

Working^{the} WALK

Using the Walk to Improve All Gaits

by Beverly Whittington

Don't all horses walk properly? After all, it just comes naturally, right? Neglecting the walk is one of the biggest mistakes riders of gaited horses make.

The walk is the foundation of all smooth gaits. If your horse cannot walk properly, odds are all his gaits could use some improvement, yet many riders don't know if their horse is walking correctly. The walk is of such vital importance; show ring judges scrutinize it closely, looking for training flaws. They know that in order for a gaited horse to use his body correctly he must be flexible, balanced and work with impulsion from the rear. It all begins at the walk.



Is your horse a 'lefty'?

Stretching through back, needs to release pull.

Ever notice that your horse bends more easily in one direction than the other? Virtually all horses have a hollow (weaker) side and a stiff (stronger) side. Although many are stiff to the right side, some can be stiff to the left. Sometimes you can see this by comparing the muscle development on each side of the horse. One side will be much more developed.

Horses that bend more easily to one side are actually a bit weaker to that side. A horse bends to the left more easily because the muscles on his left side are less developed, and not accustomed to stretching as far as the ones on the right. He has trouble turning to the right because of stiffness on his left – hollow - side.

Although trotting horses manage to trot no matter how one-sided they are or how crookedly they travel, gaited horses work best in their gaits when they travel straight. It is up to you to condition your horse by developing the muscles on his "weaker" side so that he can stretch them as well as the ones on the "strong" side.

Warm Up

Even when working at a walk, it is important to warm up your horse. Ask the horse to relax and walk out. Ride on a loose rein. The horse's head should be low with the strides long and relaxed. With light contact on the bit, encourage the horse to stretch his neck down and forward by lowering your hands and shifting your weight from your seat bones to knees, thighs and stirrups and bringing your shoulders slightly forward. This helps to raise his back and

stretches and conditions muscles from poll to tail, making them more elastic, all of which helps the horse round his body later. Vary the low head position with a slightly higher one. Your horse should learn that this is a time to stretch out, not an opportunity to fall asleep.

Straight travel, not circles, is best for beginning the warm-up. After about 10 minutes, lift his neck up to a natural position and ask for gait in a circle (about 60 feet wide) for about 10 minutes. Include plenty of transitions from gait to walk in both directions.

Pay Attention

Still on a straightaway, continue frequent transitions from walk to gait and gait to walk. Ask your horse to pay attention, not to just move. The horse should respond quickly to your leg for the upward transitions and be quick to respond to the bracing of your back (tightening your back and stomach muscles, while stopping your body from following the horse) for the downward transitions.

Your horse's head will nod in time to his hoofbeats as he walks. Soften your arms to follow the movement. Uneven rein contact and artificial "pumping" of the reins can result in loss of impulsion in the walk. Allow your body to move with the horse, keeping your lower leg slightly behind the girth. You want your horse to walk briskly, not dally along.

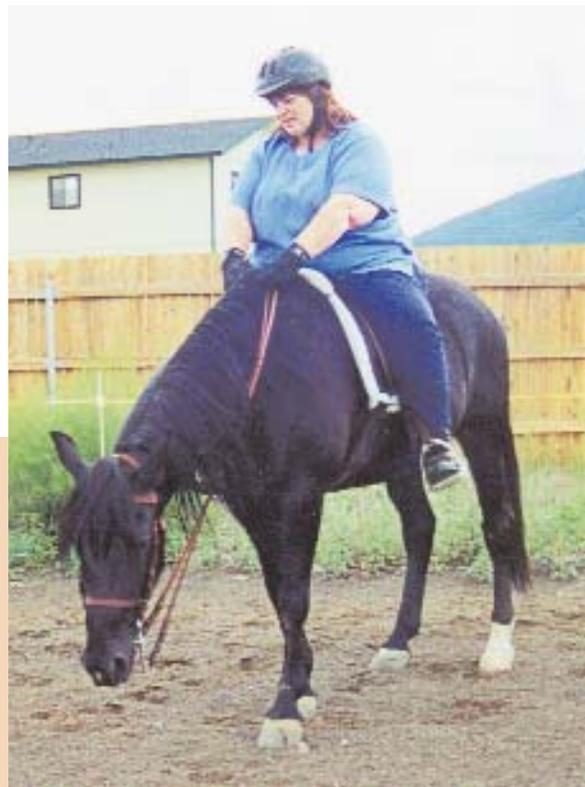
It is important not to desensitize the horse to the leg aids. Give a very light leg aid to encourage the horse to move forward. If he does not respond, immediately and enthusiastically, chase him forward with a firm tap with a whip behind your heel. Then relax your leg and see how far the horse will go without a reminder. If he slacks off into a more sluggish walk "BUMP" him forward, first with a light leg cue,

then with the tap of the whip or rap from your heel. Let him know that this is work and you expect him to respond correctly. After a few sessions, the horse should get the message that listening to the leg cue is the better option!

Leg Aids Simplified

- *Pushing the leg into the horse asks the horse to move away from the pressure*
- *The front end of the horse is controlled by a leg aid on and slightly in FRONT of the girth*
- *The hind end by an aid in BACK of the girth*
- *Pressure ON the girth means forward motion.*
- *Pushing down into the stirrup asks the horse to move around your leg as a support*

If your horse is not traveling straight, correct him. Note his position relative to a true, straight line. If the horse carries his haunches to the right, he is most likely stiff on his left side. If he carries his neck or head to the right, he is most likely stiff to the right side. Use your legs



Stretching out.

to encourage the horse to straighten his body while keeping your hands soft with medium contact. Check your weight distribution. Are you putting the same amount of weight on each seat bone and in each stirrup? You must be balanced to encourage the horse to achieve a straight walk.

The Working Walk

Once he responds to light leg cues for forward movement, begin to ask for impulsion. Without leaning forward, note the action of the horse's shoulders.

Practice with your eyes shut for several strides. Can you ascertain which shoulder is coming forward by feel rather than by glancing down? You will notice that your shoulders "move" with the shoulders of your horse, and your hips "move" with the swing of the horse's hind legs. As each shoulder moves forward, squeeze and release the leg on that side firmly against the horse, slightly

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ing on energizing your horse's walk, continue to regulate how straight he travels.

a decrease in the nod of the head and shoulder roll as the horse begins to collect and work more off the hind end. True collection rounds the horse's back. (The back rises up into the saddle, as the horse drives off the hindquarters.) Teaching your horse the two extremes of self-support (carrying himself without leaning on the bit) and true collection is a long process.

The Collected Walk

When properly performing a collected walk, the horse takes noticeably shorter, higher steps with a bit more elasticity in the hind legs. He will have more roundness in the back, with a bit more impulsion and

The Extended Walk

In the extended walk, the horse strides out freely, with the shoulder lifted, the neck supple, and the head just in front of the vertical. The horse takes long strides, with an overstride with the hind. (As the rear foot sets down, it passes the track of the same-side front foot.) . Ask for larger, longer steps, while maintaining the same rhythm and tempo. Some horses will track up behind naturally and others will require training and muscling to be able to achieve an overstride of any degree. If the horse forges (hits his forefoot with his hind), he may not be moving his shoulder freely enough. (Usually on his hollow side.) A horse that is balanced in his walk will have a longer overstride than a

behind the girth. This asks the horse to engage the corresponding hind leg. By alternating the leg application with the shoulder movement for 4 or 5 strides, the horse should begin to engage his hocks and stride out more purposefully.

Important: squeeze, don't bump or kick.

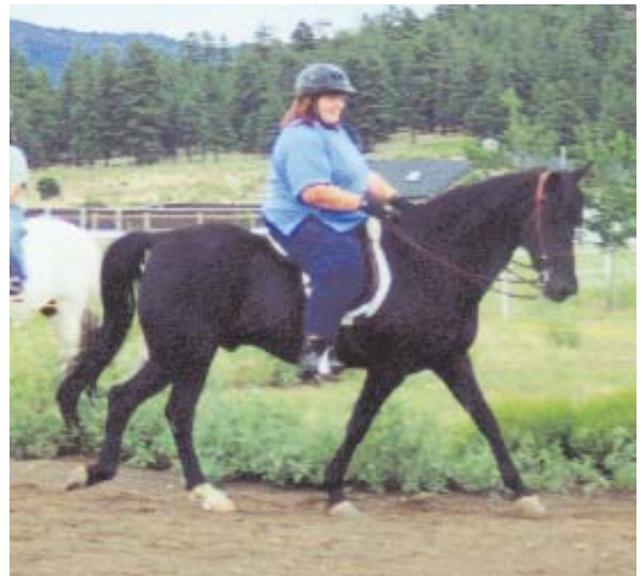
Head tossing, dropping behind the bit or pulling, indicate that the hindquarters are not fully engaged or the rider's hands are too heavy.

The horse should be walking with a regular rhythm (like a marching soldier), but not hurried. This is the walk often referred to as the working walk. The head should be slightly elevated, just in front of the vertical and without looking around or trying to evade the bit.

After about two weeks of short training sessions, you should have a horse that now moves out briskly at the walk instead of considering it "break time". While you are work-

energy. The neck is slightly arched and his head will come closer to "on the vertical". Ask for the most collection the horse can give you without disturbing the sequence of the walk.

To achieve a collected walk make your hands "less giving". Don't pull on the reins, but use slightly more contact. Ask for engagement of the hindquarters with slight leg contact behind the girth, while coordinating with the shoulder movement, as in the Working Walk. You should be able to feel the horse shorten his stride, and begin to use his hindquarters more. You can feel the horse engage his hocks. There should be



Extended Walk

horse that is "strung-out". Overstride is a basic characteristic of the Tennessee Walking Horse running walk, but it is important that any horse can be encouraged to do a nice Extended Walk, with a bit of overstride.

As length of stride increases, so too does the horse's head nod. This movement should originate from the base of the neck and should be rhythmic. As the horse steps out, moving his shoulders freely, his head will rise to allow the shoulder to rotate easily. The shoulders have to rotate to permit free and efficient usage of the muscles. A good head nod indicates a balanced animal, working and pulling with his front end as much as pushing with its rear.

Two things determine the stride length of a horse, his conformation and the condition and elasticity of his muscles and joints. Any horse can increase his muscle condition and elasticity through specific exercises to improve his reach and length of step.

Building on Strength

It is important that the horse be worked in all versions of the walk to develop the muscling necessary for strengthening the hindquarters and back, as well as conditioning the muscles in the shoulders and chest to stretch. In order for a horse to be able to take long steps, his back muscles must relay the thrust of his hindquarters through his body to his front legs. Alternating work in each of the above walks will develop the muscling that makes it possible for him to lengthen or extend his steps. This will help strengthen his haunches and his back, good extension is a result of strength developed in semi-collection. Lengthened steps develop from shortened ones.



Collected Walk

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