

## READINGTON TOWNSHIP

# Riding instructor/trainer takes on Combined Driving events

Combined driving is an equestrian sport that commands a diverse and talented group of horses and drivers.

At a typical three-day combined driving event, three challenges must be faced: a dressage test, marathon course, and cones course. The real challenge lies in finding a horse versatile enough to tackle all three areas. A dressage test requires a responsive, flexible horse with graceful movements. The marathon section demands a horse that must be fit and confident enough for challenging natural and man-made obstacles on cross-country terrain. Finally, a horse will require obedience, talent, and drive to complete a test of precision and timing on a tightly-spaced cones course. While completing these events under saddle could present a difficult challenge, driving requires even more discipline and focus, given that the drivers can only communicate to their horses using reins, whip cues, and vocal commands.

Combined driver Alyssa Weihe has been Pleasant Meadow Farm's barn manager, trainer, and instructor in Readington since April 2007. Also an accomplished rider, trainer, and instructor, Weihe previously assisted a Grand Prix dressage trainer/judge and helped train horses to the Federation Equestrian International (FEI) levels.

Having previously traveled to a World Driving Pony Championship as a groom, Weihe currently competes her 8 year-old Morgan mare, High Country Holly, in combined driving events.

"I became interested in competitive driving while assisting at the Gladstone Combined Driving Event in Fall 2001," Weihe said. "Someone asked me to navigate for them. I had no idea what that meant, but I said I would and hopped in the carriage. We went into the first hazard and the driver asked 'did we get all the gates?' At that point, I had no idea what gates were."

It didn't take Weihe long to pursue driving herself. "I completed my first horse trial, or one day schooling combined driving event, just four weeks after the Gladstone meet," she added. "I was a little nervous and thought that I didn't have a clue. Somehow, I ended up in 2nd place. That following summer, I competed in Lord Stirling's training level com-



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The writer, a resident of Stanhope, owns a Morgan mare. She is also the author of several children's novels, most recently Janie's New Legs and Luck of the Draw, which benefit local charities. She runs the Horse Welfare Organizations website at <http://horsewelfare.8k.com> and can be reached at [lunar\\_aradia@yahoo.com](mailto:lunar_aradia@yahoo.com).

bined driving event. I was very nervous, but thanks to a great horse, I once again placed second."

It wasn't until November 2005 that Weihe found a driving partner in her horse, Holly. "When I first competed, I did a lot of grooming and borrowed horses, carriages, and harness equipment—whatever I could!" said Weihe. "It was great finally having my own driving horse—Holly is a natural competitor."

Like most competitive horses, Holly is kept in excellent shape and works year-round. "To keep my horse fit, Holly is ridden all year long," Weihe said. "She is a great dressage horse and has shown with several junior riders. Holly loves trail rides and is very willing to try new things, including jousting and polocross. She also does light jumping."

Training for combined driving events requires a rigorous schedule. Alyssa added, "About six weeks before an event, I work Holly about a half hour every three days with light conditioning, just trotting. By five weeks out, I'll increase our work time to 35 minutes, both trotting and cantering. At four weeks, our workouts are pushed up to 40-45 minutes, trotting and cantering while working up and down hills. Just two weeks out, we increase our time to 60 minutes. With only a week to go, I try to mix up our workouts—one day for dressage, one day for conditioning, and one fun day working with cones, hazards, polo, or trails. After her conditioning day, Holly gets a much-needed day off."

Not all combined driving events require the same level of work, however. "I generally alter my training schedule depending on where the show is located," said Weihe. "At Lord Stirling, there are less hills and great footing, so Holly doesn't need to be quite as fit. Down in Oak Hill, Va., there are lots of hills and deep mud, so she needs a lot of extra fitness. I always try to keep Holly in shape for the distance she is going, and then some."

For more information on Weihe and Pleasant Meadow Farm, visit [www.pleasantmeadowfarm.com](http://www.pleasantmeadowfarm.com).

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