

Maryland Youth Tops National Driving Championship

Training, Preliminary, Intermediate and Advanced. "Marathon is my favorite because it is cross-country through obstacles as fast as you can go," he said.

Getting Serious

Morgan met Wiltison and his family early in his driving career when she saw him driving at a local event. "He has the ability to focus very well," she said adding, "He is above average in his ability to focus on the animal and the challenges of the sport." Being impressed by his advanced skills at such an early age, she offered to take him on as a student.

Now, Wiltison drives year-round with Morgan. "I take my ponies to her house in Beallsville for lessons and training, except for the winter when I train with her at the Grand Oaks Resort in Weirsdale, FL," he explained. Wiltison and his family head to Florida every winter to keep up with the Combined Driving scene. "I have been in Florida for the past five winters. There are a lot of drivers and competitions here and it is an amazing training facility," he added.

Morgan explained that here in the United States, the "best venues with the most competitive entries" are in the Ocala region of Florida from January to March. The season takes a bit of a break in the summer when the footing is hard and the weather is hot before picking back up again in the Mid-Atlantic area in the fall. "Riley's parents are so very supportive," she said. "It's a lot of work but they all enjoy it."

Morgan added, "Riley is a very dedicated kid. He is very serious about the sport but in the right kind of way."

Championship Year

This past season, Wiltison continued to drive his 12-year-old, 14.2H Connemara pony, Willow's Aslan. The pair has won championship honors for the past three seasons. In 2018, they won the American Driving Society National Championship at Preliminary and in 2019, they won ADS's National Championship at Intermediate. He was just 14 years old when he won his first National Championship!

This past season, the pair earned the 2020 USEF Champion Horse of the Year title in the Combined Driving Intermediate Single Pony division. "We are so excited!" said Wiltison's mom Billie. "He is one of a few junior drivers and the only junior to place. All others that placed below him are adults." Unlike many other USEF disciplines, in Combined Driving, there are no separate junior divisions. All ages of drivers compete together.

Wiltison said being able to compete at the Live Oak CDE was a highlight for him this past season. "Live Oak is the biggest CDE in

the US. They only have Intermediate and Advanced levels and the obstacles are very technical so 2020 was the first time I was ready for this competition." He placed third overall and were the only ones in the division to go double clear in the cones phase. "That means we had no time faults and no balls knocked down," he explained.

Wiltison's scores over the past few years have already made him eligible for the World Championships. Being able to represent the US at the World Championships is certainly a goal of Wiltison's, as is driving a team of four-in-hand Dartmoor ponies.

Future Endeavors

Wiltison seems to already be on his way to achieving both goals as he recently started competing in the Pairs Pony divisions with two Dartmoor ponies, Lizwell's Gambling Queen ("Maude") and Fiddlemarker's Bottle Rocket ("Rocket"). In addition, he also drives Morgan's Singletree Poker Alice ("Lottie"). "Maude and Rocket do the dressage and cones phases. And then Rocket and Lottie do the marathon phase," Wiltison explained.

Maude is 25 years old and incredibly experienced as she has already earned nine USEF National Championships and been to four World Championships with Morgan. Owend by Susan Deutermann, Maude is the senior member of the team, and helps teach the younger 14-year-old Rocket, owned by Lory Eigne, and six-year-old Lottie. "You often need the knowledge of the older mare to help teach the younger ones," Morgan stated.

Wiltison competed the Dartmoor ponies at the USEF National Championship for Preliminary Pair Pony at the end of January. Results from the CDE held at the Grand Oaks Resort in Florida were unavailable at the time this article when to press so check equiery.com for results!

"Not all single drivers make good pairs drivers," Morgan said. "But as soon as he tried it, I knew he'd be good at it. He's just very smooth with the ponies." She added, "Riley is a shining start for young riders and I hope more young people read this article and decide they want to try driving."

"It is challenging being a junior in this sport and sometimes it would be nice to compete against other juniors, but there are very few junior drivers, and none currently driving in my division with the single or pair," Wiltison said. "My parents joke that most of my competitors have been driving longer than I have been alive but it is fun when I beat the adults, and they don't seem to mind... well some do!" he said with a laugh.



Pics of You

By Katherine O. Rizzo

According to champion international driver Tracey Morgan, the sport of Combined Driving is "a sport for all ages," however, it is mostly dominated by drivers in their late 30s and early 40s. Morgan herself, did not start driving until later in life after having competed in Eventing and Dressage. "Driving is great for those equestrians who want to continue doing something fun but may not want to jump all the big jumps anymore," she said.

So how is it then that the top single pony driver in the country for the 2020 season is only 16 years old!

Why Driving?

Riley Wiltison was introduced to the sport of Driving by neighbor Cynthia Doll while he was in 4-H riding her ponies. "Cynthia also had driving ponies and asked me if I wanted to go for a ride on the back of the carriage," Wiltison said. "I really liked it so she taught me to drive and let me start driving one of her Welsh ponies, Dollhouse Shenanigans."

Just like that, Wiltison was hooked. By the time he was nine years old, Wiltison was entered in his first official Combined Driving competition, a Horse Driving Test (HDT) at the Teddy Bear Picnic, hosted by the Brandywine Driving Club. A HDT has a shorter marathon course than the traditional Combined Driving Event (CDE) competitions. "I was only nine years old so I wasn't old enough to do a recognized event like an American Driving Society (ADS) or United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) one. Cynthia had to convince the organizers to let me do the marathon. I was really slow compared to now, but it was a lot of fun," he remarked.

Combined Driving is a three-phase competition similar to Eventing in that it starts with dressage, then a cross-country type phase called the marathon, and then finish with cones, which would be similar to show jumping. However, unlike Eventing which is ridden, in Combined Driving, the competitor is driving a cart behind that horse. Wiltison explained that there are four levels to Combined Driving: