

## Summer Driving Camp is a big hit for students and parents alike By: Jim & Christi Humphrey

Searching for a different kind of summer camp for your child? This past summer my son Sam tried his hand at carriage driving camp for two weeks at the Carriage Barn in Newton, N.H., and came away with a love of the sport and some proudly-won prizes, earned in driving competition.

Some background; Sam has been involved with horses ever since his aunt chucked her city ways and bought a farm in North Sandwich, N.H. He learned the basics of riding, grooming, and cleaning up after two wonderful beasts – Beau and Gabe, by name – who had taken up residence in the paddock there. In order to improve his riding skills, though, my wife Christi and I knew he would need to ride more regularly, and started looking for a place to take regular lessons.

That's how Sam came to the Carriage Barn initially – to participate in their therapeutic riding program. Sam has a condition called 'low muscle tone', which impedes the ability of muscles to react quickly. This makes ball games frustrating for him, especially when his 10-year-old friends are focusing on soccer, baseball, hockey, and such to show their mettle.

As is well-known in equestrian circles, riding is an excellent sport for gaining strength and athletic confidence. Professional therapeutic instruction teaches students how to balance and move around on top of the horse, working trunk muscles. Many exercises require standing in the stirrups for an extended period, "burning" thighs and calves. Even grooming the animal prior to the ride can be demanding work – heavy hooves have to be picked up and cleaned, high manes have to be combed briskly and thoroughly.

Acquiring strength and balance increases a student's physical confidence. When that has been demonstrated, the teacher begins to let the rider take more control over directing the horse in the ring or on the trail, helping to improve the student's confidence in his judgment.

Sam started riding at the Carriage Barn in November 2003. In the spring, Christi approached Ann Miles, owner of the Carriage Barn and director of the camp, to ask whether Sam would be suited to the driving sessions she had planned for August. Ann began spending some time working with Sam to gauge his physical readiness for driving, his level of interest, and whether she thought he would be able to succeed at it. Through some of these early "tests", Ann and Sam developed a relationship that would help to make driving camp a success for him. Ann became Sam's mentor, providing advice and support and watching over Sam's progress, encouraging Sam when things were new or difficult.

One of the things Ann stressed to Sam is that a driver needs to know how to work with his equipment. Sam enjoyed the "hardware" part of driving as much as the "horseware". In fact, this may be one of the most attractive aspects of the sport for boys – the chance to speed around on your own set of wheels. Sam would show Christi and me how to get in and out of the carriage, where to step and not to step, where the brake was, the differences in the many carriages lined up against the barn wall, and all the other technical idiosyncrasies of these "hot rods". Seeing this gave his over-protective parents the assurance that Ann would teach him well and safely, and we could start "letting go" of Sam's reins.

Luckily, Sam was just tall enough to reach the brake, and based on her early work with him, Ann felt he could attend the August camp sessions. He would be the only "first-timer" there –the other attendees had come in prior years, and most were at least a few years older.

The camp runs Monday to Friday, with the first 4 days devoted to learning all aspects of driving, and Friday being used for competition in dressage and obstacles. Even though the classes build to this final test against other participants, the focus very much is on teamwork. Students help prepare the horses together every day, grooming, harnessing, hitching them to the carriage.

Competition day is where all the hard work, team and individual, shows. Dressage starts at 10 in the morning, with the afternoon reserved for the obstacles trials. A driving judge scores the events and reviews the results with each driver. A competition photographer captured all the action (and even some of the sitting around!).

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Sam's day reflected all the agony and joy of athletics. His horse, a mini named Joe, was a reluctant 'stopper', which impaired his dressage scores. But if Joe had unreliable brakes, he had a speedy little motor, helping Sam sweep to top place in the cones.

When it comes to actually instilling knowledge about the sport in their charges, Ann and Mary Gray, the driving instructor, know each student is an individual, and adjusts for the fact that each one might learn differently. The campers learn life lessons, not only how to drive a carriage. At the camp, children are respected for the gifts they bring and are treated as equals. Ann and Mary share their passion for and expertise in carriage driving with the campers. The children come away with respect for their animals, belief in their own abilities and great stories to share with friends back at school.

Sam ended up attending a second week of camp as well. In October he traveled to the Maine Carriage Days at Skyline Farm in North Yarmouth, Maine, where he picked up a first-place ribbon in the junior cones competition.

The final result for our family? A boy with a new sport to excel in, increased self-confidence and several new meaningful relationships. If that sounds like the camp experience you are looking for with your child, give it a try!