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# Sidelines

For Horse People

About Horse People

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USPA Open Finals  
Tami Hoag



# Chester Weber: On A Roll



*It just looks as if the grooms are push starting Chester Weber's winning four-in-hand at CAI-A Live Oak; they're actually leaping aboard the carriage as it gets under way for the victory lap. What a way to travel to the World Equestrian Games in Aachen this August!*

Photo by Shaneen Kohler

By Lauren Giannini

Chester Weber reigns when it comes to one-handed circles and shoulder-in, just two of the skills required in the upper levels of Combined Driving. He is the 2005 FEI North American Champion and, this spring, Chester won his fourth USEF Four-in-Hand Championship at the CAI-A Live Oak International in Ocala, Florida.

Combined Driving, like eventing, has three phases: dressage, marathon (cross country) and cones (stadium jumping). You can do it with horses or ponies hitched to wheeled vehicles in single, double, or four-in-hand harness. The marathon resembles a solo chariot race threading through intricate obstacles and water hazards. It's very exciting.

It's also incredibly expensive and requires years of specialized training and equipment. Harnesses must fit to the nth degree and vehicles are inspected to insure that they meet regulated standards. All that equipment and horsepower needs transportation to events in big rigs or jumbo jets.

Above and beyond cost, however, combined driving requires finesse and skill on the part of the whip (driver). No amount of money can buy the ability to control four fit horses with delicacy and split-second precision.

It's a small but competitive field with their sights trained on the World Equestrian Games in Aachen this August. Chester's on course to represent the USA with two wins to his credit from the first two selection trials. He competes one more time in early May at Tucker Johnson's farm. After that, the horses ship to Europe where he'll compete against the best

whips with whom he more than holds his own.

Chester grew up with horses on his parents' Thoroughbred breeding farm, Live Oak Stud, which provides a lovely setting for the CAI-A. Father and son used to compete with draft horses – in harness – for fun. Chester grew too much to be a jockey, but he's just right on the box – a catbird seat for him to set records.

From 1993-99 he competed in pairs driving. He was the youngest American to qualify for the World Pairs Driving Championships and the youngest driver ever named to the US Equestrian Team. He was also the youngest to win the USET National Driving Championship. He won 12 consecutive Advanced CDEs (1997-99) and finished his pairs driving career at the 1999 World Pairs Championships in Hungary where he finished second in dressage and eighth overall.

That same year, Chester moved up and competed internationally in four-in-hand – no mean feat, but that's what everyone has learned to expect from this whip: his best.



*SPLASH! Big water hazard captures the essence of the marathon at CHIO Aachen, Germany in 2001 where Chester Weber and his team finished seventh in the Advanced.*

Photo by Franz Steindl Courtesy of Chester Weber

"Driving a four-in-hand is a bit like managing a company," he says. "You need to work together in synergistic ways. I think that horses lend themselves to working in groups quite well."

They may be herd animals by nature, but it takes a fair amount of expertise to get them all going in the same direction at the same time. Factor into that the narrow margin for error in the cones or the rigid mazes that challenge whips during the marathon. It's all about communication, teamwork and the supple coordination of a team that's been well-dressed (trained) on the flat.

"The horses at my level are really great athletes and they make good dressage horses," says

*Four-in-hand Combined Driving gets compared to Formula One Racing, but this photo after the awards ceremony at CAI-A Live Oak in March 2006 expresses formal elegance during the victory lap: a triumphant tip of the hat from championship rosette festooned Chester Weber while his lady friend My Larsson, wearing a picture perfect hat, cradles the trophy.*  
 Photo by Shaneen Kohler

Chester. "They can dominate in the dressage phase, which tests the fundamentals. Dressage done right is very exciting – it's energetic, not dull and boring."

It also looks a lot different when four horses, hitched to an elegant carriage complete with formally attired grooms, perform mandatory figures in an arena the size of a football field. But that's just the first phase. The marathon encompasses a wild run cross-country that requires finesse and lightning quick reactions. Then it's back to the arena to thread a winding course through cones set 'just so' with tennis balls on top. To topple one earns penalty points, so does exceeding the allowed time.

"Your mind's got to be sharp," says Chester. "An old horseman told me – run quick with your body, slow with your mind. Ponies tend to be quick with their bodies, slow with their minds. It's a good attribute to have with the horses. I try to keep my reactions sharp through tennis. I play three or four days a week and I'm biking about 50 miles a week. If I'm in better shape, my mind is more calculating in competition."

Four-in-hands demand esprit de corps: the horses with each other and with the whip.

"There's a lot of multi-tasking going on," explains Chester. "The horses try to help you. Sometimes they try to jump over things – it doesn't work well. The sharpest horses we have for the team are intelligent, and they don't stop."

"It takes three years or 3,000 hours to train a horse for four-in-hand – if the horse has the character and body style," he adds. "Even then they're still at the beginning of the gig. One good horse in my team – I drove him for two years only in the dressage test – and it's just in the last two years that I've been able to use him in the marathon."

It's a team effort from the horses to the people involved with four-in-hand. It's such a small world that whips might be fiercely competitive on course, but they'll loan each other horses when something goes awry. Not to compete, after all that effort and invested energy, is unthinkable – even when it means supplying a good sound horse to the likes of Tucker Johnson and James Fairclough.

"I use my own personal best as a team asset," says Chester. "It's no good to have my seventh best horse at home when we go to horse shows. Americans are holding their own over in Europe. Tucker and I consistently run in the top 10."

Within the microcosm of Team Weber, he counts on stable manager Olaf Larsson and head groom Taren Lester, who serves as his navigator in the marathon, to name just two – and a lot rides on the trainers who start his young horses, Saskia and Gerent Leijten.



Horses are the passion and power of Combined Driving. Chester knows what he needs in harness, but even those that don't quite make the cut end up finding a niche.

"I have a business with Mario Deslauriers, ranked #2 at Wellington – Available Jumpers," he says. "We're dealing horses, and I also teach and give clinics to train people interested in being at the top of the game."

"The most important thing is to find horses that are suitable for the sport," adds Chester. "Right now, I'm not sure why, but my horses seem to be more Dutch – although one of the best is German-bred. The Dutch harness horses or Gellanders are bred for carriage driving. The breed is modernizing, and we're breeding more suitable horses for our sport."

A phrase at the bottom of the horse page on his website declares: "Chester Weber... a driving force in the world of international competition."

Just look at his horses – they know it's true. After all, they're hitched to a star.



*Chester and his team of bays come out of a water hazard at CAI-A Live Oak, en route to winning his fourth consecutive title in 2006.*

Photo by Shaneen Kohler

## Combined Driving Lively at Live Oak CAI-A

*Keady Gadwell and her new Dutch Warmbloods make a splash at the CAI-A Live Oak Driving Event. They took the top spot in the FEI Pair Horse division at the March event. All photos by Shaneen Kohler*



By Shaneen Kohler

"Preparing this year, I knew this team was really good," said Chester Weber, of Ocala, Fla., after winning his fourth consecutive National Four-In-Hand Championships at the 14th annual CAI-A Live Oak International Driving Event. "I knew that as long as I didn't have bad luck, I'd do well."

An estimated 8,000 spectators attended the event, many of them to see the championships, which test the skills of the best four-in-hand drivers in the nation. According to event organizer Susan Gilliland, "The word is getting around about what a great sport this is and how exciting it is to watch."

Exciting it was, especially during the marathon portion, which had its share of upsets.

James Fairclough, of Newton, N.J., was one of the drivers to experience technical difficulties in the hazards. "I had a rein get caught on a pole at the water hazard," explained Fairclough. "The water is normally not a problem for me. I went to go in and one of the horses spooked and came back. When he came back, the rein went over the post and I didn't see it. I asked him to go forward three times and he wouldn't go. I couldn't figure it out. They would go and then they would just stop," said Fairclough. "We got the rein off the pole and then we went in. But it had to have cost me at least 12-15 points."

It might have cost him the reserve championship, which went to Tucker Johnson of Hobe Sound, FL. But he is not one to live in the past. "I don't ever say, 'should have, would have, could have.' Everybody has mistakes and problems, so if I didn't have my problems and they didn't have their problems, where would we be?" Said Fairclough, who came

in third in the FEI Horse Four-In-Hand division by less than 10 points.

"Overall, I had moments of brilliance and a few baffles and mess-ups here and there. But all in all, we did fine."

Fairclough considers Live Oak a "very nice event," especially for the beginning of the season. "It is kind of easy in the roads and track because it is so flat. But it is early in the year, so that is wonderful...They have done a wonderful job and they are slowly progressing and making it better every year."

Johnson said the course was "perfect for the young horses, to get them going forward and taking the bridle." He felt the most challenging aspect was the last hazard. "The route to take in all the hazards up to the last one was a very open flowing one." The last hazard was more technical with tighter turns. "But we got through it and I was happy," said Johnson, who was planning on going home and having dinner on the beach with the kids to celebrate his reserve championship.

Alan Aulson, of Bronson, Fla., also praised the event, even though it was not his year to claim a win due to a "complication" at one of the hazard's gates causing his disqualification. "Chester did an unbelievable job in the brand new field, the one for us to warm-up in. At one time it was just a hay field with cows in it. It is like a golf course now."

Aulson would have won his event, based on his final score of 174.35, if he had not been disqualified. "We had a good ride and did well." He praised the Joe Gilliland-designed course, the weather and the lay out of the event. "I think Live Oak is better every single year. It is the best in the country," behind the ones I hold, said Aulson with a laugh. Aulson owns Black Prong Equestrian Center, which hosts events of all types, including combined driving.

## Cadwell Sisters Claim Two FEI Wins

For the first time at the FEI level, both Keady Cadwell and her sister Miranda won their respective divisions. Miranda not only won the FEI Pair Pony division, but also got awards for Best Presentation and Best FEI Marathon. In the midst of taking care of her ponies and doing some barn work, which the Cadwell sisters both do on a regular basis, Miranda said she was on a mission at the show. And she accomplished it. "My whole mission here this weekend was to improve on my dressage, which we did."

The awards and the win were just the icing, and thanks, in part, to their groom, Keiley Banfield. Banfield is Keady's navigator, usually. But for this event, she rode as a groom on the back of Miranda's carriage.

The tricky part was hiding the hair from the judges, Miranda's hair. "Around the judges, I have to wear a hat," said Miranda with a mischievous smile. Last month, she wasn't a redhead, but a bluehead. And, if accurately describing her hair color now, you might say it was pink. As Miranda sees it, "I felt a little pink, so we went pink!"

Keady, in what was described as an upset by the event announcer, claimed the win in the FEI Pair Horse division with a 179.19. It was Keady's first show with the two young Dutch Warmbloods she got in September.

"They did some 'baby' things; but, overall, they went in and did their job. In the marathon we had a few little issues, but came out on top anyway," said Keady, whose interesting name is Irish in origin. Miranda explained that there was some discussion over which set of horses Keady should compete (she has two pairs), and it was her trainer, Boyd Exell, who told her to go for it and compete the young pair. "She ended up doing that and she won, which is just great," said Miranda.

Keady said she had the most trouble with the last hazard "because it was tight and the horses were more tired by then." She added: "These two have very nice heads, but they are young. So, we don't want to rush them." Despite the concerns, the last hazard ended up going "really well," said Keady with a big smile.

Florida hosts the first two combined driving events of the season: Live Oak CDE and Sunshine State CDE. The other five FEI-recognized driving events are held in New Jersey (3), Pennsylvania (1) and California (1). The Oak Hill CDE in Virginia was canceled for 2006.

For full results of CAI Live Oak, visit [www.cailiveoak.com](http://www.cailiveoak.com).

**Chester Weber wins his fourth consecutive National Four-In-Hand Championships at the 14th annual CAI-A Live Oak International Driving Event.**



**Miranda Cadwell's Welsh ponies were jumping for joy after finding out they were the top ponies in the FEI Pair Pony division at the CAI-A Live Oak Driving Event**



**An entangled rein causes an upset at the water hazard for James Fairclough, who came in third in the FEI Horse Four-In-Hand division**



**Tucker Johnson and his team of four horses came in second behind Chester Weber, earning the National Four-In-Hand Reserve Championship**

