



# THE Standardbred — JOURNAL —

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I've  
GOT  
THIS



Shiflet®  
2022  
Photo By Rachel

**2022 Asheville Amateur Roadster to Bike Champion**  
I've Got This, 2014 Gelding (Muscle Massive - Andover Hall) Driven by Rose Marie Wheeler





# THE Standardbred JOURNAL

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PO Box 185  
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Editor and Advertising Sales:  
Mark Yoder, 330-946-6501  
Email: ymarkjournal@gmail.com

General Manager and Podcasts: Steven Yoder

Graphic Design & Layout:  
Beth Miller, 330-473-2253  
info@sugarbushdesign.com

Writing and Proofreading  
Jeff Pratt and Connie Troyer

Road Horse Show Representative:  
Rick Adams, 678-296-7442

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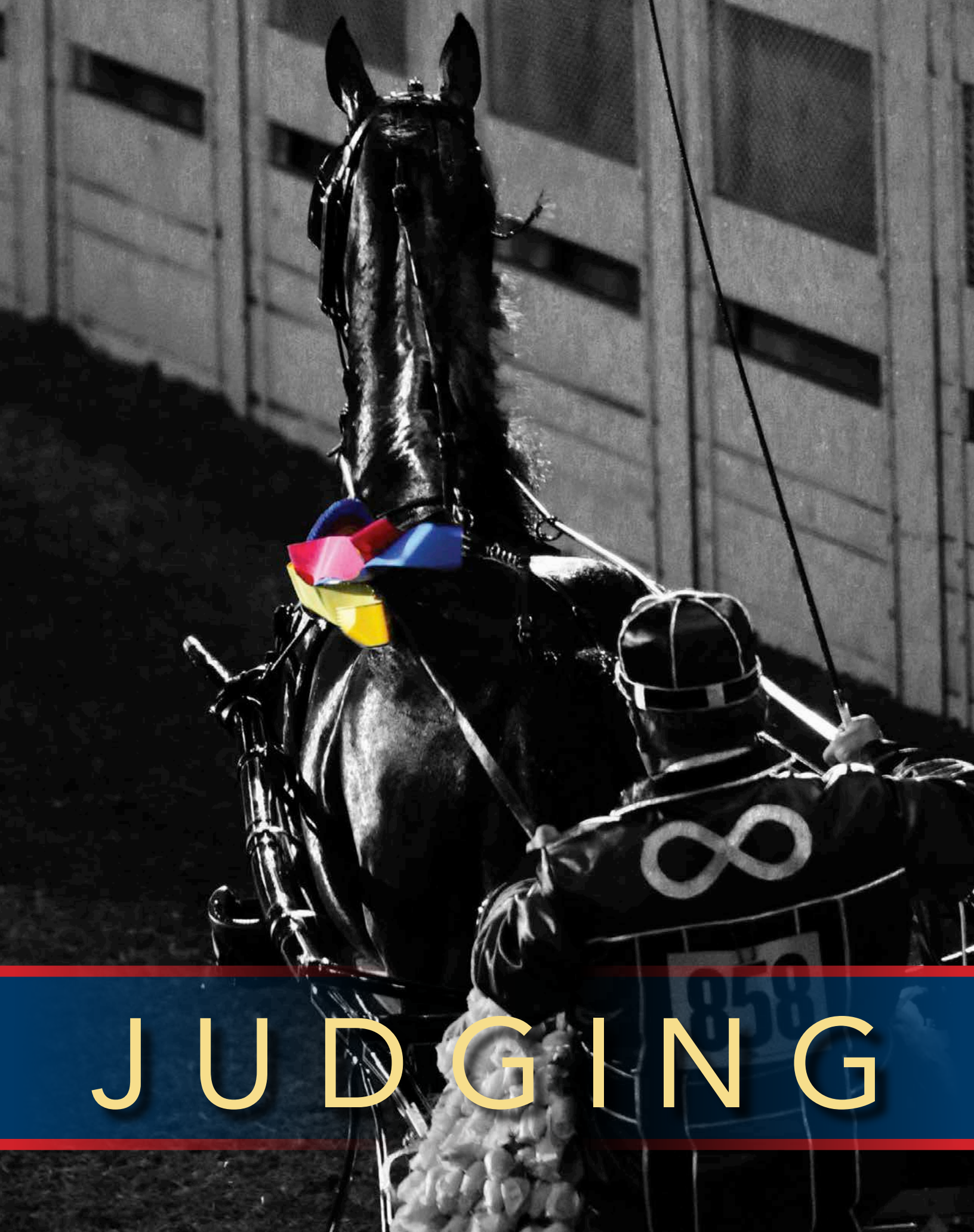


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# JUDGING

# Slate Acres Stables

## *A Destination for Fine Harness Horses*

By Reuben Dourte    Photography Provided by Slate Acres

Approximately two and a half miles west of the quiet town of Baltic, Ohio, nestled against a backdrop of sparsely wooded, “rolling hills” is one of the country’s premier training barns of fine harness horses.

The rich red color of the steel on the neatly kept barns, with their accents of charcoal-colored trim, along with the well-manicured grounds of Slate Acres Stables, is plenty enough to attract visitors. It also offers the impression that this is a facility where the finer details about fine harness horses will be attended to in great detail.

Robert Hershberger set out to turn his vision of an elite stable of horses into a reality around the turn of the 21st century. Striving to do things the right way, find new and better ways to achieve superior results, and improve constantly is the kind of mentality Robert Hershberger carried with him.

He accomplished his goals and set up an empire for fine harness horses. Now, Robert’s son David has taken that mentality and used it to propel Slate Acres Stables to new heights over the past several years.

Slate Acres Stables is now a well-known source of show quality prospects within the Amish Standardbred industry and the fine harness show world, alike. However, this was not always the case. In the late 1990s, the Hershbergers began a horse habit that would transform into a full-time business for the family’s second generation. This came with the purchase of Percheron Draft Horses.

### **Draft Horses Beginnings**

Robert had developed an interest in horses. Therefore, he attended a draft horse sale with his brother-in-law. Soon after, the family was breeding their Percherons under their Slate Acres prefix. Moreover, the product of their program was regularly finding themselves on the front pages of sale reports across the Midwest.

More importantly, the presence of the horses on the farm allowed a young equestrian to grow up within the horse industry. It also gave him the time to learn by trial and error with the Percherons he began to train and fit for sales. It would be this experience with drafts that resulted in Dave catching the horse “bug.” Moreover, it would also lay the groundwork for a career in training and presenting fine harness horses and roadster prospects.

### **The Early Years with Draft Horses**

During those early years, Dave enjoyed attending draft horse sales with his father as a young boy. The two would regularly visit Dublin Valley Farms to watch Robert Hershberger trained and prepped a string of Percheron mares for auction each spring. These trips helped to solidify Dave’s desire and vision further to start his training stables.

Similarly, his father credits Rob from Dublin Valley for his exemplary help and support over the years. As it turns out, the Mid-Ohio Memorial Trotting Sale, which Rob



# Meet Our Roadster Advisors



**JAMES NICHOLS**, current American Road Horse & Pony Association president, past president of the United Professional Horsemen's Association, longtime trainer, and lifelong roadster enthusiast, hails from Metairie, Louisiana. James has served on many committees for the United Professional Horsemen's Association, American Saddlebred Horse & Breeders' Association, and USEF, including the addressing of rule changes. He is a popular and tenured judge who has adjudicated at all of the major horse shows nationally and internationally. James is a lifetime member of ARHPA, American Saddlebred Horse & Breeders' Association, UPHA, and the American Hackney Horse Society. He has been honored with the UPHA Lifetime Achievement Award and the ASHA C. J. Cronan Sportsmanship Award, and has been inducted into the UPHA Hall of Fame.



**SHANE MULLENS** is a trainer at Diamond View Farm in Versailles, Kentucky. Shane trained the undefeated Roadster-Under-Saddle Bebe Rexha from pulling a buggy to twelve wins for his amateur rider. He drove the Standardbred Magical Beginnings to the Kentucky County Fair World's Championship win. In 2021, his rider and driver won both the Amateur Roadster Under Saddle World's Champion of Champions title as well as the Amateur Roadster To Bike World's Champion of Champions Award at the Kentucky State Fair. In 2015, Shane accomplished a triple feat. He trained the charismatic Roadster Thunderbolt to the Amateur Under Saddle win, the Amateur Ladies To Bike blue ribbon, and the Under Saddle Championship win—three World's Championship titles with the same horse, all in the same year. Shane has judged all over the country, including the World's Championship Horse Show.



**JIMMY ROBERTSON** is a second-generation professional horseman at his and wife Helen's Infinity Stables, proprietor of Robertson Equine Sales LLC, and winner of almost every Hall of Fame Award in the equine industry. Jimmy's record of wins includes the Roadster To Bike World's Grand Championship with Divide 'N Conquer and the Kentucky County Fair Roadster Championship with GRCH Chanteur PV in 2020. In 2021, he won the lucrative Mid-Ohio Trotting Sale class with Zoom at the Lexington Junior League Horse Show. Robertson, from Shelbyville, Kentucky, has judged internationally and across the U.S., including three times at the World's Championship Horse Show.

considered the science of showing Roadsters but not necessarily the art. For that, you need to read between lines, consider your horse's style and strengths, assess the entries in the ring with you, and find the way to show your horse—safely—to its best advantage.

Safety is the first priority, according to all three judges. “At the turn, reposition on the seat on the bike. It's extremely important that you're sitting in the correct spot. It not only balances your bike but also your horse,” Nichols says.

Mullens then emphasizes, “And keep both legs in the bike's stirrups! It's not cool to hang a leg out of the bike. Lock your knee and get all the way over, and you won't flip that bike.”

Strategy in the show ring depends on many factors—ring layout, ring conditions, competitors' horses, the number of horses in the ring, and more. “I like a horse to come in strong, almost at a road gait, and then kick back a bit,” Mullens says.

Robertson agrees: “Make your entrance known. Hit the ring looking bold and correct. Catch the judges' eyes as soon as you can,” he says.

And, similar to stock car racers, there's the tricky subject of passing. “Control is the main part of the [amateur] class,” says Nichols. “Running up behind someone or getting boxed in—that's all about control. Make your decision about what you're going to do on the next straightaway as you go into the turn, not as you leave it. There's not time to ponder; you must make quick decisions. Know when to go and when to hold 'em.” He continues, “I'd rather see someone pull up a bit rather than push through and try to get out of a tight spot. Pass according to what's ahead of you and what's inside your position in the ring.”

Robertson adds, “Stay as close to the rail as you can, because the rail is your friend. If you must pass another horse, do it by turning a bit sooner into the turns, but smoothly. Then go back to the rail. Stay in your lane, like NASCAR drivers should.”

And Mullens wraps it up by saying, “My number-one tip is to keep space in front of you. If you're coming up on someone, let them go into the turn while you cut your turn sooner. Your spot is key. Stay on the rail! As a judge, I'll crucify someone for driving around in the middle of the ring.”

Then there's the ring layout. While some rings are renowned for their Roadster-friendly design and slightly banked turns, others are, well, rather flat. Or worse yet, flat and rectangular, instead of oval. “A smart driver will regulate their horse's speed without being so obvious in those types of turns. You don't want to slow down in the turns, and you need to give your horse the confidence to imagine the curved rail,” said Robertson. “My wife Helen instructs her riders this way: ‘Draw the circle in your mind and let your horse be the pencil.’ That's a good way to describe how to show a road horse in any ring, especially a less-than-optimal show ring.”

Because the USEF Rule Book specifies a different priority of characteristics for an open vs. amateur, youth, or ladies' competition, the driver needs to keep in mind what the class calls for first: manners, performance, quality, or speed. But let's say the announcer has called for the at-speed gait—the most exciting part of the class, for many onlookers. The criteria for judging haven't changed, but the excitement takes a big step up.

“Just remember—it's not a race; it's a show. A horse looks better with something left in his tank. Go to the edge [of performance ability], but don't look over it,” Robertson cautions.

Nichols points out, “At the speed gait, the speed and how the horse sets up are important, but I want to see that overall picture of how the horse travels and his conformation, in addition to his speed.”

Mullens adds, “I want to see the horse keep his expression and stay up in the bridle. I don't like to see a Roadster class go too long; it's a long time to get a horse





Howard  
Schultz  
2021  
SARAH

## HANDLING THE TURNS

The ring layout plays a big part in navigating the turns well.

to go at-speed for four or five laps. Good judges don't need that long, and they shouldn't tax the horse that much."

And while the gentlemen insist that judges are doing the best job possible, they often consider certain things differently. "None of us is perfect," Nichols acknowledges. "Sometimes when a pack of horses is grouped, it's easy to overlook the horse on the other straightaway."

Robertson opines, "I think our biggest judging mistake is not evaluating the turns enough."

"I wish," said Mullens, "that there was more leeway in judging how a horse stands, especially in an amateur, youth, or ladies' class. If the horse moves out for safety reasons—now, I'm not talking about a horse undressing itself—I think the horse should be able to circle around at the lineup, without penalty, if needed." (Sounds as if he's talking to rules-writing committees, eh?)

Roadster classes spell excitement for the horses, the exhibitors, and the fans, but it takes experience and insight to help separate the good performances from the great ones. After your next class, watch a full-class video to objectively view how the judge(s) tied the entries. If you're on the rail or seated, don't just watch a single horse or two; instead, pick a spot in the ring, at each gait, and evaluate how consistent each horse is. Watch a horse's expression and how it may change. Pay attention to a horse's manners and the driver's ability to put the horse where he needs to be at the right times. Judge the horse's conformation, according to the rule book. Finally, look at the combined picture.

Then—and only then—are you qualified to be as judgmental as the professionals from center ring!

TSJ





Steve Bagdasarian 2014

# HEAT SEEKER

Amateur Roadster To Bike 2014 Gelding (Muscle Massive - Angus Hall) Driven by Micah Burkholder