On Sunday’s Rokeby Farm drive, Jim and Kathie’s youngest son Chad Hundley, 24, took over as whip on the return trip from the estate where the late Paul Mellon bred Thoroughbreds, most notably Mill Reef. After a pause for refreshment at a halfway point, each flight departed for the return. A barbecue awaited them and a chance to talk up the likelihood of another great weekend of driving in the glorious Piedmont. After all, in 2004, everyone said that was a once in a lifetime deal.

“We may be the last generation



George “Frolic” Weymouth - whip, artist, conservationist and president of the Four In Hand Club - led the way to Llangollen after Saturday’s parade of coaches. His guest of honor, Mrs. Jacqueline B. Mars, is vice-chair of the National Sporting Library’s Board of Directors and a sponsor of the Coaching Weekend.

able to enjoy coaching on dirt roads,” said Doug Kemmerer, whose wife Queenie also drives a four. Their passion for driving embraces hunting, and their Thoroughbreds go under saddle as well as in harness. Kemmerer’s adamant about getting open lands into conservation easements, and his successes include property owned by a developer. “Trail riding will be more and more difficult because there won’t be any land to do it. Everyone needs to be involved in the preservation and conservation of open lands.”

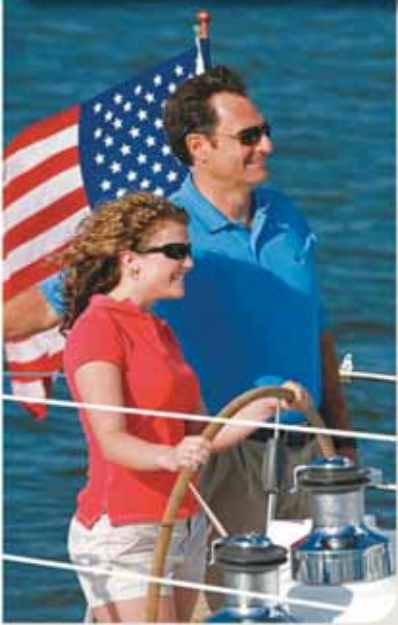
When pressed, the whips tend to point to the result: the perpetuation of nature’s beauty and rural lifestyles and pursuits, especially riding, hunting and coaching. But it’s also the protection of the natural habitats of fauna and flora that attracts city folks to come out for a day of leaf- looking, garden touring or antiquing. Weymouth’s Brandywine Conservancy

serves as proof that land can be saved from urban encroachments.

“I think that coaching makes people more aware of open space, and that helps conservation,” said Weymouth. “They enjoy watching, maybe they go for a drive – the one feeds the other. Coaching is one of the most beautiful ways to see the country– no engines and better than walking, it gives you a different perspective. It’s a tremendous way to enjoy the beauty of nature. I go out of my studio every day to take a drive so I can see the land. I get away from business, and I get to enjoy God’s gifts. It’s also a great thrill when four horses are pulling a heavy coach, and they’re driving beautifully.”




The coaching enthusiast has many choices: some drive a single, pair or team of four for pleasure, while others love to compete. The basic requirements are a love for horses or ponies and the willingness to put in lots of time, hard work and a

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financial investment of some kind. It all depends on how big the dream. You might see yourself with the reins of a team of four laced through your fingers or driving a jaunty pony hitched to a little carriage. The important thing is to enjoy. When it comes to coaching, there's a great deal of truth in that old saying: *Let the good times roll.*

Lauren R. Giannini works and plays in the heart of Virginia's horse country as an equestrian journalist/photographer. For the past 15 years she has been a regular contributor to *In & Around Horse Country*. Her stories and photos can also be found in *Sidelines*, the equestrian news magazine, *Middleburg Life*, and other equine-friendly publications. She is a card-carrying member of the International Alliance of Equestrian Journalists and the American Connemara Pony Society. Her motto: "Write, ride— not necessarily in that order!"



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