

Sleighting Safety *Especially For The First Time*

Sleighting looks very much like pulling a wheeled vehicle but there are crucial differences. It's not unusual to find this out a little too late!

~ **Have experienced help with you the 1st time you hook a horse to a sleigh!** ~

Not necessarily in order of importance:

1. Use a kicking strap. Wear a helmet. Self explanatory!
2. A Horse's metabolism functions most efficiently at about 23 degrees, so all systems are firing well when you are sleighting. This translates into quicker reaction time on their part. The horse you drive calmly and relaxed in July may be a lot sharper and fresher in December. For the first time hooking, if possible, drive or ride your horse indoors or ride them outside before you hook them to a sleigh and assess their energy level and focus. Best for the 1st time that they be a little tired and the session rather short and uneventful.
3. The drivers and handlers will not be as nimble dressed in heavy boots, thick gloves, and heavy clothing as they would be in July, dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, sneakers and regular driving gloves. Think about this when you dress for hooking the first time. Reins tend to get a little slipperier when your gloves are cold and may have a little snow on them. I like to use Zilco textured reins for sleighting to improve my grip. I find Beta reins get quite slippery with a little snow in the air. Leather reins work well too. Your regular driving reins may be a little short for the sleigh as you will tend to sit further and lower behind your horse.
4. The footing is slippery and may be deep....for both horse and handlers. This affects your ability to move around the horse if things start to escalate towards trouble. Best to have traction devices on your horse's feet for sleighting. Discuss this with your farrier as this is one of the biggest compromise situations in shoeing. You want extra traction for your horse when you sleigh, but you may only sleigh once or twice a month. Do you want your horse to wear traction 24/7 just for this one time work? OTOH, you don't want him slipping and hurting himself when he does work. Screw calks may help with the flexibility of your options. Snowball pads really help.
5. Seating in sleighs is generally lower for everyone than wheeled vehicles. This reduces your field of vision and makes getting OUT of the vehicle quickly a little more difficult. HOWEVER: the 1st time you hook, it is best to get in the sleigh before moving off than it is to try to walk beside/behind the horse while he is hooked. If he starts to run off, you will not be able to run with him in your heavy boots thru deep and slippery snow.
6. Runners will often stick to the ground before you get into the sleigh after you have your horse hooked. He may not be used to the extra effort required to break it loose, or to the sounds the runners will make on ice and snow. After you have him hooked, before you get in, have a header holding the horse and break the runners free by moving the sleigh, then get in. Start off slightly on the diagonal; this will also help break the runners free. A little candle wax on the runners helps with this. Rust tends to form on them when not being used. Best to get this off first. Dragging it for a short distance on pavement or thru road sand will do this pretty quickly.
7. Sleighs don't go backwards very well. Carry a whip. For the 1st hooking, put a halter on over

the bridle and have a helper up front with a lead on the horse.

8. Turning is different and generally requires bigger, sweeping arcs than with a wheeled vehicle. Crusty snow is more hazardous when turning. For 1st hooking, don't try it in a small enclosed area where you have to be constantly turning. I like to use a more or less level field, although I once hooked Morgan mare that I later found out had gone over a waterfall in a cart. She took off with me in the sleigh and I just pointed her up a big hill in about a foot and a half of powder snow...about half way up the hill she started to tire out but I pushed her on all they way to the top...she never bolted off with me again. I got lucky.

9. Sleigh bells are fun but your horse first needs to get used to wearing them. Hang them on his stall door for a while so he gets used to the sound. Ask him to wear them while being ridden or driven before you hook him to a sleigh. And keep it simple: don't use them the 1st time you hook to a sleigh.

10. Plan your route in advance. There are things hidden under the snow and the uneven footing can affect the confidence of the horse. Traction devices on the horse obviously improve his traction but don't help when they stumble over something buried in the snow. The first few times you hook a horse new to sleighing, know for sure what lies underneath in your way. You can't turn 180 degrees very easily in a narrow road. Don't get trapped having to cross areas without any snow, like plowed pavement or plowed dirt roads. If your horse is experienced he may cross these short distances ok, but don't try it the first time out

11. Snow conditions are not always the best for sleighing. Deep powder is wonderful, but a little tiring on the horse; packed but not icy snow makes the job a lot easier; Ice crusted, deeper footing is dangerous when it comes to turning the runners and very hard on the horse breaking thru and working against the crust; heavy wet snow makes pulling harder than light fluffy snow. The first time you hook, try for several inches of light snow or nicely packed but not icy footing.

12. Your horse may get tired faster than he did in July. Depending on what you do with your horse, he may have lost some fitness from his peak competition condition by the time sleighing conditions arrive; the job of pulling may just be physically more demanding because of weather/footing conditions.

13. Very Very cold air may be detrimental to your horse's lungs....not so such because of its temperature, but because it is so dry. Horses work hard pulling a sleigh and are apt to breath very deeply, pulling very dry cold air deep into their lungs. I have never had a problem with this that I am aware of but I can see how a horse could get hurt. OTOH, when it's very very cold, it's not the best time to be out there sleighing anyway. Don't pick the coldest day of the year to hook your horse for the first time. For more on airway damage from cold dry air see:

http://www.ivis.org/special_books/Lekeux/davis/chapter_frm.asp?LA=1

"Airway Injury by Cold Air" is down the page a bit. I thought this was particularly interesting about horses that survive at minus 53 degrees Celsius :

<http://www.arcticphoto.co.uk/stories/horses/horses.htm>

14. You are right to be concerned about the condition of your old sleigh. Dry rot can hide in critical places, especially under shaft wraps. Have someone who knows what they are doing look your sleigh over. You don't want to discover a weak spot while driving.

Note from the Author:

If you have *any* questions, suggestions or comments on this material, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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