

Weber Wonder

Chester Weber, the youngest person to be named a member of the United States Equestrian Team, continues to excel in international combined driving competitions.

By Summer Best

Splash! Turn! Yell! Look! Faster! Hazard coming up! Lean! Water! Forward!

Ears perked up, muscles tense, eyes peering toward each obstacle. Four horses straining against the harness, pointing their toes as they pull a four-wheeled sturdy carriage through an impossibly exciting course. Spectators cheering. Flags flying.

It was a vim-and-vigor, adrenaline-filled, fast and furious day of marathon driving, and Chester Weber, driving his four-in-hand team of horses last fall for the United States Equestrian Team at the World Equestrian Games in Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, was at the top of his game. After the three phases of combined driving competition, which included the exciting marathon, dressage and cones, Chester was helping lead his team to a top spot in the competition. Chester Weber

When the scores were tallied, the USET's driving squad of Chester, alongside teammates Tucker Johnson and Jimmy Fairclough, cinched the silver medal – the first time a U.S. driving team won a medal at the WEG.

Later, after catching his breath and having a chance to consider the impact of that momentous win, Chester explained the glory of the day. "Winning the team silver was planned luck," he says. "It was a lot of hard work over many years, which resulted in the three of us being able to step up on that podium that most drivers only are able to climb on in their dreams."

Back to Serenity

The next week, Chester was back on his home turf at Live Oak Plantation in Ocala, Florida. The morning, quiet and still, was a far cry from the international buzz in Spain. Crowds were gone.

Chester strolled about his stable, surveying a farrier and groom at work as he simultaneously returned phone calls via cell phone. Morning sunshine streaked through the majestic oaks around the farm.

Two of Live Oak's best driving horses, Maximo and Palle, watched their master as he readied them for a morning drive. Sabina, a Swiss native who works as groom for Live Oak, helped hook the horses to the carriage,

and the drive soon began down quiet roads. Maximo and Palle leaned on the harness, anxious to see around the next curve of the road. Chester quieted them with his hands and his relaxed, familiar voice, asking them to “whoooooaaaa” each time they hesitated or became edgy.

Driving Along

At 27, Chester is a young competitor by nearly all driving standards, but he’s not a new face in the game. He’s been holding the reins since about fifth grade, when, almost on a whim, he began driving a Clydesdale.

“Some people told me I was good at it,” he now says, tongue-in-cheek and with a sheepish grin. “I think they might have been simply humoring me.”

Either way, it opened a can of worms. Chester, who had older siblings already riding hunter-jumpers and playing polo, resolved to excel in his own sect of the industry.

“Driving is exciting to me because it is absolutely impossible to be perfect,” Chester says today. “All your horses have to be perfect at exactly the same time...it’s just not possible.”

So it’s the challenge that gets under his skin and pushes him to perpetually improve. That, and the fact that Chester, who dreamed as a boy of becoming a jockey, just plain loves horses.

“Horses are the most deadly disease,” he says wryly. “You literally take them with you to your grave.”

After experimenting with the Clydesdale, Chester began driving a Warmblood in 1988, then from 1993 to 1999 he took up a highly successful pairs driving career, becoming, at 18, the youngest member to ever join the United States Equestrian Team.

“I had a lot of early success in the states,” he says humbly, especially considering how from 1997 to 1999, he made history by winning 12 consecutive advanced combined driving events.

“Some people say I’m lucky,” he says. “I disagree. Success is planned, and you make your own luck. Winning 12 in a row is not luck. It just means you probably got up a little earlier than the other guys.”

Chester is the youngest driver ever to qualify for a World Pairs Driving Championship, which occurred at the 1993 World Pairs Driving Championship in Gladstone, New Jersey. At the 1997 Pairs Driving World Championship in Riesenbeck, Germany, he was a member of the sixth-

place USET squad. Chester Weber

In 1999, he finished among the top 10 in the World Pairs Championship held in Keckemet, Hungary, where he was second in the dressage class and eighth overall (the best finish for a U.S. driver), which led the team to a fifth-place standing.

Still, those feats pale in comparison to the team silver and his individual fifth-place finish at the 2002 WEG in Spain. In addition, Chester was the only driver to represent the U.S. during the 2001-2002 World Cup Driving season, and he was recently ranked fifth in the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) Top Drivers Award for the 2002-2003 season.

Chester's future plans include working with four of the five horses that competed at the WEG, and he intends to win an individual medal in Hungary at the next World Championships in 2004.

"For us to win another team medal, that is certainly in the cards," he says.

Portable Office

Lest you think Chester's only job is to drive beautiful horses around the countryside all day, think again. A self-proclaimed entrepreneur, he's got a hand in several additional ventures.

Like Robin sports drink. Haven't heard of it yet? You will. Robin (www.robinbrand.com), a high-protein sports energy drink for musclemen and moms, due to hit grocery shelves any day, was launched in early 2002 by Chester and some of his pals. By October 2002, shipments of Robin had made their way to Japan.

"We've already got several college football teams on board with Robin, like Rutgers," says Chester, who has a degree in hotel administration from Cornell.

Then there are Chester's horse-trading ventures – tasks that keep his cell phone buzzing every hour.

"I try to trade at the top of the market," he explains. "I like to stick with super-high quality. I show a lot, so I see a lot of horses. That's fun for me. My barn manager, Olaf, and I work hard to make this all work."

In addition, Chester has signed on to coach the Canadian Singles Driving Team, which will take several weekends this year, and he also teaches individuals to drive at his place in Ocala. Plus, he's happy to promote his sport through community events and demonstrations.

"I'm a believer in 'What comes around goes around,' so I don't mind helping out when I can," he says.

A final sideline that keeps Chester from growing bored is his personal

consulting business, which he unofficially calls “family wealth management.”

“ I studied some time back that there are wealthy families with children who have no idea how to manage their money,” he explains. “I’ll go and spend a weekend with a family, talk to their kids, and help them understand how to preserve the wealth that they will inherit. It works because kids are at a stage where they won’t listen to their parents’ advice, but they’ll listen to me because I’m not that much older.”

Trust the Driver

Chester exudes confidence and charisma, which is perhaps why his horses trust him to take on the demands of international four-in-hand combined driving competition. One moment, he asks them to zip through a marathon montage of hazards at high rates of speed, and the next day, he expects them to regain their aristocratic appeal as he guides them through a controlled, sensitive dressage test.

“They have to want to do this,” he explains, using his voice to calmly encourage his horses forward, then assure them of safety should they spook at something on the roads.

Chester is competitive, no doubt. He’s got grit and tenacity, and he shies away from monotony. And he’s got the trophies to show for it. But despite the accolades, this 27-year-old, tall, tidy bachelor will tell you that one of the best reasons to drive is because it’s a fun and relaxing sport.

“ I’m fortunate that my work is with horses,” he says Chester. “I’m a competitor, and we work to win, but more and more, what’s exciting is leaving the stable at 7:30 or so with a young one. What a beautiful way to start the day.”

Then he pauses and glances toward town. Morning traffic is already congested on the highways. He can’t help but grin.

“ Sure beats the dreaded daily commute to the office.”

For more information, including Chester’s competition schedule and additional biographical data, visit his Web site at www.chesterweber.com. Learn more details from his equine nutrition program at www.seminolefeed.com or www.ecmagazine.net.