

A GMHA Win Gets Monroe Closer To His Ultimate Goal

By: Ann L. Pringle

Sep 17, 2009 - 10:00 PM



After a year off from competition, he's back on top and getting ready to represent the United States.

For Scott Monroe, an advanced level win at the GMHA Horse Driving Trial in South Woodstock, Vt., served as the first in what he hopes will be a season of firsts for his horse Shadow. After sitting out last season because of a minor injury to his 16-year-old black Morgan gelding, Monroe and Shadow are now one step closer to the FEI World Singles Championship in Pratoni del Vivaro, Italy, next July.

The GMHA competition, held Aug. 21-23, marked the first time that the advanced level was offered at the Green Mountain Horse Association Combined Driving Event in many years, although the organizers opted to run that division as a horse driving trial (where competitors only drive section E of the marathon) to avoid the need to become U.S. Equestrian Federation-sanctioned.

Monroe, Sharon, Conn., said he's "big on fitness," and despite being out of competition for a year, he thinks Shadow is starting this season in the best shape ever.

Taking a year off "was the best thing that could have happened," Monroe said. "We played, we rode and drove [just for fun]."

Then Monroe started Shadow's training program up again last fall. Part of that training program included 10 days of work in a pool this spring, something Monroe has done with the gelding for six or seven years.

A shortened course, particularly during the hottest time of the season even in Vermont, might have seemed welcoming. But Monroe found it more, not less, of a test. He noted that he really needed section A to "take the starch out. It was a challenge to do only one section.

"I took half an hour to warm him up, running around the area, trotting and cantering," he continued. "I wanted to do section A on my own."

But Monroe soon realized his warm-up might cause problems for the training through intermediate level competitors who were doing the full three sections. Without his usual warm-up, he had plenty of horse on his hands as he approached the first obstacle. A deluge of rain on mostly turf footing made for a substantial challenge.

"In the first hazard we came in fast, as I'd planned, and we button-hooked the first gate. Then the turf moved, and Shadow went right down," he said. "But he got back up, and we still won the hazard!"

Monroe and Shadow went on to win the entire marathon phase with 43.11 penalty points.

Winona Ponies Up

Nine advanced single horse drivers and one advanced single pony driver entered the event, which was also open to training, preliminary and intermediate level competitors—53 in all. The advanced entry likely would have been larger, but the FEI World Pairs Championship was running concurrently in Hungary, and the FEI World Combined Pony Championship had just been contested the weekend before.

Four of the nine advanced single horse drivers were veterans of previous World Single Championships: Monroe, Robin Groves, Donna Crookston and Canadian driver Carole Precious. So single pony driver Vivian Creigh was thrilled with her dressage score of 41.60, which put her third overall in the horse and pony divisions' combined dressage scores.

Creigh drives an 8-year-old Norwegian Fjord mare, Winona, whom she bred at her Rainbow's End Farm in Springfield, Vt.

"It was just a wonderful 'perfect storm,'" Creigh said of their dressage performance. "The test unfolded in front of me. It was effortless. 'Winnie' was light and obedient with tons of impulsion."

The fact that GMHA is so close to where Creigh lives helped to relax her, which may have contributed to the end result.

"It was kind of like schooling," Creigh explained.

Creigh was one of the many competitors who drove their test on Sunday. On Friday, after two inches of rain fell in 20 minutes amid a flurry of lightning, followed by more storms, the organizers called the competition off for the rest of the day and began rescheduling.

Being local, Creigh stabled at home, and during her ride home on Friday she made the decision to not drive the marathon. Without studded shoes, Creigh worried that if Winnie slipped on the slick surfaces, she would back off.

"She's just learned to go fast in the marathon," Creigh said. Previously, "she just didn't see the point of going fast."

With Winnie entered at The Laurels At Landhope (Pa.) in a few weeks, Creigh wanted to ensure she would be confident and ready.

While Creigh has been breeding and competing in driving with Fjord ponies for 20 years, Winnie is the first homebred she's shown. She intended to sell the pony and had entered her in ridden dressage competitions as a 4- and 5-year-old. In fact, the 13.2-hand mare was undefeated at first level U.S. Dressage Federation shows with a 6'2" female rider.

But when Winnie didn't sell, Creigh decided to compete the mare herself in combined driving.

"I was told 23 years ago that a Fjord couldn't do advanced level," she said. "That just made me more determined!"

In spite of her determination, however, Creigh has accepted that "regardless of how good you are, when going down the centerline, you're going to get one point lower than a Morgan," she said. "This isn't a comment on our judges but about human nature."

Creigh tries to take Winnie's perceived disadvantage and turn it into an advantage. She's often been the only one in her class, and she doesn't mind.

"I have to strategize more," she said. "It energizes me. I know I'm smaller, so I have to take advantage of the situation."

Throughout her training, Creigh has paid attention to drivers of smaller horses, like Lisa Singer, who competes Morgans, and watched how they walked hazards.

If Winnie keeps improving, Creigh will declare to be considered for the 2011 pony championship team. "I'm 58 and have been driving competitively for 23 years," she said. "Since even before there was a pony championship, my dream has been to get a pony to one."

Crookston Conquers In Dressage

Donna Crookston and her black Morgan gelding RG Cowboy's Black Cadillac won the dressage, earning a score of 38.61 from judges Dana Bright and Sue Mott.

"I would have liked a better left lead canter depart, [but] I was very happy with 'Cowboy's' dressage test," said Crookston, Saltsburg, Pa. "He's a really nice horse—I'm lucky to have him. Despite all the rain, GMHA's ring was in great shape, which allowed all of us to be able to go well."

Crookston and Cowboy were third in the marathon. Again, in spite of the wet conditions, Crookston thought the hazards held up well. "They drove much better than I expected," she said.

The cones course proved to be a challenge for all competitors. Out of the 53 starters, only four managed to post clear rounds, and none in the advanced division were able to do so. Crookston, who finished fourth overall, described the course as tight and technical.

"The grass was slick with all the rain, which didn't help," she said.

"I hope I never see a cones course like this again!" concurred Monroe.

According to organizer Wilson Groves, following the horse driving trial format meant that some of the normal requirements were relaxed—no horse inspection was held, fewer officials were needed, grooms and drivers were allowed to compete more than once.

Groves also explained that the course is not as hilly as one might think a marathon in Vermont might be. "People who have trouble have never had a fit horse," he said simply.

Much of the GMHA property is on a river bottom with few hills. Part of section A takes place on roads and in flat fields. The five hazards originally offered (one was taken out due to the weather) were built around cross-country jumps.

The rain, which caused problems on Friday, continued through most of the marathon. Officials removed obstacle 2, which was set on a hill, from the course due to the deterioration of the footing going up and down the incline leading to it. The officials also had to wait until Saturday morning to make a decision about a stream that flowed (or raged on Friday) through the course, requiring competitors to cross it many times. By morning, it had calmed down, and that part of the course was unaltered.

Category: Other Disciplines