

Selecting Your First Harness

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Synthetic Marathon Harness with a shaped breastplate. Donna Crookston driving Viktor at Southern Pines CDE 2018, Jeff Legg navigating. Photo courtesy of Pics of You.

One of the most common questions asked by new drivers purchasing their first harness is how to choose an appropriate harness at an affordable price. Unfortunately, there isn't a single answer that suits every driver and every situation except to recommend purchasing the best quality harness the driver can afford. Quality often has a direct relationship with safety and performance as well as the comfort of the horse. Still, there are many choices to be considered. If you aren't sure what driving sport you will eventually participate in, a well-made basic harness that suits your vehicle is a sound choice.

Harness Style

There are several basic harness styles including fine harness, pleasure harness, marathon harness, and draft work harness. Fine harness is a light harness used in the show ring by some breeds and designed to allow the horse to show off its conformation and movement. Work harness has a utilitarian design for farm work and logging. The most common harnesses used in carriage driving are pleasure harness and marathon harness. Pleasure harness developed from harness used when carriages



Draft Work harness. Photo courtesy of Marlin Wengerd, www.WorkingHorseTack.com

Draft Show harness

Photo courtesy of Shanahan Harness Ltd, Huntsville OH





Russett leather and "white metal" or stainless steel.
Photo courtesy of Dana Bright WEG 2010.



Morgan horse in fine Harness. Photo courtesy of Tami Johnson.

were used for personal transportation. Pleasure harness has specific designs that correspond to the carriage it was traditionally used with that have their origins in comfort for the horse; such as wider saddles used for gigs, which are heavier two wheel vehicles; versus the light saddle that can be used with a road cart. Marathon harness is

specially designed for driving across variable terrain and negotiating obstacles, often at fast speeds. Marathon harness is typically constructed a bit heavier and more utilitarian than pleasure harness. Additional padding at key pressure points and adaptations specifically for safety are common. Marathon harness can be used for everyday

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Lynn Leg and Curry, harness suitable for a pleasure show or CDE dressage/cones.

training and recreational driving and many people choose this as their first harness for ease of upkeep.

Most harnesses have the option of using a full collar or a lighter weight breast collar. Which is used may be based on the job the horse is doing or the tradition of specific pleasure vehicles. Breast collars may rest straight across the chest, or be V-shaped to prevent compression of the area where the neck sets into the chest, which can interfere with the horse's breathing when pulling a heavy load or when doing fast work such as the marathon in a combined driving event.

Harness Materials

Harnesses are made of leather, a variety of synthetic materials, or nylon. Some harnesses may combine leather with nylon or synthetic materials. All come in various levels of quality. Leather is traditional, requires the most cleaning and upkeep, and is the most common material seen in pleasure and combined driving events. Just as with other leather tack, leather harness can vary in quality from the very cheap in price (and cheaply made) to the more expensive, better quality (and likely safer) harness.

Synthetic materials are newer and very popular because of their ease of cleaning, one can just hose it off. Some common brand names of synthetic material harnesses include BioThane, Beta and Granite. Just



Leather and hardware colors.

Courtesy of Driving Essentials.

as with leather, there are different quality levels of synthetic harnesses. Some have a look and feel very similar to leather, while others more resemble plastic or rubber. Those not in favor of synthetic harness often point to its lack of tradition. Synthetic materials can become stiff in cold weather and not conform to the horse's shape quite as well as leather.

Nylon is typically the cheapest, poorest fitting and least safe of harness materials as it will not break in the case of accident, trapping the horse. Nylon strapping has more abrasive edges. It has few positive aspects and is not typically recommended.

Harness hardware can be brass, stainless steel or nickel (What is traditionally referred to as "white metal" was nickel or silver plated). Brass is usually used with

leather harness. It can be very labor intensive, but looks spectacular when polished. Stainless steel is easier to keep shiny and is the modern version of white metal. Nickel is typically associated with cheaper made harnesses. The color of the metal on your harness should match the color of metal on your carriage.

Harness Quality

Equipment failure is one of the most common causes of carriage driving accidents and can be related to harness quality. No matter the type of material, there are a few giveaways that will help differentiate a better quality harness from a lesser quality one. Better made harnesses will often be made of thicker material that is well-finished with reinforcement or padding at key pressure points, will have good quality hardware and a high degree of adjustability.

Ways to cut costs in harness making include: using lower quality materials (especially with leather harnesses), thinner or single-ply materials where thicker or double-ply materials would be safer or more durable, lack of padding at key pressure points-particularly in the saddle to keep it from resting on the spine, low quality hardware and sewn-in or stapled pieces that limit

adjustability and prevent interchanging of pieces.

Harnesses can be bought in standard sizes or be made to the measurements of your horse. Standard size harnesses may require some pieces to be switched out if it does not fit your horse exactly. If a made-to-measure harness does not fit, most reputable harness makers will exchange pieces at no additional charge.

Used harnesses can be a good option although a quality harness, like a quality saddle, holds its value so you may not see much difference between the price of new and used. When purchasing a used harness check the quality of the material it is made of; avoid ones that have cracking of the leather or synthetic material and obvious signs of poor finish or degradation. Check stress points for signs of wear indicating that pieces may need to be replaced, and ensure the hardware is in good condition and repair.

Don't hesitate to purchase a well-made harness if the new driver can afford it because of concern that the driver or horse may not stick with driving. Well-constructed and maintained harness can be expected to hold its value. ↙

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