

Dorsal Hitch Sulky by Fiona Mottram



Photo above: Mini donkey pair in the USA being driven to a dorsal hitch sulky made by Australian Jim Walsh.

DO YOU harness drive your donkeys or mules, or have you always thought you'd like to? Sometimes issues such as difficulties of transporting a cart to locations away from home, initial set up cost or inability to find a vehicle suitable for a mini-sized equine are just over-whelming factors.

Shut your eyes. Think Australian-designed and made by a firm that is very well established in the harness industry. A vehicle that is very light weight, dismantles easily for transportation, is easily and cheaply adapted from a single to a pair hitch, is extremely maneuverable, and has excellent suspension and brakes. Add too, that it's easy to maintain and long-lasting. There are models to suit equines from miniature donkeys up to 14hh or so. Design adjustments can be made for the vehicle to suit a disabled driver. Compared to prices of many other brand new, sturdy styles of harness vehicles, it is relatively cheap to buy and deliver to your door or nearest post office. Oh yes – and add in an historic connection to ancient equine experts!

Now open your eyes. You've got the amazing Dorsal Hitch Sulky made by R. J. Walsh and Son P/L of Padstow New South Wales. The models of Millennium City and Millennium Mini suit mini equines while the Millennium Maxi model suits donkeys 10-14hh approximately.

It's probably a bit of a shock to the visual system. Unless you recall photos in past issues of *Donkey Digest* featuring Noeline Cassettari of NSW driving her mini donkey and mini horse as a pair, you've never seen anything like it before. First impression is that it is strange, a tad stark and well...it kind of doesn't look very substantial, just a few bits of metal. I mean, where's the cart? That thing looks more like a bicycle rack!

Well think again. Think of all those real advantages. Look at the web site www.rjwalsh.com.au/mini/index.htm, [including warm tributes from happy users] the facts and Noeline's very enthusiastic endorsement [see further on] of her dorsal hitch cart

Look harder at the bench seat model if you find the single seat model is a bit much to come at. Overcome your prejudices – and just dress to cope with mud [maybe even wear goggles?] if it is those kind of conditions as there's no mudguards or splashboard. Mind you, plenty of standard vehicles don't have those fitted either!

The suspension, balance and light weight of the dorsal hitch is reputed to be really something. Considering that the designers are renowned for their innovative racing sulky designs which have been used to break numerous world records, and that the mini sulkies [commenced in late 1999] came about as equine owners requested some kind of adaptation of the firm's popular canine harness vehicles, there's been plenty of thought and trial behind these current equine models.

Innovative but spreading

Designer Jim Walsh, who joined his father's business several decades ago, explains that, "Despite its novelty, and the overwhelming weight of conservative opinion, there are now several hundred dorsal hitch single shaft sulkies in use throughout the world, and those who have them *know* that they are overwhelmingly superior to anything they have used before. "In fact this year we have granted distributor rights for the mini sulkies to a German organisation who will be distributing the minis in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. "We have already sold them in the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, Cypress, Hawaii, Canada, the USA (our main market) New Zealand and, of course, Australia."

He mentioned that the extreme manoeuvrability of the dorsal hitch cart meant that variations have continued to be used for many purposes from war to circus acts [see photo below], since it was first developed by the Ancient Greeks.



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Details

Jim stated, "They have full independent suspension by progressive rate coil springs and Ikon Australian-made adjustable hydraulic competition-grade dampers. In plain language, they have the best road-holding [stability] of any miniature harness racing vehicle in the world. Also, they are of tubular stainless steel construction. Easy to maintain, very long lasting, and beautiful.

Brakes are an optional extra for the Springtail, City Mini, Millennium Mini and Millennium Maxi models. The brakes are disc brakes, the rotor is stainless steel and made by R.J. Walsh & Son P/L. The brakes calipers are Italian Grimeca units. The brakes are applied to both wheels simultaneously via a single handle on the cross bar.

The sulkies come apart easily for transport in car or float. The City Mini is the easiest to transport as it can be carried in a sedan or station wagon car if you don't have a van or horsefloat.



Photo above: The Millennium Maxi model can be used to suit donkeys 10-14hh.

Cart costs & weights

For mini donkeys up to 36 inches, the appropriate models are either the 19.5 kilogram City Mini designed for urban use but capable of traversing gutters, or the slightly longer and wider 20 kilogram Millennium Mini for off road use. These cost approximately \$2,400 delivered as a flat pack to any capital city in any state [except for Darwin in the Northern Territory].

For donkeys in the 10-14hh range, the 23 kilogram Millennium Maxi would suit. It costs approximately \$2,500 in basic form.

To drive a pair of donkeys two abreast, you also need an Equine Yoke, which costs \$159.50. The option of brakes to any model that can have them would cost an extra \$798-60.

Incidentally, the business sells other models of sulkies including some lighter ones for dogs plus

many styles of horse-racing sulkies including the Regal Apollo chariot [driver standing, think *Spartacus*], which can be fitted with conventional shafts or a pole and yoke as well.



Photo above: Bench seat version of the mini dorsal hitch sulkie. [NB it is sitting at 90° to a racing sulkie so don't mix up the poles/shafts.]

Harness

Unfortunately, you can't use conventional harness with the dorsal hitch carts as it's a different pulling system.

Jim Walsh, who has exported a large number of his vehicles to America which he describes as the harness centre of the world, recommends harness makers Chimacum Tack in Texas for sourcing your harness.

Janie Amdal of Chimacum Tack described the dorsal hitch vehicle as, "The lightest, most exciting and animal-friendly carts ever designed for miniature equines [in] the 21st century. The first of these, the Regal Millennium Mini, was designed in 2000, and since then the incredible ease of use, comfort and maneuverability of these carts has won them a legion of fans and has spawned a host of developments such as the "City Mini", the "Spyder" and the "Springtail".

She continued "Traditional harness cannot be used on these dorsal hitch carts, and Chimacum Tack is proud to have developed harness specifically for this growing class of cart. "This harness is designed for comfort and convenience. "Built of Betathane with stainless hardware each part is made to fit your horse properly and allow freedom of movement. "The saddle is wide, well padded and designed to facilitate comfortable pulling. "The bridle includes a curved crown, rounded cupped blinds and flexible winker stays. (Open bridles available on request). "The breeching and breast collar are both designed to keep the saddle comfortably in place. "The crupper is soft, folded and stitched leather which is the most comfortable style and never rubs. Lines [reins] are 5/8.

The dorsal hitch harness can be viewed at www.chimacumtack.com/miniaturehorsetack/miniaturehorseharness.html.

Larger sizes can be made to order and there are several colours to choose from - black, brown, red, blue and green Betathane. Harness made to measure for equines up to 44 inches [11hh] costs \$495 US dollars [approx AUD \$530] plus postage. Janie added, "If it were for a larger animal the price would go up a bit - a 14hh dorsal hitch donkey harness would be US\$595 [approx AUD \$636]. "Shipping is always the expensive part. We do ship to Australia – generally US postal service is the least expensive way. It takes 6-8 days and costs \$125 US [approx. AUD \$134] for 20 lbs and these harnesses are not heavier than that."

Janie continued, "We do offer the harness in leather which is not our recommendation and the price is 30% more than the Betathane. Beta is seven times stronger than leather, does not stretch, does not absorb water, does not separate, washes with water and if needed soap. Hardware is stainless for low maintenance."

Photo below: The Chimacum Tack version of the dorsal hitch harness on a miniature horse that is driven to one of Jim Walsh's sulkies. The wider harness saddle is reminiscent of a curricule harness saddle pad.



Noeline has discovered that harness racing supplies manufacturer Rocket Harness Company in Queensland will make a dorsal hitch harness "for about \$350". She said this option was "not as fancy a product" and mentioned that there was to and fro required before a correct fit was obtained. However it is significantly cheaper and "washes clean and does the job fine!"

Rocket Harness Company can be contacted at PO Box 35, Marburg, QLD 4346, phoned on (07) 5464 1737 or Fax (07) 5464 1727 or emailed via banforth@optusnet.com.au.

Noeline's Testimony

The following extracts about a City Mini dorsal hitch cart are from Noeline Cassettari of the Donkey Society of New South Wales emailing enthusiastically to Donkey Society Victoria member Heather Bradbury who is interested in buying a vehicle for pair driving.

Noeline stated, *"I don't have brakes on mine, but they do come with brakes if you like. It is extremely well sprung. I can drive up and down gutters as the manufacturer claims. I have no problems at all driving my animals straight, however I do have trouble backing in pairs. (Both animals fan out. I may be able to fix this with better rein technique, but am new to pairs!). I use a strap from the chest of one donkey to the other, similar to traditional pairs vehicles. This stops your animals travelling off in their own direction. You will need breeching on a harness for a donkey, or it will slide everywhere. However it won't work like traditional breeching as the cart and harness are designed differently.*

You can drive singles or pairs. In theory this is easily done by just adding the pairs attachment. However once I set up for pairs, I have never gone back to singles as my animals really love going out together. Jim is very clever, and has invented lots of things just because people have asked. So if you did want to drive three donkeys abreast... who knows! [Ed. Note: The Regal web site does have a photo of three minis abreast - a troika- to a dorsal hitch cart].

You do need to buy a special harness. This is a big added cost. The only positive is that it is a much simpler harness to hitch up, and very easy to long rein or lunge in. The bench seat looks good. It means you can have someone with you to open gates.

The other thing I found while driving Jim's vehicle is that it attracts a lot of attention. Initially, some conservative people couldn't accept such a design. But as you drive donkeys you won't be a conservative person, so that's no worries!! Most people are very impressed and ask lots of questions.

You may have seen a [harness] vehicle overturned or seen photos of this happening? With Jim's cart, if your vehicle were to flip your donkeys wouldn't notice. They would be standing comfortably on all four legs. And emergency unhitching is just as easy.

Ever had to stop an equine that has bolted? With Jim's vehicle you can turn on the spot. They can be turned away from danger in an instant. Worried that they may turn and face you? I have tried to do it to see what would happen. Firstly, no smart equine would run into a vehicle. Secondly, even if you ask them too, the cart always swings around and follows them."

Noeline concluded, "I love the theory, and think it works especially well with donkeys."