

# Chariot Racing

**"I do it just for the thrill."**

**By Grace May & Ron Snowden**



**The horses give it all they have, leaving the gates.**



**Clarence Wheeler, one of the oldest members of the club.**

On a beautiful winter day we went to Clarence Wheeler's home on his ranch on lower Elk River, & Clarence told us a lot about chariot or cutter racing.

"Frank Stetson was the one that got me talked into it, (chariot racing). He wanted to know how come I did not come race with them. I told him I didn't have a cutter. I didn't have money enough to make one. Frank said he would get the FFA boys up at Yampa to make me one for \$40. I told him if he could get one for that I'd take it. So he made me my cutter and brought it down to me.

"The first meet we went to after I got that cutter was at Meeker. I hooked Dee Star and that black mare of my brother, Dean's, up. I've been running ever since. I do it just for the fun of it, there's no money in it. That's for sure! I can't remember, but I think it got started in '58 running the races at the airport. The next year they got started over at the rodeo grounds. They got so many airplanes coming in, that they wouldn't let us race at the airport.

"When we first started we raced at Yampa, Hayden, Meeker, Craig, and a few other places. After we started using gates these places and the Snake River Associations folded up. We raced at Rangely a few years after that. Then they quit, that left us by ourselves. Now we travel all over Wyoming." These places mostly folded because of expense and space for permanent starting gates.

"The first two or three years it was all cutters. I guess Jim Camiletti was the first one that got a chariot. It got so where when we went up into Wyoming they didn't have snow, so we had to use chariots." A cutter slides on runners and a chariot rolls on wheels.

"We borrowed chariots from the Wyoming racers. We built some of our own. Leo Snowden built a couple. Just right here someone hooks onto a cutter sometimes. Other than that it's all chariots. The first chariots were a lot bigger than a 50-gallon drum. Now a lot of them are made out of a 50-gallon drum, or something similar. The first tires we used were off an old Cadillac. A good share of the first ones were made with Model A wheels. You don't see one of them on the track hardly any more. Once in awhile some one will pull on the track with one.

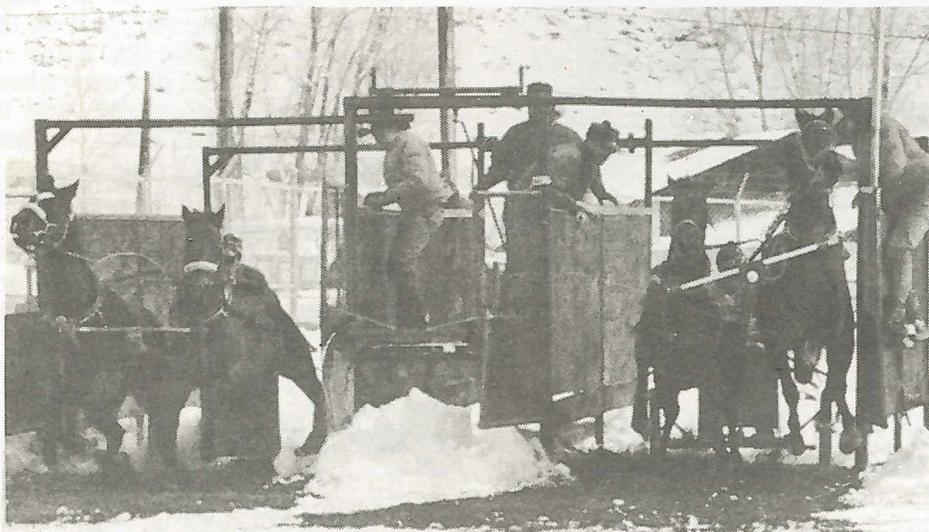
"Back in the late 1950's and early 60's it was all 'Lap and Tap'. That was when you went up the track at the same time, and turn at where you were supposed to start. When both teams got even the starter let them go. Every once in a while some one would try to jump the gun. Then it would take a lot longer to run a race. Especially if someone wanted to get the jump on the other team. If two guys wanted to get started together there was no problem. Now and then they would have false starts. When we were racing 'Lap and Tap' I used to try to figure out if the other driver was gonna try and get the jump on me, or if he was gonna try to get me to turn and to go. About the only way your opponent can mess you up in the starting gates is if you have a nervous team and they get you in the gates first and just deliberately stay outside for a while. Most of the drivers anymore are real good about going in and trying to make a good race. That's what almost ruined it there for a year or two with 'Lap and Tap', the crowd would get discouraged because it would take half an hour to get a race started. They didn't want to stand out there in the cold waiting for those drivers to get started. They wanted to see them go up the track and have a race. It took a better driver when it was 'Lap and Tap'. You had to have the horses broke a bit better. There was more chance of runaways.

"Around '65 we put permanent starting gates in here. The city tore our gates out and tried to take our track away from us, but our club went to the city council, and they said we could keep the track, if we made moveable gates.

There is quite a little trick to getting the teams into the starting gates together. The starter will let them go, as the teams come in together. No two teams work the same going into a gate. Sometimes you have to go in real fast, and some teams you can stop and fool around and wait for the other team and go in right with them. A lot of teams that don't get to go right in, balk and won't go until the other team is in, and then they usually blow up. (rare, buck, bolt)

"If you aren't prepared and have a hold of the lines when the gate opens you might be left at the gates, because the horses are 'gonna go.' I think you want to keep a good tight line on your team. I do when they come out of the starting gates, so that you're braced. If you have slack in the lines the horse may lunge, leaving the driver off balance causing the horse to rear on their hind legs. I had one turn over in the gates once. It wasn't anything serious. We got her unhooked

and tipped back up. I only know of about a half a dozen horses tipping over in the gates. When they first started using the gates everybody said it would be impossible to work a team in the starting gates. I was one of them. I didn't think it would work either, but we have had very little trouble in the starting gates. One horse at Casper reared up and got his head over the bars as they opened the gate. There was a wreck, lost the driver. They finally had to kill the horse. It was a freak accident.



"I do not feel that I have ever ruined or soured a horse yet by running them. A soured horse may freeze up, fight, or become extremely stubborn. The fact is that a lot of the horses are better to ride after racing them. Some people tell you that it makes them crazy, but I've never had a crazy yet. I broke most of my riding horses on a cutter. If you run them on a cutter before you get on them they are used to tugs and bumping from the cutter, and they aren't half as apt to buck you out.

"I've only crippled one horse in all the chariot racing I've done; that was for only about a couple of months. I would say there are more crippled horses run on a chariot than any other type of racing. Most of the fast horses are crippled or too old to run on a flat saddle track. (regular race track) There have been very few horses crippled on a chariot that wasn't crippled before they started. You see a lot of horses come off the track lame. Most of the horses were lame when they started on the track. They were given shots to kill the pain while they were running them. Barney was the horse that I crippled. I put shoes on him with a long toe grab. When he hit a hard place where cars and trucks had crossed the track he bowed a tendon. The majority of racers either use aluminum or steel race plates with toe grabs on the front. The reason I use these types of plates is because the horses don't get cut up so bad hauling them. It used to be nothing to see someone unload a horse with a big gash from the older style shoes, which had a longer toe grab.

"Our Yampa Valley Cutter Association usually hauls our horses to meets in a semi-truck. Most of the other organizations have trailers or stock truck to haul their horses. At out-of-town meets our horses are usually stabled around close to the tracks. Most of the racers keep their horses in barns and keep them blanketed all of the time. The only time I have a blanket on mine is after I've raced on a really cold day. Hauling horses over long distances slows them up a bit I think. There is a difference on the horses too. Some horses are bothered by hauling a lot more than others."

"Some trainers start running their horses when they are two years old. I figure if you are running a horse very hard every week that the horse should be a little older than two. They will last longer. If you don't overwork the horse it is alright, but a lot depends on the horse. If you have a real highpowered horse and do not have it in shape you can ruin it. Forcing a two-year-old too much will cause leg problems. Much depends on the horse and on how long I run them. I ran old Dee Star for about twelve years and one of his colts and stock for about ten years. I have run a horse named 'Dee Jay' for six years now.

"With some horses it makes quite a difference what side you hook them on, (right or left sides) I do it a little different than most guys do to start out a young horse. I hook the horse up with an old horse. I tie their heads and their tails together, That way they can't turn wrong side out on me. The young horse has to go where the old horse does.

"At Laramie, Wyoming, we ran four teams abreast. I think it's fine with good drivers and broke horses. It's just as safe as running two teams. If they get a team in the race that somebody can't handle, then there will be trouble. The year I was at Pocatello they ran four teams. They had just as good luck with four teams as with three. There will be wrecks once in a while, but there are very few for the amount of horses that are run. Poor driving causes wrecks, as does unbroke horses. There isn't any more danger in having a wreck with a team than there is with one horse if your equipment is good. Once in awhile the equipment will break.

“When we first started, the racers used saddle horses, but now some drivers are going to California, Arizona, and Utah, getting triple A horses off the race track to run. If you don't have the money to buy a triple A horses you have to run the ones you can get and hope there will be someone else at the race that has a team of the same speed. I have never been to a race yet that someone didn't have the same speed of horses as mine.



### Teams running neck and neck.

“There is about three seconds variation between the fast races and the slow races. The majority run about 23 seconds down to 26 but there are faster and slower times. The secret to an exciting race is to have two teams running that are of equal speed. The secret to having a good chariot team is a team that strides together. If they don't stride together you will never run up in the real fast times. The team has to start the same, especially out of the starting gates. When one horse jumps out a length ahead of the other one all you can do is pull the fast horse up and let the slow horse catch up. You have lost a second right there.

“The majority of horses that are run now are Quarter Horses or the Quarter Horse type Thoroughbreds. You hardly ever see the long gangly Thoroughbreds running up in the fast times. Most of the Thoroughbred type Quarter Horses have about 7 / 8 or 15 / 16 Thoroughbred blood and are registered as Quarter Horsees. A lot of the horses that aren't registered are out of registered horses. When we first started racing just about everybody hooked up their saddle horses and raced them. When we first started there wer quite a few Thoroughbreds that raced, and now very few straight Thoroughbreds are being run.

horses in shape you are going to win more races. I chase my running horses around the corral for about five minutes each day. Then I usually tie two of the horses behind the feed sled when I go out to feed. I have only two teams that are running steady this year. I do have a few colts that can run a little. I would hate to try and guess how many horses I've run in the past years.

“Some chariot racing goes on in the summer but the main racing season is in the winter time. During the winter circuit we always run a quarter of a mile. In the summer at fairs and rodeos the half mile is run.

“There is a lot of difference in the chariots that racers use. Some now weigh about 60 pounds. You can about pick them up with one hand. Most of the racers use motorcycle wheels or something heavier than bicycle wheels. The main thing is the balance of the chariot. Also the racer has to get used to his chariot and know where to stand so it is balanced best. Chariots used to be built much the same. A few racers make their own but not very many. There are several people in Utah, and a couple in Idaho that make chariots. Some of the chariot racers make custom built chariots. Glen Chiver and another fellow in Wyoming, make them to sell.

“I feel that on a hard track the heftier chariots pull just as easy as the lighter chariots. A team can run just as fast with a heavier person as with a lighter person once they get started. On a heavy track, the lighter your outfit the better. I have watched some big men run up in the fast times if the track is good and solid. The track conditions make the biggest difference in how much weight you put in your chariot, I think.

“I don't see that chariots run faster than cutters. A lot of people claim chariots are faster than cutters. On a good snow track I know cutters will run just as fast as chariots. I run a cutter down there one Sunday in the mud with that colt. I kept up with Bill Green. He had a chariot and his wheels balled up with mud. I think probably the cutter pulled easier than the chariot did. We ran in Bridger, Wyoming, one time right out on Bert Powers' meadow with cutters and no snow. They had a pretty good dirt track. The next day they decided if they could get enough chariots, there were three or four of'em around there, we went over and ran on the dirt track and didn't make as good of time on the dirt track as we did on the meadow. The ground was froze and the cutters pulled easy on it.



Bill and David May  
going to the starting gates.

# Chariot Ra



Ron Snowden listening to a few wild tales about chariot racing.



Bill May coming out of the gates at Laramie.



Preparing for the race.

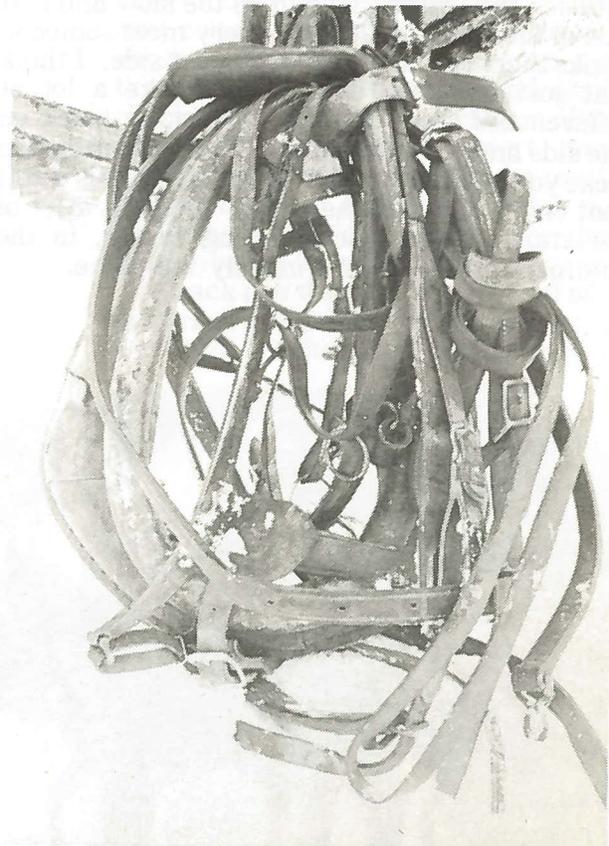


Gary Yeager, r

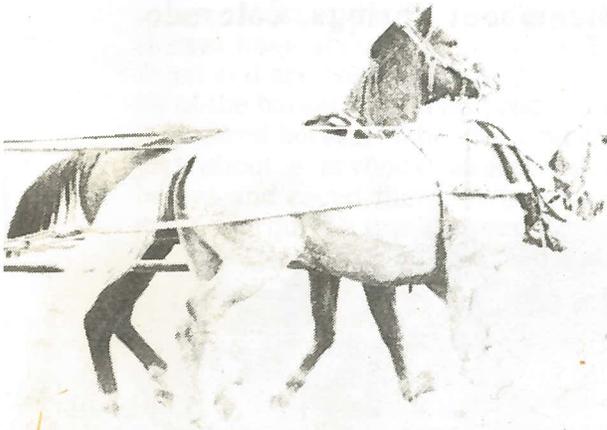
# cing, A Great Sport



Grace May helping with her Dad's team.



chariot harness.



ly to race.



“The track condition makes a lot of difference on the time of a race. Sometimes a team will outrun some of the faster ones on a soft track, and if they were on a good hard track the other team would outrun them.

“If you have a real hard head wind it will slow teams up. If you have a real hard tail wind, it will speed them up. If it is storming, bad horses won't run as fast, but both teams have the same chance. There will be better than a second's difference if you have a strong tail wind. Several races we have run where there was a real strong tail wind for about half of the race; some of the slow teams make better time than the fast ones that run with no tail wind. Ordinarily the weather stays the same the whole afternoon.

“There used to be a lot of difference of the two sides of the track. One side might be softer or something and you could tell a lot of difference between the teams that run on the slow and fast side of the track. At almost every meet someone thinks there is a slow side and a fast side. I think that just happens, but it does make a lot of difference if there is a soft spot in the track on one side and not on the other. If you are matched close you are going to get outrun if there is a soft spot on your side of the track. There is a lot of variations in the tracks during winter, in the summer the tracks are usually the same.



**A little oil might help keep the snow out of this horse's hooves.**



**Horses running on a snow track at Steamboat Springs, Colorado.**



**Keep up or eat dust.**

"We have only had photo finishes for about eight years. I have been to very few races where the photo finish worked every time. Photo finishes have been better the last few years. A guy up at Casper has an outfit that works pretty good. Most of the other outfits (photo finish pictures) that they use, they only get about half of the pictures. There is a surprising amount of races where the photo finish determines the winner. It used to be if the races were that close the judges would call it a dead heat. On a photo finish if a horse has his nose out a couple of inches ahead, you could tell it with the photo finish picture. They called two dead heats up at Casper one time with the photo finish. They don't like to have dead heats anymore because they have to give the Calcutta money back. The drivers are paid out of money taken in from the spectator gate receipt. So far the association that's putting on the race keeps the Calcutta money to try to pay the expenses, but it usually doesn't pay, but it helps.

Calcutta is a form of betting. Before each race, both teams in the race are auctioned off, one team at a time with the highest bidder "buying" the team, driver, and gate for that race. Both bidders (the buyers of the two teams) deposit the amount of their bid with the cashier. After the race, the buyer of the winning team collects both bids after a small percentage has been deducted to help pay the expenses of putting on the race. Each race may be auctioned several times, this gives any person wishing to wager on a team an opportunity to do so. Also it benefits the club. The success of Calcutta depends a lot on the auctioneer and understanding how a Calcutta works. The best way to learn is by experience.

"Chariot racing can be expensive if someone that is working in town goes out and buys a team of horses, harness and has to buy feed for them, and pays for a stall to keep them in. Why, it involves quite a bit of money. Most racers around here own their own horses & have to feed them anyway. It involves quite a bit of money if you go out and buy a team that wins these days. It costs thousands of dollars.

"At first of the racing year they match the ones that they think will make the best races. After they run the first race they then match the teams according to times. You match the fast ones against fast ones and slow ones against slow ones to make a close race to excite the crowd. You don't have to break any records to get the crowds enthused if the horses are racing neck and neck.

"There are quite a few businessmen that race up in Wyoming. Up around Casper a few chariot racers work in the oil fields. A good share of them work at other jobs and chariot race just for a hobby. A lot of the racers around Ft. Bridger are ranchers. Over at Lander a sheriff runs a team, and a man that owns a lumber yard runs one. There are a few teams that their owners hire somebody to take care of the horses and



**Some people will stand out in a snow storm to win a little money.**

keep them in shape. Eklunds, up there in Casper, the three brothers, have three or four teams they run themselves.

"In our by-rules no one is to drive a team unless they are in the association. There is some way they have it set up if a team hurts someone they can only sue the club for what the club has. You have to be a member of the association or they can sue the person driving. When we started the age was 18 before you could drive.

"The officials are supposed to disqualify you now, if you get across the center line. They hardly ever disqualify anybody unless they can see that they interfere with the other racer. At Pocatello, the World Championship races, they disqualify often. At Pocatello they have three sets of judges. Two at the starting gates, two & eighth of a mile down the track, and two at the finish. If one of those judges say that one of the teams got off the course, then all six judges have to get together and decide if he needs to be disqualified. Nine times out of ten if he gets out of his course very far, he is disqualified. They give you a thorough understanding--either you stay in your course or that's it. This cuts down the wrecks when they disqualify 'em. Once in a while a team will have a line break or something go wrong and the driver can't keep them from cutting in front of another team. That only happens once in a while. The main rule is to stay on your side of the track. When we first started racing some of the drivers would crowd you clear off the track if they thought that they could win the race.





Horses and drivers doing their best to win.

“There’s a few things that different people would like to change, but in the over all picture, I can’t think of anything. Maybe at an interstate meet; it would be better if we all had the same starter at the race meets. If we had the same starter we would start all of the races the same.

“Up at Casper, they gave lots of trophies for the four fastest times in four divisions. They usually give a trophy for the fastest combined time at the meet that qualifies a team to go to Pocatello, Idaho.

“The year I was up at Pocatello there were about 60 teams, I think they came from Utah, Wyoming, Montana and, Washington. At Pocatello there’s no messin around. You go up there and get your team and if you can’t get ’em in right away, then you just don’t get ’em in. They start the others and leave you sitting there. There’s no fooling around about it, one team goes off and another come on. Just almost like clockwork. It’s getting more so that way here. Most all the places we run, people try to get out on the track just as soon as the other team is off. The crowd likes that a lot better than if you mess around a long time trying to get ’em started.

Special thanks to those who gave their time for a personal interview, especially Clarence, Wheeler, Bill May, Gary Yeager. We would like to thank the members of the Yampa Valley Chariot and Cutter Racing Association for their support.

“If someone knows a team real good they could get a faster time than if you don’t know the horses. Most of all these teams that run up in the top bracket have one person that drives them all the time. You hardly see any teams running up in the top bracket that doesn’t have the same driver. My fastest time I think was 23.95 and that was only one time. I run more in the 24.25 most of the time.

“Art Hudspeth and I took the chariots out to Centennial as a demonstration to see if we could get the crowd interested. It didn’t seem to go over. The club has grown and dwindles. We have as many right now as we ever had, I think. There for three or four years we almost run out of club members. All of ’em are doing it for the fun of it, some of ’em are a little more serious than others. If they weren’t doing it for the fun of it, they wouldn’t be doing it. Some of ’em are more serious about winning than others.

“I have been hoping for the last 15 years we would get a bigger crowd. Some people think the Calcutta has increased our crowd. I really don’t think it has. They have tried to promote at a couple of places. I doubt if it increased the crowd too much. My brother, Dean Wheeler, and I have been racing cutters or chariots for about 18 years. Just the thrill of runnin’ is what keeps me doin’ it. If it wasn’t for that I wouldn’t be doing it. You think quite a few things while you’re going up the track.”

