



~ CARRIAGE DRIVING ~

THE SHOW CO-OP— COMMUNITY, COLLABORATION, AND COMPETITION

Once lone New England carriage competitors have pioneered a collective approach to horse show participation. They experience benefits in and out of the ring.

Conversation fills the air as you round the bend at the horse show stabling and encounter the beehive of activity at the Show Co-Op's stalls. The group of carriage competitors stable and work together at the New England Regional, Connecticut, and Massachusetts Morgan Horse Shows, under the management of Elsie Rodney of Stow, Massachusetts. The camaraderie and genuine friendship among the group demonstrate the feeling many exhibitors seek through equestrian sports, namely that they are having fun and enjoying time together. Moreover, the group's collaboration and partnership in the Show Co-Op is a template others can use at horse shows.

Elsie and a cadre of supporters devote time and energy to make the Show Co-Op work. "I want to keep that division going, people enjoying the horse shows, and getting together. We support each

other throughout the year doing other things too. We want that sense of community and camaraderie among Morgan people, we have it in the show ring and want it in the carriage division, too.

We don't want people to feel alone; we want the Morgan world friendly and helping each other and that's why I've put a lot of energy into it."

Carriage driving is steeped in history and tradition. The elegant carriages, either antique or replicas, beautiful harnesses and traditional outfits of the whip and any passengers that harken to a bygone era, and the skills needed to navigate an obstacle course or complete driven dressage are on par with any other discipline. Morgan horse shows include sections for Carriage-Driven Dressage, Carriage-Obstacle Driving, and Carriage Pleasure Driving. Obstacles include timed classes, fault and out, pick your own route, and double jeopardy. Reinsmanship, turnout, and a working class

By Stacey Stearns

ABOVE: Members of The Show Co-Op at New England Regional 2024 (photo © Lauren DuPont).



CO-OP CANDIDS

1. Elsie Rodney hanging drapes at The Co-Op's stalls at New England Regional; 2. the group works and socializes together; 3. Fellow Co-Op member Doug Coursey accompanied Barbara Estey, who was enjoying competing at Grand National, a bucket list item; 4. Andrea Pianka with co-pilot Elsie Rodney.

are the primary pleasure classes. The Carriage Dog class, held in the main show ring, is a favorite of exhibitors and spectators.

The activity at the Show Co-Op stalls subsides as each horse is hooked to its carriage and the group heads to the carriage competition ring for the day's classes. Many exhibitors have stabled with the Show Co-Op since it started 16 years ago. Its alums and current members include Barbara Estey, Pam Sorton, Amy Severino, Cheryl Pratt Rivers, Victoria Surr, Gina Handy, Doug Coursey, Joann Doucette, Kelly Pesek, Christina Pierce, and Marlies Stoddard, among others. Barbara was the catalyst for the idea, while Elsie is the fearless leader (as Barbara calls her) who holds them all together.

AN IDEA IS BORN

The Show Co-Op started organically in 2008. Barbara, who lives in North Springfield, Vermont, grew up riding and participating in 4-H. She graduated from a pony to a Morgan at age 10 and was hooked on the breed after visiting "The National"—what is now, of course, the New England Morgan Horse Show—with her 4-H leader. Years later, Barbara discovered carriage driving. She was running a 4-H clinic at the Green Mountain Horse Association in South Woodstock, Vermont, and Robin Groves came to do a carriage driving demonstration. "What she did with the pair of horses was captivating, it looked like so much fun; as I aged, it became a

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CO-OP COMPETITORS

1. Kelly Pesek & Moses Meadow; 2. Barbara Estey & Meadowmere Storm Watch; 3. Cheryl Pratt Rivers & Meritage River's Promise GCH; 4. Andrea Pianka & Elsie Rodney with JVT's Passion; 5. Amy Severino & Silver Lake In Line (photos © Shawn Tinkham Photography, Lisa Cenis, Denlore).

natural progression to carriage.”

Barbara finally realized her dream of showing in the carriage division at the New England Morgan Horse Show, decades after the trip with her 4-H leader. Showing on your own is challenging though, and as she watched the other carriage competitors she noticed many amateur carriage drivers with Elsie Rodney Stables. “I was looking for the umbrella of support that a bigger barn can provide,” Barbara says. “I was going on my own and new to competing at Morgan shows and thought things would be smoother with a tribe around me. I’m fully capable of taking care of myself, I just needed an umbrella, and Elsie looked like she would be a good one.”

Barbara didn’t know Elsie before asking to stable with her, but figured they could see how it went and make it work for one show. “It turned out we became good friends too,” Barbara adds. Elsie had six to eight horses from her training business at every show then, and mentions, “It didn’t take me long to figure out she was more helpful to us than we were to her, and Barbara’s a blast to have around.”

The Show Co-Op solidified when Elsie retired from training, sold her barn, and moved to a lake house in Stow, Massachusetts. She thought about all the amateur carriage drivers, and how it’s always better to have someone else around when you’re hooking a horse. The Co-Op expanded beyond Barbara as Elsie organized the group at those three New England horse shows. Although it’s

mostly comprised of amateurs, a few professionals are part of it too. Cheryl Pratt Rivers of River Echo Morgans in Stockbridge, Vermont, is a long-time friend of Elsie’s and has attended or shown at the New England Morgan Horse Show for the past 60 years. She started stabling with the Co-Op about six years ago at UVM Tirzah’s (UVM Equity x UVM Devana) first show.

“It’s like going home. Some of the people involved in the Show Co-Op now were involved with Morgans when I was young,” Cheryl says. “Barbara Estey, I’ve known her forever and remember watching her and her sister as a kid. The Show Co-Op has meals together, it’s like going home and getting together with friends. And we have new people, we share our expertise with them and encourage them.”

THE CO-OP MODEL

The Co-Op model thrives on collaboration, sportsmanship, a love of the Morgan and carriage driving, and a genuine enjoyment of each other’s company. Each Co-Op member orders their own stall when completing their entries, some also order a tack stall. Elsie orders enough tack stalls for the rest of the group to share, and then bills everyone for their portion. She sets up a dressing room, hangs harness hooks, and helps coordinate schedules.

“You have to have someone that’s the anchor, who is ultimately responsible. In our case, it’s Elsie. You can build your team from there,” Cheryl says of the Co-Op model.

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CO-OP COMPETITORS

1. Dr. Pam Sorton & Bay Run Encore GCH; 2. Doug Coursey & San Andreas Bay; 3. Victoria Surr & FR Freedom First; 4. Marlise Stoddard & Triumph Is Bittersweet (photos © Lisa Cenis, Kim Oplotnik, Denlore).

The people and horses are all comfortable together. Dr. Pam Sorton, a veterinarian from Brattleboro, Vermont, is usually the first to arrive at the show each morning. Everyone leaves a flake of hay and morning grain out, and Pam feeds all the horses. Early on, Amy Severino showed up with a pan of brownies one afternoon, and soon, everyone started bringing a dish to share while visiting in the evenings. The group watches each other's classes, cheer each other on, and enjoy watching classes in the main ring together.

"We all are separate owners/riders and I'm a trainer, but most are amateurs," Cheryl says. "We stable together and look out for each other in all different ways, topping water buckets, feeding, help someone that's alone hook, and we talk to each other about scheduling."

Taking care of each other is one of the driving forces for the Show Co-Op. "We have never shown with the Co-Op, but Elsie helps me as my co-pilot," driver Andrea Pianka says. She appreciates the cooperative model, saying "...as an observer, they are a fun group who have a blast, helping each other and supporting one another."

Elsie adds, "I ride with Andrea Pianka, and she always goes last for driven dressage, with Cheryl going second to last. Cheryl always has her horse stand and wait during Andrea's dressage test so that Andrea's horse isn't left on his own. Victoria Surr retired to Martha's Vineyard. She doesn't compete anymore, but still comes to the shows and helps out, which is really appreciated." In a similar

theme, Barbara shares that the support of the Co-Op last year and this year helped her continue showing.

Naturally, the group addresses challenges, from figuring out which horses stable well next to each other to sharing space and how the flow works among Show Co-Op members to get everyone and their horses out to the same class. The group juggled logistics and figured out how to make it work. Different personalities sometimes cause conflicts, but the Show Co-Op seems immune to this, and even had some friendly competition in the Carriage Dog class for a few years.

"There are personalities involved, and you have to figure out how to work together; some people are more competitive than others," Barbara says. "We've figured out how to work with all the different personalities; we have a great time and welcome new people too."

Carriage driving competitions are as much about competing with yourself as they are competing against other horses and drivers. "The great thing about the Co-Op is there really is a lot of competing against ourselves as individuals and we are all happy when each other does well," Cheryl adds.

DRIVE ON

Participating in the Show Co-Op enhances the intrinsic rewards that naturally come with equestrian sports and horse shows. For Cheryl, "... seeing a new person get confidence and energy and

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CARRIAGE DOGS

Dogs love riding in carriages (right photo © Shane Shifflet).

being able to help a new person do that,” is the most rewarding.

“I enjoy the company, cones, and Morgans and love to go in the stands and watch when I’m not showing,” Barbara says. “The friends I’ve made is the biggest surprise, these people have become good friends and I’m so happy to see them at shows.”

The rewards for Elsie are in both the Co-Op itself and the people and horses who are part of it. “Watching people have fun is rewarding, as is having the Show Co-Op slowly get better and now it’s become a thing. Watching the horses get better is one of the most fun things too; watching horses and people work together. I also love watching people connect and enjoy each other—this is a holiday for most of us.”

The community and camaraderie extend throughout the year too. Barbara had a bucket list item of going to the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show® and finally checked that off her list last year. She and Elsie went to Oklahoma City for the show, and Doug Coursey, a fellow Co-Op member, was competing. Barbara’s experience was even better when she drove with Doug during his double jeopardy class, a two-driver class.

Cheryl Rivers and Gina Handy both bring junior exhibitors to the shows now, with the youth showing their respective horses. The junior exhibitor infusion excites the other Show Co-Op members, as they want to see more young people in the division and showing horses.

“I have a young rider, Eva Whittaker, with me,” Cheryl says. “She’s 12 now and has been participating since she was ten. All of the Co-Op members were so welcoming and encouraging to her and it’s wonderful. This is her third-year riding dressage, she helps

them, and they’ll all be there helping and cheering for her too.”

Carriage is also a viable second career for Morgan show horses, as is evidenced by the horses of several Show Co-Op members. “When your park or pleasure horse is done, does he need to go to pasture or can he have another career?” Elsie asks. “The horses enjoy going through a set of cones and obstacles; the average Morgan loves that stuff because they like to go fast and are handy.”

A collaborative group like the Show Co-Op continues evolving and improving. Everyone is in the same classes, and it can still be challenging to get all the horses out at once. They are considering hiring a professional groom for future shows, especially at Connecticut and Massachusetts, the shows where Elsie is also coordinating the division and unavailable to help.

“It’s grown and become more, I think people are looking forward to spending time with others and having help,” Elsie says. “We have two people coming in that have never shown at a Morgan show and are looking forward to learning. Our members share information too,

it’s not about beating anyone, it’s just about learning and having a good time.”

The carriage driving division at these three New England shows is thriving, thanks in part to the Show Co-Op, but more than that, it’s the community among its members that ensures they have help, learn, and enjoy the experience. Their model is one that other equestrians can replicate, whether in carriage driving or another discipline.

“It’s good company and that’s always important—it’s important to have fun,” Barbara concludes. “It’s us, we’re a special group and have made a connection; perhaps we’re a model for others.” ■



Co-op members collectively waiting for their turn on course.