

# Happy Sleighing

**By: Kathleen Winfield, Equestrian Canada  
Driving Coach and Foothills Chapter member**

Winter is the time to jingle the bells and hit the trails! We have great snow in Alberta for sleighing and the sunny weather can be perfect for outdoor recreation. It is a great way to play in the winter by hitching up your driving horses and heading out.

Sleighting is quite a bit different than driving a wheeled vehicle. The vehicle moves quite differently, may be tougher to get started (runners may be frozen to the ground) and definitely turns a lot differently (snow can pile up in front of the runners while you are trying to turn). When you are making turns in the sleigh, make them big and wide. Also, keep in mind that you can't see what is lurking under the snow so don't go blasting off down trails you don't know. Hitting a buried log with your



sleigh runners would not be a fun experience. As much fun as sleighing is, there are a number of safety considerations that must be taken in to account.

You can use the same harness for sleighing that you do for carriage driving. One really dandy little addition when driving a single horse is a kicking strap – this is a strap that goes from the shaft on one side, over the rump of the horse and down to the shaft on the other side. This strap makes it difficult for the horse to kick up (even in happiness!) as he would have to lift the whole sleigh with you in it.

Horses are actually very well adapted for cold weather. You may find that your horse is quite a bit livelier when sleighing than when you drive in the hot summer so just keep this in



## Happy Sleighing

mind when you hitch up. Some studies show the metabolism of the horse is most efficient at -5C (23F). However, be careful in really cold weather as deeply inhaling icy cold air may cause your horse some problems.

The footing is quite different when you are sleighing – you could travel from light, fluffy snow to crusted snow or even ice. A big concern is adequate traction. Snow balling up under the horse's feet is a big problem and potentially a treacherous situation. There are a number of possible solutions folks use for this problem: shoe the horse with snow pads or rims that help pop out the snow balls, prepare the underside of the horse hooves with Vaseline or similar product (very short term solution) or my personal preference is to have the horse barefoot trimmed correctly to promote movement in the hoof that will pop the snow balls out.

Keep in mind you will be wearing bulkier clothes and footwear. You will not be as nimble as you normally are. Also, you will be wearing gloves so make sure you can handle the reins in the cold and with snow on them. Sometimes the synthetic reins don't do well in the winter as they get too slippery in the cold. Also, just

by Kathleen Winfield

harnessing and hitching up will be a bit more of a challenge in your winter wear.

Your horse is working a lot harder travelling through the snow in the winter. He may not be as fit as he is in the summer so make sure you keep a close eye on how he is doing – don't push him too hard. Also, he is wearing his heavy winter coat so can't dissipate the heat he generates as well. If he becomes sweaty, you will have to take extra precautions in cooling him out at the end of the sleigh ride to ensure he does not get chilled when turned out.

Another safety issue is the condition of your sleigh. You should thoroughly check all components of your sleigh (especially if it is an original or older vehicle). Make sure there is no dry rot in any of the woodwork, no cracks or signs of weakness in the shafts and the runners are in good shape.

After having done all your homework, hitch up and go sleighing!

