

## **Knox Farm CDE – With a Little Help from my Friends**

*By Mary Van De Bogart*

In the fall of 2005 I brought Rosie Cotton home from Rathdrum, Idaho. My long search for my personal dream horse had ended with a middle-aged, unregistered, undersized, overweight Norwegian Fjord mare. We were a perfect match.

I was relatively inexperienced as a whip. My only successful driving experience had been with my son's aged ex-dude pony, Annie. She had nerves of steel and a mouth of iron, and could be persuaded to trot on a good day. Encouraged by this, I got a three year old Connemara gelding. He was going to be my ultimate, do-everything, warmblood in a fourteen hand package; ultimately he became known as, "the stupid thing that Mom did when she turned forty". I hadn't realized that a certain percentage of Connemaras have pedigrees that look like something that happened in the Ozarks, and are wired like stunted racehorses. Telly still lives with us, but driving him was Not Fun.

Fortunately, by this point I had learned enough to know how much I didn't know, so I had Amanda come out and give us a nice long lesson and harness-fitting. Rosie had been suffering from a too-short trim job, so I had shoes put on her front feet as soon as I got her home. The change was dramatic. Amanda grinned and said, "This little mare has LOTS of gears!" I saw my plan of pattering peacefully around the back roads and trails fading rapidly. However, the clinics and playdays that the Treasure Valley Whips put on were exactly what we needed. I still remember my first Linda Fairbanks lesson, clinging desperately to the handgrip of my home-made, badly sprung cart while Linda drove.....when we achieved what felt like escape velocity, she declared with satisfaction, "THIS is this little mare's working trot!" Yikes.....

Over the next two years, we acquired a decent harness, rebuilt the cart about six times, and went to every clinic that we could manage. Rosie learned that her body actually can bend to the right as well as to the left, and I started to be able to differentiate between enthusiasm and running away. My husband Lee is an unflappable and soothing horse anchor, as well as being right handy with a welder; and although he has no interest in doing the driving, he really enjoys coming along for the ride. The TVW members, and in particular Amanda, were always there with help, advice, and encouragement. It started to feel like time to Do Something.

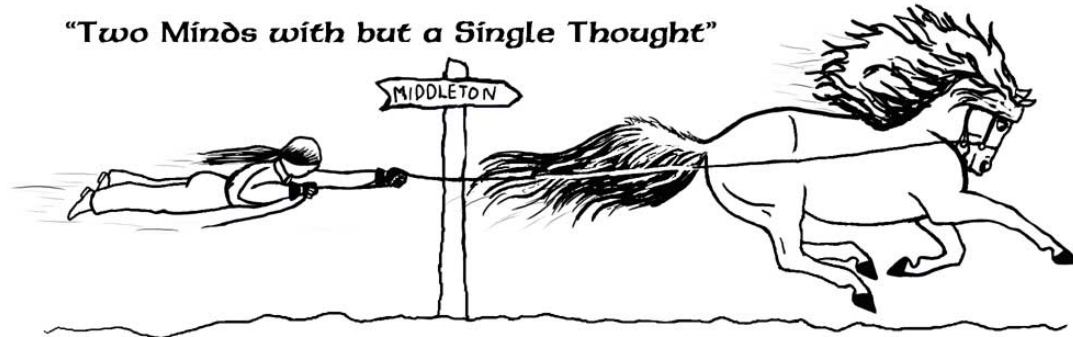
Something came up, in the form of the Combined Driving Event over at Knox Farm, in southeastern Idaho. It was close enough to be possible, and we could camp, so the expense wouldn't be horrendous. I was pretty comfortable about the dressage test and the cones; the arena driving trials that TVW puts on had given us some experience with those. But cross-country driving was a whole new thing; I had only just gotten comfortable – well, almost comfortable – going from the hitching post to the arena without a header. Careening cross-country with things to negotiate that are actually named, "hazards" – did this seem like a good idea?

After much encouraging and coaching, we decided to Do It. I assembled a spares kit that probably weighed forty pounds and would cover any contingency short of a nuclear attack while we were on course. Lee watched the Navigator 101 CD about forty times, and showed it to anyone who would watch. We headed for Chesterfield on a Thursday afternoon. It was a long haul for Rosie; I walked her all around the grounds and dressage

arena in what was left of the daylight, and all she was really interested in was the lawn. Perfectly calm, I thought; this is going to be a piece of cake.

On Friday morning her eyes were as big as saucers, and she was acting like the victim of an alien abduction. What I needed was a nice little private area with a good fence and some privacy where we could regain our composure; what was available was a lumpy open corner of the field where everyone was camping, hitching up, and milling around together. I don't think that Rosie was taught to lunge as a filly, and she has a certain middle-aged skepticism about learning new tricks. I had visions of traveling through the crowd at the end of a lunge line, horizontally and at great speed, with Rosie making tracks for wherever she thought Middleton might be. Attaching her to a cart at this point seemed like a very bad idea. Slinking home in disgrace seemed like an intelligent option.

***"Two Minds with but a Single Thought"***



Luckily for us, Amanda had finished her dressage test by now, and came to our rescue. She helped us hitch up, and then drove Rosie around the farm at a good pace until she settled down. It actually started to be fun! I drove an almost respectable dressage test – well, I was at the right place at the right time, for the most part. Who says circles have to be round? After a break at noon, it was time for cones. We had walked them and walked them, but when I finally drove out there, it looked like an endless and uncharted ocean. Lee rode along with me; we were both unaware that unless you have a groom during your dressage test, you are not to have one during cones. Particularly, you are not to have one who points and says, “Over there!” in a loud voice. However, this was a Learning Experience, and everyone was very kind and tolerant. Linda Fairbanks was the judge, and she is marvelous about explaining things very clearly without making one feel stupid or embarrassed.

That evening, we were driven around in trucks to preview the marathon course. I had begun to feel pretty cocky about having gotten through the dressage and cones without any major mishaps, but the confidence started to wear off a little at this point. It was long, and it was bumpy and nasty, and the obstacles had lots of hard unforgiving things to crash into. People started telling ambulance-driver type stories about vehicles upside down in obstacles. The markings were confusing, and the route wove around and crossed itself until my eyes were doing the same thing. The plaintive refrain to a “Counting Crows” song kept going through my head... “Oh Lord, I’m not ready for this sort of thing!” Fortunately, I had an unfair advantage at this point. Lee, my horse anchor and cart builder deluxe, has also been a Boy Scout leader for almost twenty years. Talk about a navigator! He remembered every twist and turn.

Saturday morning looked a little ominous, but the bad weather held off. I thought that Rosie would be adjusted to her surroundings and a little tired from the previous day; she came out looking like she'd heard the bugles sounding. We were almost the last to start,

and we opted to wait a bit to hitch up and warm up as we went, rather than stand around fretting while everyone else came and went. Rosie wasn't really all that well conditioned, and she's a chubby little rascal; I figured that after half a mile or so, she'd settle down and we'd have a nice quiet slow drive. Think again! She spotted Nala and Janie half a mile ahead of us, and did her darndest to catch up. We were sailing through a rutted hayfield dodging clumps of thistles and badger holes; she watched the ground like an eagle and never put a foot wrong. Lee was hanging on to the cart with one hand and to my pants with the other, and we made very good time indeed. We got around the field and passed the cows without incident –those cows had played a major role in my Worst Case Scenario broodings the night before. Then we got to walk for a good bit, although Rosie made it very clear that she'd just as soon be moving along now, thank you! There was a very confusing bit with the route at the end of the first section; I think that's where a lot of people got lost. The timers aren't allowed to help you, but after they made it clear that they were Not Recording our Time, Lee figured out that we had gone through the finish for section D rather than section A, which was about twenty feet away. We ended up ahead of Nala on the last section, and Rosie was heartbroken. I had been worried about her being fit enough to complete this thing; she managed to do it fast enough that we could walk all the hazards and still have to deliberately slow down at the end so as not to be under the allowed time; all while screaming at the top of her little pony lungs for her lost companion. She was tired but in fine fettle when we finished up.

Surprisingly enough, we ended up on top in the medium / large pony division when all was said and done. This was due in good part to Lee's navigational skills, and also because this was a training event, with certain errors – like pointing at cones – being explained rather than being grounds for elimination. We got a nifty set of brushing boots for the Newbie Award. We went home full of new confidence and with a huge appreciation for the carriage driving folks who are so willing to extend a helping hand to the newcomers. Thank you!

