



Ahead of the Pony World Championships we caught up with Maria Buchwald - Committee Member and Competitor at this years World Championships.

Focus on Maria Buchwald

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What initially drew you to the sport of carriage driving?

My parents introduced me to the sport. They began helping a close friend as grooms in both pairs (H2) and four-in-hand (H4), so I spent my childhood summers at competitions. Eventually, they got their own single horse and started driving themselves. I was so eager to be old enough to groom for my dad that I could hardly wait.

One day, I asked if I could try driving myself — using my very first pony, a white Welsh Section A. Even though the pony had never done driving before, my dad hitched him to a carriage, and off we went to our first competition. That's how it all began.

Can you tell us about your journey from your first competition to qualifying for the World Championship?

I was fortunate to have supportive parents and great ponies, which allowed me to start in the children's classes. As I grew older and gained more experience, I progressed through the junior levels.

My first international competition was in 2014 at the Youth European Championships in Poland. The results weren't outstanding — except for fourth place in dressage — but what truly stood out was the friendships I made with other young drivers from different countries. That experience was one of the biggest reasons I fell in love with sport. It's not just about the competition — it's also about the people, the shared passion, and of course, the fun of working with ponies.

In 2017, at just 18 years old, I entered my first season as a senior driver. My dad and I made it our goal to qualify for the World Championships in Minden — a city that holds special meaning for our family. Two years earlier, we had bought ponies in Minden with the potential to reach that level.

With a bit of luck and a lot of hard work during the winter of 2016/2017, we managed to qualify at the very first two competitions of the season. That year, both my dad and I represented Denmark at the WCH in Minden — he as an individual driver, and I as part of the team. It was extra special because he was one of the oldest drivers there, and I was one of the youngest.



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Who has been the biggest influence or mentor in your carriage driving career?

Without a doubt, my dad and Michael Freund.

My dad has been there for me every step of the way — constantly supporting and pushing me to become a better driver. His encouragement and belief in me have been essential.

Michael Freund has also had a huge impact on my development. I had the opportunity to work at his stables for several years. What I learned there — and continue to learn from him — has transformed my journey from a hobby driver into someone now competing among the top 10 in the world.

Michael is a legend in our sport, coaching many of today's top drivers. But what I admire most is how he still takes time to support his former grooms and students. Whenever we meet at competitions, he always shows up, says hello, and offers advice or help if we need it. That kind of support means everything. He is also one of the reason, that I could made the transition from single to pair driver and in a short time.

What does a typical day of training look like for you and your horses ?

At the moment, I'm fortunate to work with a pair of experienced ponies. That means I don't need to teach them anything entirely new — instead, my focus is on refining and perfecting the different elements of competition: dressage, cones, and marathon.

Typically, I train them 4–5 times a week. At the beginning of each week, I plan a small weekly schedule for my three ponies, depending on what each one needs to work on. This includes sessions for dressage, conditioning, gymnastic work, cones, marathon training, or sometimes just single driving or even riding under saddle.

They spend their mornings and most of the day out in the paddock, which keeps them mentally and physically fresh. I usually train them in the afternoons after work or during the weekends. Each session lasts between 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the focus of the day.

How does you balance physical fitness for both yourself and your team of horses?

For me, my ponies always come first. I usually focus a lot on their physical fitness during the winter months — before I start working on specific competition elements. That means lots of training in the woods and on tracks, often including interval training over distances of more than 10 kilometers. This helps build their stamina and ensures they're physically prepared for the upcoming season. During the competition season, I still try to prioritize this type of training at least once a week to help keep them in top condition.

As for myself, I try to fit in a few exercise sessions during the week — even just short workouts. But luckily, working with horses means I'm physically active every day. Riding and general stable work help keep me fit, and in many ways, what's good for me also benefits the ponies.

What specific preparations are you focusing on in the final months before the Championship?

Nothing too specific at the moment — my main focus is making sure the ponies are in top physical condition, maybe even a bit more than usual. Besides that, I've been reflecting on the competitions from earlier in the season and working to improve on the mistakes we made. It's all about fine-tuning the details and making small adjustments that can make a big difference in performance.

How do you mentally prepare for the competition?

I've found that what works best for me is simply focusing on myself, my team, and what my ponies need — before, during, and after the competition.

It's a bit like staying in my own little bubble. By keeping my focus inward and not getting distracted by everything going on around me, I'm able to stay calm, clear-headed, and present for both my ponies and my team.

Tell us about the horses you'll be driving at the world championships – what are their names, breeds, and personalities ?

My top ponies are;

- **Bloklands Hoeve Cupido** – stable name *Cupi* – is a 17-year-old Welsh pony. He competes with me in all three phases. Cupi is a little powerhouse — always reliable and full of energy. He's incredibly sensitive and has a bit of a grumpy, "just leave me alone" personality. It takes time to earn his trust, but once you're under his skin (especially if you bring food!), he'll do anything for you.
- **De Klumperts Monnstar** – stable name *Moon* – is a 19-year-old Welsh pony and my dedicated marathon partner. He's like two ponies in one: in the stable or in hand, he's the sweetest, calmest soul who absolutely LOVES cuddles. But once he's in front of the carriage, he transforms — full of power, always wanting to go faster, and completely unstoppable. He'll keep working until he physically can't anymore.
- **Don 553** – stable name *Don* or *D* – is a 20-year-old Welsh pony who competes in dressage and cones. He's been my partner in crime since the autumn of 2015, so this is our 9th season together. We know each other inside and out — I know his thoughts, and he knows mine. He's the troublemaker of the group, still mentally a 5-year-old stallion. Don lives for attention and will do anything to get it — teasing, nudging, or just being silly until someone gives in. He's a total goofball and never fails to make me laugh.

How do you build trust and communication with your horses?

I love spending time in the stables and being with my ponies every single day.

When I have a new horse in the stable, I always try to spend extra time with them

— before and after work — to learn their likes and dislikes, and especially to find their favorite cuddle spots. For me, that makes a huge difference in building trust and communication. I believe that truly knowing my ponies inside and out — and them knowing me — is the key to a strong partnership. It takes time, sometimes even years, but I try to do a little every day. And in the end, all those small moments really make a difference.

What role does your groom or navigator during competitions?

The people I have with me at competitions are usually my parents, my boyfriend, and one or two close friends as grooms. We work together as a team to get everything done — and to make sure we still have fun along the way. My grooms are all people I'm personally close to, so I trust them completely when they give advice or share their opinions. That trust means we can work together for the best possible results while enjoying the experience. At the end of the day, we're a close unit that can always share a good laugh.



What is your favorite phase of competition— dressage, marathon, or cones — and why?

For me, it's the cones. I think it's because of the mix of unpredictability, speed, precision, driver nerves, and the horses' cooperation on the day. Yes, it can be a disaster when nothing works — but on those days when everything clicks, when you finish with a double clear and the horses feel like a dream to drive, it's almost a heavenly feeling.

How do you adapt to the different terrains and weather conditions during competitions?

Sometimes we know the type of terrain before the competition, so I try to train my ponies in conditions that are as close as possible to what we'll face. But sometimes things change once we're there. In those cases, I try to focus on the positives — some conditions can be great training for future championships. For everything else, I simply wait to see how my ponies handle it on the day and then make the best of the situation.



How do you approach competing against the best in the world- what is your mindset?

My mindset has changed over the years — this will be my fifth World Championship for ponies — but some things remain the same. First of all, I'm deeply grateful and proud to have the opportunity to compete in my nation's colors. Over the past few years, I've gotten to know more and more of the other drivers personally. This year, it almost feels like competing against friends and acquaintances. Of course, I know they'll bring their A-game, and I'll do my best to do the same.

What would success at the world championship mean to you personally and professionally?

If I were lucky enough to have success at the WCH, it would mean the most to me personally. It would prove that my small team, with more limited resources, can stand alongside some of the biggest names in the sport. It would also be a chance to put the Danish flag back on the map — we've only had a win in the singles class, and that was 14 years ago. Above all, it would be a reminder of what an incredible partnership with ponies can bring you.

What advice would you give to someone considering entering the sport?

Give yourself time to learn and gain experience. Be open to people at competitions, and don't be afraid to ask for help. In our sport, friendships can last a lifetime — and, in the end, your biggest competitor might just become your best friend.

What is one thing people might be surprised to learn about you?

I am dyslexic, which has always given me challenges at school. I have obtained my truck driving license including trailer and my education in a foreign country (Germany) with almost no aids.

How do you unwind after major competition

Nothing big, just unpack the trailer and truck, slowly wash everything so it is ready for the next competition, and relax with the ponies (normally they get one week off after a competition and a lot time on the paddock) and my team.

What are you most looking forward to about the world Championship – on or off the field?

Being at beautiful Le Pin again, enjoying a hopefully good week, with my ponies and my team, and the Danish team. Meeting friends from other countries and having fun.



International Carriage Drivers Association