

# Wrecks

Every accident is different. Every Horse is different. Every vehicle is different and every driver is different. There are different causes: inadequate training, equipment failure, driver error and just plain unavoidable coincidence. There are many caveats, exceptions and disclaimers that apply to what I am going to tell you. These are general observations about carriage wrecks from my experience over 25 years of training driving horses. You can not find this information in written form anywhere I know of.

## **1. If there is a runaway, DO NOT TRY TO GRAB THE HORSE.**

Standing in front of a runaway horse and flapping your arms is a good way to get trampled. Even grabbing a rein is more likely to result in a broken rein or injury to you than a stopped horse. Let the driver have as much room as they need to get control of the situation. The horse will stop when its fatigue overcomes its fear.

## **2. First save the humans, then the horse, then other property**

Summon useful help. Rescue personnel are better trained in rescue than most Medical Doctors are. Let them do their work unimpeded by MDs. Establish CONTROL. Appoint someone to take charge, and then exclude non-essential personnel from the scene. This is the hardest task you will face, since Doctors are not used to taking orders from anyone and it is human nature to want to help others in distress, especially people that may be friends with each other. If there is no one with Emergency training on the scene, have the announcer request an EMT Then if no help materializes, request a MEDICAL doctor

## **3. Try not to make things worse than they are.**

Attempt to keep the humans involved in the accident from moving, except to get clear of additional risk of injury, until they are sure they have no neck or spinal injuries that could be aggravated by movement.

## **4. Don't run to the horse.**

Walk briskly and purposely but cautiously to the horse. Watch to see if you are making things worse by frightening the horse. Remember horses are prey animals and are wired to run from beings chasing them. Their adrenaline is pouring into their system and their evolutionary instincts may be on high alert.

## **5. Usually it is best to keep the horse down rather than to let them back up**

Most horses can be prevented from getting back up by holding their head to the ground. Place a knee behind the ear and a hand just above the nose using most of your body weight. Hopefully you can get in this position from behind the horse's head, not below it in front of his neck within reach of his front feet. If you can't hold him down, you will be in a much better position if you are behind his head. If you are alone, chances are your horse will get up while you are in the middle of undoing things and may or may not want to stand still while you finish the job. Often they somehow know they are being helped and will often be persuaded to lie still if you talk to them calmly.

## **6. Expect the horse to get up at any moment.**

Never put yourself in a position you can not immediately get out of if the horse decides to suddenly get up. Expect it to happen at any moment.

**7. Stay clear of hooves and legs.**

With a horse lying on its side, work over the horse's back rather than reaching over its legs. If the horse insists on rising, you may not be able to stop it. Take care that you are not thrown under the horse and try to keep it standing in place, But NOT AT RISK TO YOURSELF OR OTHER HUMANS.

**8. The driver is NOT the person to be in charge.**

They may be suffering from concussion, and are certain to be overstressed. Often people who watched the accident from the ground have a better view of what happened than the driver had and may have a better idea of what is broken and who is injured and how to best set things right. Take what the driver is saying with a grain of salt.

**9. The \*order\* in which things are undone is as important as \*what\* gets undone.**

When horses go down, they often can be readily convinced to stay down because of the added confinement of straps that are suddenly very tight on them. They know or suspect that they are caught up and will stop struggling with a little encouragement from you. However, once straps begin to loosen by being cut or unbuckled, there comes a point where they feel free enough and they will suddenly try to get up. At that critical moment, you better have the right straps undone because they may try to bolt free. If they are still half hooked to whatever piece of the vehicle that remains, you may find yourself with Accident #2 quickly on your hands. This is a critical point in undoing a wreck.

**10. Recognize what is still connecting your horse to the vehicle at all times**

This becomes important when the horse suddenly gets to its feet.

**11. Release the harness by unbuckling the backstrap.**

Some harnesses will also need the wrap strap undone before the horse is free. Usually you can get to the backstrap buckle. If you undo the backstrap buckle, you will have effectively freed the horse from the breeching attachment to the shafts on both sides (and kicking strap if you used one) with just undoing this one buckle. Don't waste time trying to unbuckle and unwrap breeching straps! You probably can't get to both sides anyway and even if you can, you won't likely be able to undo them at the same time (which is better than undoing them one at a time) This also applies to horses that are standing and need to be removed from a vehicle in an emergency.

**12. Undo the traces.**

You usually can get to the ends of both traces where they connect to the whiffletree. Usually you can't get to the buckles on both sides of the breast plate to unbuckle the traces there since the horse is probably lying on top of one side. NOTE: PAIRS - Unbuckling a harness strap on a collar will free a horse of traces too. That's why you need your harness straps the correct direction - pointy end to the inside - on multiples. When doing this, beware of false martingales which may still be connected to the girths.

**13. Unbuckle the Tugs.**

On the side that is topmost, unbuckle the wrap, and then unbuckle the tug from the hanging strap. Your horse is now free from the shaft at least on one side. Be aware: Tugs have a nasty habit of hanging up on the shaft when your horse is moving forward out of the shafts which it is likely to try to do when it gets up.

**14. Pull reins thru the terrets.**

Do not unfasten them from the bit. You may also be able to make a temporary lead with a rein passed through the noseband. Some horses may respond better to this arrangement, similar to a halter

contact, than to being held by the mouth with the bits. This may be especially true if they have injured their mouth in the wreck.

### **15. Unbuckle the girth**

If you can't get to the other side because the horse is lying on it, you can unbuckle the girth on the upper side, provided the topside tug is free, and the saddle will slide off the horse when it gets up. If you can't release the saddle by unbuckling the girth, be ready to get the other tug strap undone as soon as the horse stands up.

### **16. Cutting Straps**

A knife is rarely used to good advantage in releasing a horse from harness. Carry a good knife with a "Seat belt cutting blade". The point of the knife is very dangerous if the horse begins to struggle. When straps under tension are cut and released suddenly, the horse is likely to suddenly renew its efforts to get up when it feels them release.

### **17. Release straps SLOWLY so you don't startle the fallen horse.**

One of the most dangerous moments is when the horse tries to regain its feet. Think first what straps will still connect the horse to the vehicle after cutting or releasing straps and be prepared to deal with the horse should it try to get up still half hooked and scared. It may be frightened by all the activity and could strike or run in any direction. Try to make a reasonable effort to restrain him, but don't get hurt. Ask helpers to stand back and give the horse some room when it tries to rise. Have someone behind the vehicle to help keep it clear of the horse.

### **18. Proceed with caution when pulling harness or shafts from under the horse**

Trying to pull shafts out from under a horse that is lying on one of them is very apt to encourage the horse to try to jump to its feet. Same goes for trying to pull harness parts out from under. Proceed with caution.

### **19. Hitching the horse again**

If equipment and horse and driver are not seriously damaged, consider re-hooking. Ground drive the horse first for a bit to make an assessment of its mental and physical state. This may help the horse mentally get over the trauma rather quickly. If at all practical, drive the horse carefully away from the scene. Keep this subsequent drive just long enough to make sure the horse is obedient and not overly anxious. Remember that the sensations – sounds, feelings, even smells – may be similar to what it felt during the accident and may cascade in the horse's mind so that it thinks: OH NO! It's happening again! The horse may not fully get over the effects of his accident for some time. Be extra careful at least for the first few drives after the accident.

### **20. Some general thoughts**

Before you jump in and try to help in a wreck ask yourself: Are you effective help in an emergency, or should you leave leaping in to others? If you faint at the sight of blood, or if you have physical problems that preclude strong and agile movement, you had best stay out of the way. If you are a health professional, are you certified AND CURRENT in trauma medicine? Are you the 'Take Charge' type and knowledgeable enough to 'run' an emergency, or are you a better follower?

### **21. Things You Can Do To Improve Your Chances of Survival**

Tell someone where you are going and when you'll be back. A cell phone is particularly handy in case of an accident. but make sure you have service where you will be driving. Take it with you and fasten it to you not the vehicle! Clean your harness regularly - this gives you a chance to locate

weaknesses. Use a Kicking Strap. \*ALWAYS\* Wear a Helmet. Get experienced help with young or green Horses. (It's cheaper than paying the hospital bills!). Carry a knife. Carry a spares kit. Mark with red tape the buckles and snaps that need to be undone get a horse out of the harness in an emergency by people who do not know about harness horses.

**Note from the Author:**

If you have \*any\* questions, suggestions or comments on this material, please do not hesitate to contact me.

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