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Wiebe Dragstra is one of six American drivers that qualified for the combined driving, one of seven equestrian sports that will be contested during the World Equestrian Games next month at the Tryon International Equestrian Center.

Gearing Up for a Run on the World Stage

BY MARY KATE MURPHY

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Imagine driving a Ferrari through an intricate pattern, twisting and turning around solid posts then gunning the motor to make it to the next hazard. Or driving through pairs of cones set barely wider than the vehicle, as quickly as possible without displacing balls perched on top.

Now imagine that “sports car” is something like 25 feet long and doesn’t just have a mind of its own, it has four.

That’s the challenge of combined driving, one of seven equestrian sports that will be contested at the World Equestrian Games next month.

The 2018 WEG at Tryon International Equestrian Center, about 50 miles southeast of Asheville, will be the second ever held in the United States.

Held every four years, the WEG stages Olympic-level dressage, show jumping and eventing along with horse sports not included in the Olympics: driving, vaulting, reining and endurance. Equestrians from more than 70 countries are expected to compete in Tryon.

While singles and pairs driving are generally more popular, the WEG is only open to the most traditional turnouts: teams of four. They’re also the most skill-intensive from a driving perspective and, when the expenses associated with caring for, training, and transporting four or five horses are tallied up, prohibitively expensive.

So much so that only six American drivers have managed to qualify for the WEG. Three will make the team, though which three depends on the results of the Hermitage Classic, the final selection trial in progress this weekend in Kentucky.

One of the six, Wiebe Dragstra, has been training to be a WEG contender a lot longer than he’s officially been an American.

“Especially with the good horses it’s fun to do,” he said. “If your horses are in condition and can do the job and they’re trained well it’s a wonderful experience. You go fast and you have to really be alert and quick to respond. It’s challenging, it really is.”

Dragstra grew up around his father’s Friesians, a traditional carriage breed, in his native Holland. There, his experiences include grooming at the 1982 World Championships and working in The Hague as a coachman for the Dutch royal household.

He emigrated to the United States in 1990 and established Dragstra Stables in horse country between Southern Pines and Vass in 1995. U.S. citizenship came last year.

Nowadays, he’s head of “Team Turbo,” as he’s dubbed his team of crude-oil black Arabo-Friesian horses and the group of owners and sponsors who support them.

“We drivers put our time into it, a lot of time, but without sponsors and financial backup it’s an impossible thing,” Dragstra said. “Our whole team has a lot of passion. It’s phenomenal.”

Horses in a four-in-hand can have one



of two jobs. The wheelers are the rear pair, responsible for 1,300 pounds of carriage plus the weight of the driver, groom, and navigator.

“The wheelers are generally a little bit broader, a little bigger with more muscle,” said Dragstra. “The leaders are a little smaller, a little handier to maneuver and more elegant for dressage. They carry themselves more upright. How they’re built and their work ethic is very important, especially for a wheeler.”

Team Turbo’s wheelers, Dark Timke and Dark Upke are owned by Steve and Cindy Vollers, who imported them as weanlings from the Netherlands in 2006.

The leaders, or the foremost pair, are Dark Abir and Duco R owned by Eleanor and Larry Smith. Those two were imported in 2012 at four and five.

While he describes Upke as a one-of-a-kind wheeler, it’s the youngest member of the team, Dragstra’s six-year-old homebred Oberon, who holds a special place in his heart.

“He’s come a long way and he’s getting better and better. Every show we go to he gets more into the game and gets better. He’s a wonderful horse.”

Unlike most elite drivers, some of

whom have a “second string” of international caliber horses waiting in the wings, Dragstra has been the sole driving trainer for all of his horses.

“Most of the time people buy horses already trained to drive and then they start rotating horses, buying horses, but I’m a firm believer in training your own horse so you know what you’ve got,” he said. “It seems to pay off in the end.”

Similar to eventing, combined driving is a three-phase event beginning with dressage, where competitors are judged based on horses’ balance, submission, and quality of movement as they execute a prescribed pattern.

But carriages and jumping don’t mix, so competitors test their horses’ endurance, speed and agility in other ways. The marathon phase is roughly analogous to cross country, in that it’s a lengthy course — about 10 miles at the upper levels — of natural obstacles like water crossings, bridges, and driving hazards set over varied terrain.

In the third phase, where eventers aim to leave all the show jumping rails up, the objective for drivers is to weave through each set of cones without jarring them.

Though they’ve only recently gained popularity, Arabo-Friesians might have been custom-made for the sport. Cousins of the horses Dragstra grew up with, between 10 and 20 percent of their bloodlines can be traced to Arabian horses, who added refinement and stamina to the Friesian’s elegance and willing nature.

Dragstra started competing Timke, Upke, Abir and Duco as a team in 2015.

“You have to train them at the lower levels and take them out and compete them and work through injuries,” he said. “I would say it takes a good four or five years to develop a good international team. Just like eventing, it’s a constant observation of the horse but it takes longer with four.”

The investment, though, is a long-term one.

“Driving horses, if they stay sound and healthy with tip-top care, can be actively competing until they’re 17 or 18,” said Dragstra. “There are really good horses who are older, senior type horses and they are phenomenal. It’s unbelievable. It’s almost like the older and experienced they are, the more quality you get.”

Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh is responsible for the conception of combined driving in the early 1970s, and true to its roots it remains Eurocentric. Almost all internationally-ranked four-in-hand drivers hail from Europe, and those that don’t — most notably the American Chester Weber and Australian Boyd Exell — compete there extensively.

As it stands, only the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Germany are set to send teams to Tryon to contest the WEG. That makes for a dozen European drivers, the U.S. team and potentially a couple of individuals from Australia and Canada.

The 2014 WEG in Normandy, France brought together 46 drivers from 15 countries.

In light of that, the driving community is petitioning the FEI, the international governing body for equestrian sports, to open the WEG to all qualified American drivers and field a more robust competition on the most prominent stage that combined driving ever gets.

Previously, host countries were allowed up to nine drivers, including the three whose scores comprise the team result. But this year, in light of growth in other disciplines that has more countries fielding teams, the FEI has eliminated that policy.

“That might change, who knows. It’s at the discretion of the Tryon organizing committee,” Dragstra said. “The sport is in a little bit of decline at the moment and the other equestrian sports are kind of on the lift. It would be good for the sport and good for the future of the sport to showcase US drivers.”

For more information about the World Equestrian Games and the potential U.S.A. combined driving contenders, visit www.horsedrivingenthusiasts.com.

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