

Training starts with driver walking behind horse

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with legs and seat, driving is like switching from standard to automatic transmission.

As Marg clucked and slapped the rein gently on Alex's rump asking him to walk, my legs unconsciously squeezed and my behind sank deeper in the buggy seat.

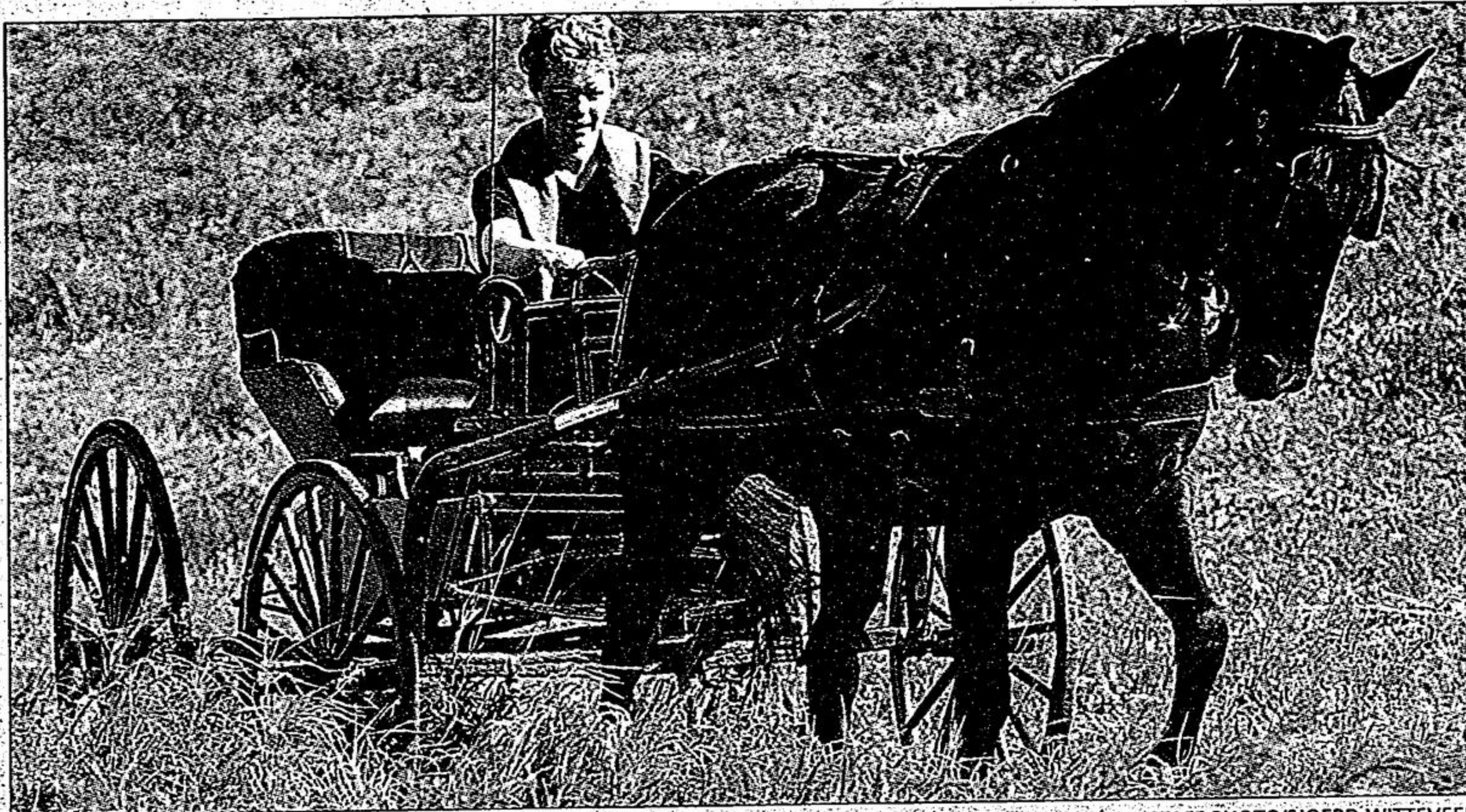
Drivers rely on voice commands and "feeling" the horse's mouth with the reins. Like riders, good drivers have "soft hands", enabling messages between 1,500-pound horse and puny human to zing invisibly along the reins in mutual understanding and respect.

While most horses accept a rider, not as many are keen on a pesky contraption rattling behind them. Teaching a horse to drive starts with a trainer walking behind, practising voice and hand commands. A buggy or carriage with is slowly introduced.

In Canada, drivers compete in pleasure driving or combined driving with single horses, pairs or a four-horse team. Combined driving has three phases. In dressage, horses are judged on gaits, impulsion and presentation.

The marathon phase requires drivers to travel as much as 27 kilometres across various terrain with hazards such as bridges and streams. The third phase has drivers twist and turn between cones with balls on top. If a ball falls, penalties are incurred.

As we trundled along a track



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Staff writer Anne Howland literally took the reins while trying out carriage driving at Marg Shaw's Schomberg farm.

beside farmers fields like a couple of genteel ladies, Marg gave me the reins and my hands fell into a familiar grip. My back straightened, eyes looked forward and elbows and arms relaxed in a slight bend. As with riding, driving is more than just sitting there.

Once I'd done some simple stops, starts and turns and generally kept Alex out of the soy bean field, Marg suggested we pick up a trot. OK, cluck, cluck, here we go. Suddenly, the noise and lurching of

the buggy increased tenfold and I feared Alex was making a break for it. Whoa! I seesawed lightly on the reins as instructed.

But Marg would have none of it and urged me to drive on at what was actually a leisurely jog. As I felt the harnessed power of the single horse thrumming in the reins, I imagined what it must be like to drive two, four, six or even the whole Budweiser team.

The world record of 28 horses "in hand" was mind-boggling. I'd stuck

with Alex, thanks very much.

Back at the barn, we pulled to a stop, dismounted from the buggy and untacked. Marg was thrilled with how I had done, but I knew the credit was due to Alex. I scratched his soft, whiskery nose in appreciation of his patience and wisdom. As both riders and drivers know, it's the horse that makes or breaks you.

Marg Shaw teaches driving lessons in Schomberg. Call 1-905-939-7285.

Competing more fun than gym

From page 32.

The Markham resident and teacher at Bayview Secondary School in Richmond Hill acknowledges he's still a competitor on the court.

"I want to do well, just like everybody else who is on the court," he says.

Still relishing the opportunity to show the opposition his high school moves, Mr. McNeilly believes masters tournaments give people like him an outlet.

"A lot of guys play because they're jocks at heart. They've done it since they were kids and they played in high school or college or university. It's a lot more fun, instead of just going to a gym and working out."

He also enjoys the social side that is emphasized at many events.

"A lot of guys who play in these masters tournaments look forward each year to seeing the guys. They're life-long friendships."

A tolerant spouse helps too, when it comes to being a weekend warrior on the masters circuit.

"Without them (spouses), it wouldn't be possible for us (masters competitors) to do what we like to do," Mr. McNeilly says.



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