

## Team Weber: The Optimal Competitors

On the International Stage of the Combined Driving Event (CDE), Chester Weber and His Posse are in the Spotlight

For seven consecutive years, Team Chester Weber has won the USEF National Championship in the crowd-wowing CDE Four-in-Hand. Last year at the Worlds, the flashy dominance of Chester's lead horse Jamaica helped the team take the gold in Dressage, before they went on to take the Silver overall. (See sidebar for more about the remarkable 18-year-old Jamaica.)

Chester, his crew of long-experienced and dedicated horsemen, and his stable of impeccably matched horses have been competing and winning on the international level in four-in-hand for more than a decade. On the walls and shelves of his home base facility at Live Oak Plantation, the evidence is everywhere – trophies, winning cups, sparkling crystal, ribbons of every hue, mostly blue, all lined up row on row.

The barns, the 4500 acres of oak-studded and four-boarded pastures, the training arenas, the miles of private roads: It's an optimal existence for horses and horsemen, and from the camaraderie they display on a fine April day, I'd say Team Weber is enjoying life.

### The Setting

Deep in the impeccably developed land that is Live Oak, Chester's barns are a horseman's dream. In layout, materials, construction and amenities, the facility is optimum but not opulent. As the Team gets ready for a training session that will take these lucky ECers on about a two-hour thrill ride, there is an air of efficiency and expectation about the barn. It seems that everybody, especially the horses, knows what is expected of them and what they are about to do.

### The Horses

With the exception of the new addition, Horus (a French trotter), Chester's horses are all Dutch Warmbloods, aka KWPN, short for the long Dutch name for this tall, powerful, lithe breed. Horus, a former racer, has incredible speed and has been brought in to see if and how he can augment the team in the Marathon and Cones. Slightly shorter and a little different bay than the rest of the Team Horses, the dressage event would not be as apropos as it is for that lead team of almost identically conformed geldings.

Today, Horus is paired for the first time with Boy, an “alpha leader” in the Marathon. The well-seasoned Boy is also Chester's go-to for schooling the rising star Reno, who's in the pasture today remembering how to “just be a horse” as Chester says, after winning his first international competition at last month's Live Oak International (kind of like The Masters of CDE).

As the leaders are backed into place in front of the “wheel” horses, I ask who's that one, pointing to the gleaming bay in the right rear position. We find out it's Jamaica, the USEF Horse of the Year, and we feel like we've met a rock star. He's all business today, though, not much interested in a pat or a pet. Next to him is Grumous, a great all-rounder, who on this day will be the recipient of many verbal cues from Chester, coaxing him to keep up his game and stay on the bit.

Left in the barn until the afternoon session is Senate, Rolex and Para, each outstanding members of Team Weber. I encourage you all to visit Chester's Horses Pages on his website. Every horse on the team has a loving, thoughtful description of their characters, strengths and reasons for being apart of the Team.

### The Human Team

It's apparent that Chester also cherishes his human team - when you do go to his website, you'll see their bios are first up after the home page. They have spent years together, training top talent and competing at the very highest level in a sport that demands teamwork, not only for success, but more importantly, for safety. Nothing like a little world travel and risky business to craft the easy chemistry the friends display today.

Chester has had multiple-time Swedish National Driving Champion Olof Larsson as his stable manager for almost ten years. Besides being navigator for Team Weber, Olof competes with the young star Reno in individual events. Head groom Taren Lester is a Brit who has been training and driving horses most of his life. After many years of experience with some of the top British drivers, Taren was recruited by Olof in 2003. According to his bio, Taren enjoys "schooling horses, braking (sic) them into the carriage and everything else that involves being a part of the driving sport."

Says Chester in an interview posted earlier this year, "There is no doubt in my mind that the team of people around me is the best in the world. They all have their strengths, and .. the synergy [is] where the results come from. We will out-organize anyone on any day. Just try to beat us!"

### The Training

We load up the carriage and at first, I get to ride in the Suicide Seat next to the driver, a position rarely held in competition. The view over the top of the Four-in-Hand causes deja-vu – perhaps a bit of ancient memory? With photographer Amanda and Olof as navigators, Chester walks out the team for maybe a mile as warm-up, winding through the estate to get to the big grassy field with the dressage arena. Trot, fast trot, slow trot, fast trot. Interval training goes on for more than an hour, and the team falls into stride, a fluid cadence upset only rarely with a flick of a whip or coo from Chester to keep them concentrating on the task at hand.

Then it's back to the barn, where Rolex, a real head turner who has won major competitions in every position, is being harnessed for his workout. The Team just schooled is quickly untacked, groomed and put out for a roll and a run-around in their own pristine, deep-grassed paddock. Think horse utopia, people.

### The Driving Sport

It's a small population of teams that have the talent and wherewithal to compete on the world circuit of Combined Driving. Imagine the logistics of packing up at least three carriages, six horses, a couple of navigators and the driver and shipping and stabling them overseas for months at a time. The financial implications suggest that CDE is a richman's sport. In the case of Team Weber, it would appear so – Chester is an heir to the Campbell Soup estate and his family's farm, Live Oak Plantation, is one of their many manses around the world. Live Oak is also a famous and successful thoroughbred facility, and Chester's mother, Charlotte Weber, has been many times named "Thoroughbred Owner of the Year."

But Chester is a professional driver in a growing spectator sport. With his long list of sponsors, my gut is that Chester pays his own bills. He is also a huge influence in the growth and marketing of the sport, and serves on many boards and committees to assure its advancement. Check out the videos on Chester's website and go to [www.horsetv.com](http://www.horsetv.com) for coverage of Live Oak later this month – the marathon footage will blow you away.

Looking to the future, Team Weber is marching strong toward the next World Equine Games in 2010. With two overall wins in two tries so far this year, the momentum is with them. Gold is the goal. Tireless, it seems, is their commitment.

Seven-time Consecutive National Champion and World Silver Medalist Chester Weber feeds grapefruit to a willing Boy W, a nine-year-old Dutch Warmblood.

Romeo is the barn dog and as such, appears to rule the roost. He trotted comfortably a few fathoms in front of the team for most of the training session, which took us through Live Oak, 4500 acres of oak-studded pastures.

Presenting Team Weber: a merry band of men, horses, gear and stable.

#### Jamaica Named USEF Horse of the Year

Jamaica's contribution to the World's win and his long dominance on the National didn't go unnoticed this year, as the 18-year-old Dutch Warmblood took the top honor the sport has for an equine athlete, the USEF Horse of the Year. It's quite a rags-to-riches story for this highly spirited gelding, who as a young teen was once on the way to the slaughterhouse before being rescued and retrained as a carriage horse. [Click here to read more.](#)

#### Inside the Sport of Combined Driving

Elegance, tradition and gritty competition are found in abundance in Combined Driving. Literally a triathlon for horses, Combined Driving is one of the fastest growing equine sports and has exploded in popularity in recent years. Adding to the challenge is the fact that drivers must communicate with their horses only through voice and hands.

In a Combined Driving Event (CDE), horses and drivers compete in three phases: dressage, marathon and cones. Dressage takes place in a manicured arena in which the driver must take his horse(s) through a test which consists of a prescribed sequence of movements. Drivers are judged on their command of the horse, the horse's impulsion, as well as freedom and regularity of gaits. Suppleness and responsiveness are vital.

The fast and furious action of the cross country marathon is largely responsible for the sport's growing interest by the public. The thrill of watching teams of horses tackle challenging obstacles at high speed is a guaranteed crowd pleaser. Competitors cover several miles of course, through open fields and woods, then must negotiate the challenge of hazards built to test both horse and driver. Stamina, courage and agility are the words of the day for this portion of the CDE.

During the cones competition, an obstacle course tests the precise accuracy of drivers who must negotiate a complicated course without disturbing the cones or going off course. Penalties are assessed if balls are knocked off the cones or if the time limit is exceeded.

Within the last decade an ever-widening circle of spectators have been drawn to the sport, thanks to indoor driving exhibitions and carriage racing events which are held at premier horse shows around the world. Chester Weber is among the top drivers who regularly travel and compete in these exhibitions, and has been influential in promoting the events.

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## Observations

- Chester usually works his horses individually or as a pair - rarely does he practice with all four-in-hand. He said that the quality of time spent training and working is better than the quantity of time. He and his staff try to give each horse quality training time at least five days a week, and allows them to rest the other two.
- Weber on verbal cues: Weber has about five verbal cues for his team. It's not so much what you say, but how you say it and the tone you use, Weber said. A rider has so many different cues to give a horse, examples such as leg pressure, contact and verbal. However, a driver is limited in the cues they can use. Examples: constant contact with the bridle, verbal cues and a whip.
- One thing that Weber and his staff insist upon from the horses is respect and obedience. Many of the carriages are not made to break away when put in a bind and an upstart horse can cause disaster Weber not only asks his horses to respect both himself and his staff, but also each other. Safety is so important when the team is at an event with so many other horses and carriages. It is not worth the risk to put others in danger because a horse, no matter how talented do not have respect and obedience, Weber said.
- Currently at his farm he has a young horse (Reno) that he started working with and has him well on his way (like a win at Live Oak), but he has turned him out to pasture to let all of the new training and competing settle and marinate. He does not want to have a youngster become overwhelmed or burned out before he is mature.
- When training a horse to pull a carriage, Weber and his team start using a long line, from there advance to pulling an old tire and so on. If the horse is okay with these things, he slowly eases them into pulling a cart.

By Amanda Burelson