

JINGLE BELLS ON ICE

By Hermien Renken

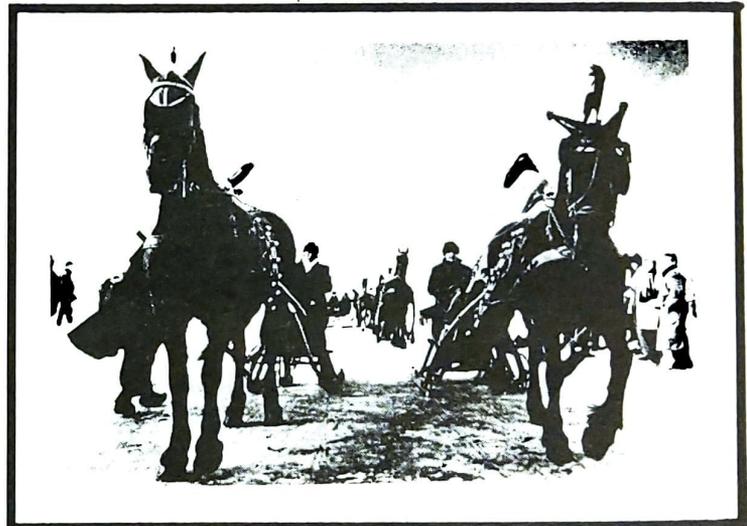
This winter, when all the many canals and lakes were frozen in The Netherlands, many horse people got out their sleighs to go for some old-fashioned sleigh driving competitions. For these competitions, the horse shoes are fitted with special nails so the horses won't slip on the ice. Two horses have to cover a distance of approximately 350 yards as fast as they can. Only a trot is allowed. All winners have to compete with each other until finally one has beaten all the others. Also the losers compete against each other.

Each sleigh is pulled by one horse and only the driver is on the sleigh. Actually, the driver is sitting behind the sleigh, since Friesian sleighs were originally designed for a family that has to sit in the sleigh. Meanwhile the man of the house is sitting at the farthest end, driving the horse and pushing the brakes in case they are needed. Just before the race the lady steps onto the ice to watch from a distance.

Many sleighs from these competitions are antique and the people in the sleighs are also dressed in clothes originating from the same time period as the sleigh. Most horses have beautifully colored pads under the harness saddle and they wear ear covers and have a plume on their head between their ears and two plumes attached to a bell on the harness saddle.

But the most essential part of the harness is the leather piece with bells that hangs down from the horse's back. Traditionally this leather piece is over eight feet long and on it are sewn about 34 little bells that make a beautiful sound with each step the horse takes.

The Friesian word for these competitions are *belslidejeie* or *beljeien* which would mean something like bell sleigh racing or bell racing. It is one of the beautiful Dutch traditions which I hope every Friesian horse lover will once be able to experience when visiting the homeland of the Friesians.



"Belslidejeien" from the cover of *Phryso*, February 1991.
(Photo: H.L.A.)