

Driving Horses on Ice

by Pat Wolfe

32 years ago I had an opportunity to drive a horse and sleigh on ice. I was hooked. There is nothing to compare with flying down a frozen river with your horse trotting as fast as he can motor. Since then, every December I start checking the thickness of the ice, waiting for the day I can hitch and go.

Driving on ice can be a lot of fun but it can be dangerous for you and your horse, if you aren't careful. Here are a few things to be aware of.

Your first concern is the thickness of the ice. I use a cordless electric drill with a ½ inch drill bit at least 12 inches long. I test the ice everywhere I will be driving. You have to be more careful in some areas than others. Anywhere water is flowing under the ice, and anywhere in the vicinity of a beaver house, drill many test holes. I will not put a horse on ice that is not six inches thick.

Secondly, winter shoes are a must for your horse. If you do not use the correct shoes your horse can slip and do major damage to his muscles and tendons. All four shoes must have corks in them. I use the rivet type. Make sure you use four corks for each shoe, two in the toe and one on each heel. I also use snow pads between the foot and the shoe. This keeps wet snow from building up in the foot. When snow builds up, the corks will not make contact with the ice and the horse is liable to slip.

Thirdly, choose your vehicle well. You need a sleigh that is stable if you drive on sheer ice. My Norwegian sleigh is fantastic. It trails behind the horse really well and does not slide from side to side. Only use a vehicle that has shaves or a pole. Never use a stone-boat on ice. Be careful when driving a bobsleigh. The back end can slide around and meet the front.

Finally, drive straight to keep your vehicle from sliding, especially when you fly. Make your turns only while driving slowly; at a walk is the safest way. If you turn with any speed, you risk the shaves or pole knocking the horse off his feet causing a nasty accident.



Photo Credit: Jane Wolfe