



Riding in Lockstep

HOW PRECISION, PASSION, AND PERSEVERANCE PROPELLED A WISCONSIN DRILL TEAM TO VICTORY

If you have ever stood arena-side at a major equine expo, you have likely felt the thunderous vibration of hooves pounding in perfect unison. You have probably seen the flash of coordinated outfits, the blur of moving color, and the sheer speed of horses weaving past one another with mere inches to spare. This is the world of equestrian drill teams—a sport that blends the absolute focus of military maneuvers with the grace and artistry of synchronized swimming.

At the forefront of this modern drill resurgence is the Lockstep Riding Company, a Wisconsin-based group that recently captured top honors as the winners of the 2026 Midwest Horse Fair Thrill of the Drill competition.

I sat down with Jennifer Koop, the manager and founder of Lockstep, to discuss the intricacies of the sport, the immense commitment required by its riders, and the chaotic, emotional journey that led her team to the winner's circle this year.

SYNCHRONIZED SWIMMING ON HORSEBACK

For those unfamiliar with the discipline, explaining drill team can be a challenge. “Generally, when folks ask, we say that equestrian drill team is much like synchronized swimming, but

on horseback in an arena,” Jen explains with a smile.

The primary objective is to take a highly diverse group of horses—varying in size, breed, age, and background—and mold them into a unified, flowing formation. Achieving this level of precision requires a masterclass in equine biomechanics and rider awareness.

“To get them to ride safely in tight formation is a trick,” Jen says. “You have to come together in a fashion where a very tall horse is rating its speed perfectly with a very small horse, and vice versa. As the maneuvers increase in difficulty, all of those elements required to make precision happen become exponentially harder.”



Thrill of the Drill winners at the 2026 Midwest Horse Fair.



While equestrian drill rooted its origins in historic military cavalry exercises, it evolved over the decades into high-energy halftime entertainment at rodeos. Today, it is experiencing a major comeback across North America, with audiences appreciating it not just as a novelty spectacle, but as a serious, highly skilled equestrian discipline.

THE COLD-WEATHER CRUCIBLE

Behind the seamless, eight-minute performances seen by spectators lies a grueling, year-round commitment. The Lockstep Riding Company is primarily comprised of female riders who are highly active in other equine worlds. The roster boasts a professional barrel racer, 4-H competitors, Little Britches Rodeo athletes, and foundation Quarter Horse show competitors. Because summer is peak season for these individual pursuits, the team takes a hard-earned hiatus during the warmer months.

WHEN THE AUTUMN AIR TURNS CRISP, THE REAL WORK BEGINS

Practicing through a Wisconsin winter requires immense dedication. The team meets at least once a week, and because of the sub-zero temperatures, the days are long.

"There is a much longer warm-up time in cold weather, we have to take frequent breaks to warm up the riders, and the cool-down period is extensive," Jen notes. "Some of our riders travel from up to two hours away just to practice. We have to ensure every horse is completely dry and blanketed before they load back into a trailer for the long drive home."

To combat the unpredictability of winter weather, Lockstep pioneered "team weekends." Riders arrive on a Friday or Saturday and stay overnight. By turning the practice into an immersive retreat, the team can log three intensive training sessions in a single weekend, while fostering a deep, family-like bond among the members.

SHIFTING FOCUS: FROM GLITTER TO HORSEMANSHIP

Jen's entry into the drill world began in 2010 when her daughter, then 12 or 13, wanted to join a local 4-H team. Realizing that several neighborhood girls shared the same dream, Jen founded the team right in their backyard, practicing outside rain or shine.

In the early days, Lockstep was focused on the traditional hallmarks of drill: breakneck speed, high-energy music, and a heavy dose of arena glitter. But about seven years ago, Jen felt a calling to steer the organization in a different direction.

"A lot of teams focus strictly on speed and that 'shock factor,' and we loved that for a long time," Jen reflects. "But we decided to make a transition and really start prioritizing equitation and horsemanship. Sometimes you watch a fast race around the arena, and it is less of a controlled performance and more of a controlled 'out-of-control' experience. You can see that some of the horses aren't having a good time—they're just trying to survive it."

Jen wanted her horses to love their jobs. More importantly, she wanted drill training to enhance, rather than degrade, the horses' performance in their outside disciplines.

The results of this shift have been remarkable. Show horses that previously suffered from severe arena anxiety or couldn't handle riding in heavy traffic came to Lockstep to learn how to relax in a crowd. "They used to have to wear red ribbons on their tails at shows," Jen says. "But after working with us on the drill team, they went back to their show worlds completely relaxed and confident."

OVERCOMING "THE WORST STARTUP IN HISTORY"

The road to the 2026 Midwest Horse Fair was anything but smooth. In fact, Jen describes the months leading up to the competition as one of the most stressful periods in the team's 14-year history.

"It was completely nerve-wracking," Jen admits. "We had an incredible amount of attrition. Riders get married, go to college, or have babies. We lost three core riders right at the start of the season."

The challenges kept mounting. One of the team's seasoned leaders gave birth just a month before the event. Determined to compete, she planned to ride, but her primary horse foundered. Jen offered her an experienced backup horse from her own barn, but just two weeks before the competition, that horse suffered an eye injury.

"She was literally competing at the Midwest Horse Fair on a horse she had only known for two weeks," Jen says. "It was just a crazy, chaotic startup with a lot of tears. Six weeks out, I wasn't even sure how we were going to manage a basic performance, let alone compete."

Yet, the riders dug deep. Through tears, unexpected horse changes, and relentless setbacks, they kept showing up. When they finally entered the crowded arena in Madison, the weeks of pressure dissolved into absolute precision. Watching from my booth near the arena, the performance was spectacular.

One particular maneuver—which the team calls the "banana clip"—captivated the audience. The riders split, with dark-colored horses perfectly aligned on one side and golden Palominos

on the other, seamlessly weaving through one another as they flipped directions.

"The funny part is, everyone came up to me afterward saying how genius it was to separate the dark horses and the Palominos visually," Jen laughs. "In all honesty, that was a beautiful accident! The four dark horses were our slower, steady anchor horses, and the Palominos were our speed horses. It just organically worked out that way in the choreography."

The intricate maneuver was dreamed up on a kitchen table by team member Allie Hansen, using childhood Breyer model horses to map out the spacing—a testament to how collaborative the Lockstep family truly is.

A COMMUNITY BUILT ON ACCESSIBILITY

Beyond the trophies, the core mission of Lockstep Riding Company is community access. Operating as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Jen and her husband work tirelessly to ensure that financial constraints never prevent a passionate rider from participating.

Through extensive fundraising and local sponsorships, the organization helps cover the costly realities of showing, including fuel, entry fees, and horse lodging. They even step in to match horseless riders with owners looking to keep their horses fit over the winter months.

"Horses are expensive, and getting a team to a major event like the Midwest Horse Fair takes a village," Jen emphasizes. "If you have a drill team near you, get involved. Even if you can't support them financially, or if you don't ride anymore, teams are always looking for volunteers to help keep the arena clean between runs or help backstage."

As Lockstep looks forward to the fall, when they will begin analyzing hundreds of hours of video to design next year's choreography, Jen remains anchored by the true spirit of the sport.

"Perseverance, commitment, coming together, and praying together—eventually, the fruit of all that labor comes true," Jen says. "When we were out there, the horses were happy, the gals were smiling, and that is always our ultimate goal."



ABOUT MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

Since 1979, with a goal to serve as America's premier destination for the equine community, the Midwest Horse Fair strives to provide the ultimate experience for equine enthusiasts and the public through exposition, education, and entertainment. As the largest three-day horse fair in the U.S., it caters to both Western and English riders. The Midwest Horse Fair is owned by the Wisconsin Horse Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes the equine industry in the state of Wisconsin. Net proceeds from the fair benefit the Wisconsin Horse Council for grants and scholarships, trail improvements, leadership programs, and communication to help future growth and development of the equine industry. The 2027 fair is scheduled to take place April 16-18 at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison, Wisconsin. For more information: MidwestHorseFair.com.

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