

Hippoevent Para Spotlight

Voices of Para Driving



The interview series with inspiring personalities from Para Driving

Interview with FEI World Champion Jacques Poppen Para Driving – Teamwork, Trust & True Partnership

In international Para Driving, there are athletes who not only impress through sporting achievements, but also through their personality, experience, and the special connection with their horses.

One of these athletes is the Dutch driver and FEI World Champion Jacques Poppen. With great precision, calmness, and a deep understanding of his horses, he has established himself firmly in international Para Driving.

Particularly remarkable is his work with Friesian horses – powerful, elegant, and at the same time highly sensitive partners in driving sport. This combination of modern competition sport and traditional horse breed gives his presence a distinctive recognition value and emotional depth.

In this interview with Hippoevent, Jacques Poppen talks about his sporting journey, teamwork, his experiences in international competition, and what Para Driving means to him personally: far more than just a sport – a true partnership on equal terms between human and horse.

Your Story in Driving Sport

Hippoevent: How did you become involved in carriage driving?

Jacques Poppen: After my spinal cord injury in 1995, my life changed completely. Before the car accident, I had nothing to do with horses, but every day, I took my wife Eva to the riding stables. On a beautiful day somewhere in 2002, she took me on a carriage ride through the woods with two horses in front of the carriage and handed me the reins.

That moment changed everything for me.

Carriage driving gave me back freedom, independence, and a new purpose to live and fight for. Behind the horses, I do not feel limited, but equal to everyone else. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to continue in equestrian sport, and what started as a beautiful ride grew into a great passion.

Hippoevent: What originally fascinated you about this sport?

Jacques Poppen: What touched me from the very beginning was the unique partnership between human and horse. In carriage driving, everything revolves around trust, feeling, and communication. Living with a disability teaches you to listen even more carefully to your horses and to yourself. That is exactly what makes this sport so special to me. The

communication between human and animal, the focus, adrenaline, and harmony continue to inspire me every single day. I strive for the highest possible level in every aspect of this discipline.



Foto FEI Massimo Argenziano

Hippoevent: What does carriage driving personally mean to you today?

Jacques Poppen: *Carriage driving means freedom, relaxation, and challenge to me. It is the world where I do not think in limitations, but in possibilities. My horses give me strength, confidence, and motivation to always keep looking forward. Through my spinal cord injury and my team, I have learned how valuable life truly is, and I carry that thought with me every single day in the sport.*

Hippoevent: Which moment in international sport has stayed with you the most?

Jacques Poppen: *For me, the most beautiful moments are the international competitions where athletes from different countries come together with the same passion. That is where you truly feel how strongly sport connects people. Especially within para sport, you see how much courage, discipline, and perseverance lies behind every participant. That touches me every single time.*

Horses & Partnership

Hippoevent: How would you describe your horses – and especially your Friesians?

Jacques Poppen: *My horses are my partners and my friends.*

Friesians in particular are very special to me: they are powerful, sensitive, and incredibly loyal. Their appearance is impressive, but behind that strength there is also great gentleness. Because I live with a spinal cord injury, trust is even more important. My horses often seem to know exactly how I feel, and that connection is difficult to put into words. It is something you have to experience!

Hippoevent: What makes the partnership between driver and horse successful?

Jacques Poppen: A successful partnership begins with mutual trust. A horse must feel safe with you, and the same goes the other way around. Because of my disability, I have become even more aware of small signals and communication. You learn to work together based on feeling. Patience, respect, and daily attention, combined with a strong team, ultimately make the difference.

Hippoevent: Has there been a horse that played a special role in your career?

Jacques Poppen: Yes, absolutely. Some horses do not only change your sporting career, but also who you are as a person. Nienke was a horse who helped me through difficult moments and gave me confidence in myself again after my spinal cord injury.

With her, I became World Champion for the first time, and her character, fighting spirit, and strength make her unforgettable.

Training & Preparation

Hippoevent: What does a typical training day look like for you?

Jacques Poppen: My training days are not only about performance, but also about balance and trust. I always begin by paying attention to my horses: how they feel, how they move, and what they need that day. Equally important is how I feel myself. A horse is the mirror of your soul, and you receive what you give. Every training session is tailored individually, and that is exactly what makes the process so beautiful. I can endlessly enjoy training on a beautiful morning.



Hippoevent: Which discipline (dressage, marathon, or cones) suits you best – and why?

Jacques Poppen: *That depends on the day and on the horse. I enjoy the marathon the most. That is where you truly feel the power of teamwork, speed, and trust within the entire team. I get an incredible thrill from going through an obstacle together with my horse and relying completely on one another. At the same time, I also greatly enjoy the finesse of dressage and the precision during cones.*

Teamwork

Hippoevent: What role does your team play in your daily training?

Jacques Poppen: *My team means everything to me. Without these people, I am nothing. With my disability, I would not be able to compete in this top-level sport on my own. Behind every training session stand my wife Eva, our children, and the people who support me, motivate me, and help me bring out the best in both myself and the horses. Together we form one whole, and without them none of this would be possible.*

Hippoevent: And how important is your team during competitions?

Jacques Poppen: *During competitions, it becomes truly clear how important a strong team is. Everyone has their own role and responsibility. We rely completely on each other, especially in moments of tension and pressure. The sport may appear individual, but in reality, success is always achieved together.*

Para Driving Today & the Future

Hippoevent: How has Para Driving developed in recent years?

Jacques Poppen: *Para Driving has developed enormously. There is increasing professionalism, international attention, and respect for the sport. That is important, because it shows that a disability does not have to mean the end of sporting dreams. The level of our sport has risen tremendously in recent years, and that is fantastic!*

Hippoevent: What would you wish for the future of Para Driving?

Jacques Poppen: *I hope Para Driving will gain more visibility worldwide. Many people still do not fully understand what this sport involves and how much perseverance, strength, and passion lie behind it. I would love to see young people with disabilities become inspired to follow their own dreams as well*

Hippoevent: What role do international projects such as the Hippoevent Para Spotlight initiative play in this development?

Jacques Poppen: *These projects are incredibly important. They give para athletes a platform and show the world what is possible. By sharing stories, you inspire others and increase understanding and visibility for the sport.*



Message & Inspiration

Hippoevent: What message would you like to share with young para drivers and newcomers?

Jacques Poppen: *Never let your disability define you. A spinal cord injury changed my life, but it did not take away my dreams. Keep believing in yourself, even on difficult days. With passion, patience, and perseverance, you can go further than you ever imagined.*

Hippoevent: What would you like to say to the international driving community?

Jacques Poppen: *Carriage driving is about connection and friendship between people, horses, and different cultures. Let us continue building this beautiful sport where everyone has the opportunity to follow their passion. Especially in para sport, you truly see how much strength people have when they never give up!*

Thank you very much for this inspiring interview and for your time, Jacques.

Your words are not only motivating for Para Driving, but for the entire driving sport community worldwide. They show in a powerful way what can be achieved through passion, trust, courage, and unity.

This conversation was not only highly informative, but also deeply personal and emotional. For that, we would like to sincerely thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Jacques Poppen represents Para Sport with great passion and dedication, both within the FEI and the International Carriage Drivers Association (ICDA). In the coming days, we

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would like to invite the international community to an open exchange of thoughts, ideas, and visions in order to further develop Para Driving in a positive way and give it even greater visibility.

Because stories like these prove that sport can overcome barriers and connect people all around the world.

Hippoevent Para Spotlight Initiative | Jacqueline Zimmermann

Thank You

Thank you for the interview and for your time, Heiner.

Hippoevent Para Spotlight Initiative
Jacqueline Zimmermann