

Live Oak: Battle of the Fittest

This year recognized more than just driving skill as veterinarians sought to choose the most physically fit horses in the event.

by Tracy Williams

Glorious weather heralded in this March's Live Oak Combined Driving Event, held on the beautiful 4,500 acres of Charlotte Weber's Live Oak Plantation in Ocala, Florida. Live Oak CDE is one of only two international driving events held in the United States sanctioned by the Federal Equestrian International, and the collection of competitors vie for the best display of grace, athleticism, precision - and physical prowess.

A Different Competition

In addition to division awards, Live Oak also doles out accolades for the fittest horse and fittest team in the event. This year, Jack Lowe, DVM, had the difficult task of ferreting out the fitness award winners from amid many horses in top form. The choice is based on each horse's response to a physically challenging cross country course filled with difficult hazards; veterinarians are stationed along the course to monitor each horse's temperature, pulse and respiration rates. Veterinarians choose the fittest athletes from the information they glean from watching the horses complete the hazards and monitoring how quickly their rates descend to normal. "We are looking for the most relaxed, brightest horses with the lowest temperatures and whose heart rates and respiratory rates recover the fastest - basically, which ones are physically ready to go out and do the same things again," said Dr. Lowe.

This year, Dr. Lowe sifted through fierce competition to give Chester Weber's four-horse team of Warmbloods a fitness award. The second, he gave to Terry Roberts' Haflinger, Whatsup. "That pony just stood out to me," said Dr. Lowe. "He looked like he had just gone for a walk in the park rather than complete the hazards course."

Terry Roberts and Whatsup

Terry Roberts has been around various horses of various breeds and disciplines since grade school. He began driving about five years ago and started combined driving a year ago, and for this sport shift, he chose to work with Haflingers because of their attitude and personality. "They are kind horses," he said.

Whatsup is a 5-year-old Haflinger that Terry has driven for about a year. Live Oak was only his third driving event, and while he didn't win his division, he did capture Dr. Lowe's attention to claim the fitness award. Terry credits the honor to his rigorous training and nutrition programs. Although he is still fairly new to the sport, Terry prefers to do all his own

training. His routine varies speed and distance for a well-rounded workout. "With any good exercise, you are breaking it up and not doing the same thing every day," Terry says. "This way you are working different muscles or working the same muscles in different ways, and it keeps your horse from getting bored and sour."

Terry has given the same thought and attention to his feeding program; he has worked diligently with Seminole nutrition consultants to develop the perfect program for his herd of horses. He feeds Whatsup Seminole Perfect 12 because the higher fat and lower starch contents give calories without hyping him up on sugar. "Feeding starch gets your horse mentally hot, and at that point, you can't do anything with him," says Terry. In addition, he provides plenty of roughage with coastal hay and ensures adequate minerals with a Grass Balancer Mineral Block.

Chester Weber and his Four-Horse Team

Internationally acclaimed driver Chester Weber grew up on Live Oak Stud, the renowned Thoroughbred farm in Ocala, Florida that hosts the annual combined driving event. He began his driving career with Clydesdales and carriages but then shifted to combined driving, and his current stable of top European Warmbloods competes at the highest level on an international scale.

This year his cross country team - Snoopy, Jamaica, Senate and Grumus - contributed to an overall division win and garnered the fittest team title. "Both the fitness award and the division win can be attributed to our intense training regimen and our careful nutrition program," says Chester.

Live Oak International CDE winner, Chester Weber wins the USEF National 4-in-hand Championship and the Jack Lowe fitness award for the best conditioned team of horses. Photo by Branam's Photography. Chester's horses have a strenuous six-day work week, and he does virtually all the training himself. Two days a week he works his horses individually with long-lining and riding, and the other four days he works them in teams. Once again, a well-rounded education keeps the horses physically fit and mentally prepared.

Nutritionally, Chester works with SPILLERS while he competes in Europe and with Spillers/Seminole while in the United States for a consistent and quality diet for his champion horses. He feeds a combination of SPILLERS Feeds and a little ground flax or corn oil to promote a shiny hair coat. In addition, he uses Cosequin® products for joints, Farriers Formula® products for hooves, and Succeed for gastrointestinal tracts - leaving no stone unturned for the benefit of his horses' health.

Tracy Williams, a native New Mexican, recently graduated from Colorado State University with degrees in both Equine Science and Journalism