

4 Exercises to Strengthen Gait

S

o How Do I FIX Gait?



When a horse that is;

- built to gait
- has the genetics to gait

isn't gaiting undersaddle, you must first eliminate any problems which may be causing the horse discomfort when he attempts to perform his signature gait. Poorly fitted tack, rider influence, and lack of condition in the horse are the primary factors in miss-gaiting or non-gaiting horses of gaited decent. A sloppy rider can mess up what nature, genetics and a good breeding program have taken years to establish in a VERY short time.

We will fix gait, in other words improve the horses ability to perform consistent gait undersaddle by:

- developing the horse's ability to use his body correctly
- placing the horse in the correct frame for a specific gait
- encouraging the horse to move with the other necessary elements of gait in place

The exercises are universal, what will develop the carrying ability with impulsion for the Racking horse will also develop the same

elements for the horse performing the Fox Trot, Running Walk, etc...

AFTER the horse has developed his muscles, flexibility and balance, we can place the horse in the frame with correct neck carriage that will enable him to do the specific gait requested. This is not Rocket Science, it is tedious work with a lot of repetitions. Anyone who is dedicated to the program can do it with time.

4.1 Cuing For Gait

Once the horse has achieved a level of condition, you can begin to ask for him to gait. This does not preclude continuing the exercises to improve his condition. Gait can now be incorporated into the lesson or riding time.

As discussed previously, gait comes from genetics and structure. A horse bred for gait and built for gait SHOULD gait. It now comes into the realm of the rider influencing WHICH gait.

Breaking it down to its simplest form; the rider causes the horse to carry itself in a manner and frame that will predisposition the horse to achieve a specific gait. So to still keep it simple,

when you are asking for a Rack, you would place the horse in the Frame that encourages a Rack. Indeed a horse CANNOT Rack unless he is in that Frame. It is a prerequisite of the gait. I do not know how many times I have heard an owner new to Gaited Horses ask “How do I cue him to gait?”. There is not a magic button, but it is actually fairly simple once you get the system down. It’s a lot like finding a radio station on a tuner-type dial; once you find it, it’s easier the second time.

For example, if you ask for gait and the horse Trots, you have to change the horse’s Frame from a dorsiflexed back to either a level back to encourage a Fox Trot or Running Walk or a Ventroflexed back to achieve a Rack. Changing the Frame, incorporated with asking for the correct neck set will usually accomplish gait, **IF the horse is in condition where he can do as requested.** The other elements of gait, impulsion in the rear or looseness in the horse, added to the neck set and Frame will 90% of the time accomplish the gait you wish for.

In each section of the specific gait I will include the Frame, Neck Set and elements of the gait that are necessary to achieve the gait. It is up to you as the trainer to condition the horse to enable him to do these things, then call for them when asking for gait. THAT is how you cue for gait!

4.2 Tack

Saddle fit is the first issue which often raises its ugly head with miss-gaiting horses. If you have read this book from the beginning, you should have already checked for fit, if not go back to Chapter 2 and read how to do so and make sure that the tack is NOT an issue with the horse.

The bit or Bosal must also be properly fitted to the horse to allow him to work comfortably. You must allow the horse to carry itself with LIGHT contact in the bit, otherwise you could be the one who is causing the issue, by not allowing the horse enough rein to nod in some gaits.

4.3 Rider

The Rider is often the problem. There are many reasons for rider interference, and since this book is on TRAINING the Gaited Horse we must work from the assumption that you can already RIDE the horse correctly to help him to achieve the frame needed to perform gait. If you are unsure that you are riding correctly you need to read “How to Ride Your Gaited Horse” first and learn to use your body correctly to enable your horse to do the same. You should try to work with a good ground person when you are

training. The second set of eyes and perspective can point out things to improve (what was correct and what was way off) in each training period. Usually a horse will improve quicker if two people work together with him.

4.4 Physical Development

First I would like to say a word about riding babies. NO Horse should be undersaddle at less than 30 months of age. Period, no exceptions and no reasonionale will alter this. A young horse needs time to be a baby, they need to grow up physically as well as mentally to handle the stress that a rider and training place on them. If you already have a horse who is undersaddle who is younger than this, you need to either throw him back out in the pasture to allow him to mature (which I HIGHLY RECCOMEND), or be VERY careful to keep your riding sessions SHORT (15 min. or less) until he is more mature.

As you train your horse, you will see changes in physical development. A trainer is seeking to improve the horse's physique so he can more easily perform the tasks we request of him. Part of creating Muscle Memory is developing specific muscle groups. It is therefore important to have goals for the physical development of your horse. These should include:

- Acquiring Cadence in all gaits and speeds.
- Improving and toning the horse's topline.
- Increasing the horse's ability to travel in balance.
- Building the horse's ability to maintain neck set.
- Developing suppleness and strength evenly on both sides of the body.
- Gradually shifting the weight of the horse from the forehand, to equal or increased on the hindquarters.
- Improving the style or expression of the horse's movement.
- Improving the quality of the characteristics of a specific gait performance.

Your horse's training program should ask for increasing effort, with each new level maintained until a new level of fitness has resulted. The increased demand can be in intensity, duration or both. But it is important that it be tailored to the individual horse. Too much too soon, overloading the horse, will result in anything from mild muscle strains, to bone fractures or tendon injuries. You can build timing and muscle memory from the walk that will benefit any gaited horse. Stretching, lengthening, straightening and bending exercises are easiest at an ordinary walk. The following

exercises detail instructions to create a stronger, more fluid-moving, more responsive mount.

The best-gaited horses are those with suppleness, balance, straightness and ability to collect and extend. Most of the exercises will be done in one of the 3 Walks, the final gait on which your horse is to be set not withstanding. Although it is best to start these exercises at home, in an enclosure, you can incorporate them into a trail ride too! It is best if you complete all the exercises prior to even asking for gait. But if you must gait the horse, do so in SMALL measures and do not allow him to miss-gait. Bring him back to the walk if he does. Best case scenario would be to teach the 3 walks and work on them for a full year before starting any gait work. Establishing the walk this way conditions the horse to be able to advance to working within their given gaits while carrying a rider.

4.5 Warm Up

Every horse needs to have time to warm up prior to beginning to work. Allow your horse to move in a steady manner at the regular walk, with reins just at the point of contact until the horse relaxes and has loosened up his muscles. You do want the horse to be moving steadily, no meandering around, but not to the point of any real work yet.

He will begin to breathe more deeply as his back muscles and his entire body limbers to steady movement of undersaddle work. He is now physically and mentally ready to begin work.

4.6 Neck Flex from the Saddle

The neck must be flexible for the horse to perform almost any exercise. The next step in your warm up should be to flex the neck. From the saddle at a standstill with the horse standing balanced on all four legs, working in a Snaffle, Bosal or Jaquima, make sure your weight is well balanced on the horse. Take both reins in your right hand, so that you



have LIGHT contact with the horse's headgear. Now reach about half way down the left rein with your left hand and call the horse's head to his side (at about the level of your knee) with a series of LIGHT tugs and releases, being sure to bring your hand to the side rather than back.

Remember you are steering the horse's head in an arc. So **you are calling with your hand shaping the arc, not pulling straight back.**

Switch hands and repeat on the other side.

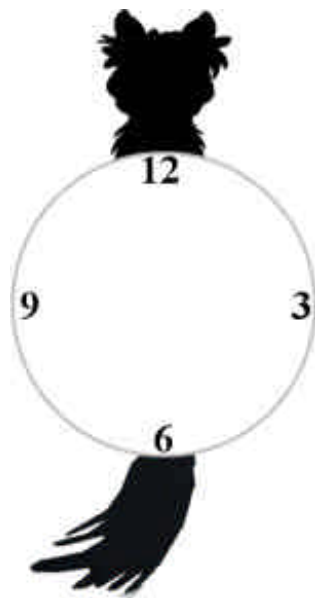
Photo - Neck Flex to left, notice the rider is sitting square and the reins are not tight, the horse is giving to a series of vibrations of the fingers in the left hand. You can also see his head is vertical and his neck upright. Notice the headgear does NOT have a bit.

Some horses will try to turn in a circle when asked to do this. In the initial stages do not correct the horse; just patiently continue to

CHAPTER 4 Exercises to Strengthen Gait

call the nose around. Be sure you are not leaning, stay in the center of the horse as much as possible. You will not get the nose all the way to your knee in the first attempts. If the horse's head was at noon and his tail at 6 on a clock, your goal is to have his head come around to the 9 o'clock position when calling to the left, the 3 o'clock when calling to the right. Since he is learning this, and has limited flexibility in initial stages, be happy if the head reaches 1:30 and 10:30 in initial efforts. Ask for the flex, to each side then go do something else for a while. After a few minutes stop squarely and ask again. With repetition the horse will be able to bring his nose

to the 3 and 9 position on the clock.



At this point he should be keeping his body still. As the horse works through this exercise he will often try to raise or lower his head when asked to reach around. It is important that he learn to bring the

nose around while maintaining the same height at which you had set the neck prior to calling the head around.

As his ability to bend his neck improves, you want to make sure he is flexing at the poll. You can tell if he is doing so if the head stays at the same degree of vertical when coming around, rather than becoming more horizontal. Over time, you can begin to correct for “nose only” bending. Use your offside rein with mild contact across the neck to ask the whole head to follow the arc with the same degree of up and down from the nostrils to the forelock.



With practice, this becomes light, the cue is soft and the horse's response immediate. Once the horse is accomplished in the Basic Neck Flex Undersaddle, you can perform this exercise in a curb bit too, as illustrated in the examples of the finished Paso Fino.

4.7 Basics

The trainer works to help the horse achieve a specific frame in which to carry his body that will influence the horse to maintain a smooth middle gait.

“
*There are different frames
for different gaits.*
”

You recognize the silhouette of a horse in a specific gait both by the footfall and the frame in which the horse is carrying itself. You would not ask for the horse to maintain the same frame for a Rack as you would for a Foxtrot. Therefore the training at some point has to become specific for the particular gait you are developing.

However, there are common elements that are vital to all the gaits:

- Conditioning
- Muscle Memory
- Cadence
- Forward Movement
- Balance
- Impulsion
- Flexibility

For purposes of simplicity in this training guide, as well as to allow the horse to develop the strengths he will need to perform his specific gait, it is important to work on these elements first. If you skip around and head right to the portion of this book that will address the specific gait you wish to work on, you will find that your results will be mediocre at best.

4.8 Conditioning

Conditioning is, in the most simple of terms, improving the ability to perform a specific task through building the muscles and stamina to increase performance. Through the specific usage of a horse's body he can be conditioned to improve gait, or to make it more difficult to maintain an easy gait. For example, a tendency for Ventro-flexion does not always mean a horse is lateral, it could mean that a horse needs a bit

— more work than some others to learn to carry the rider with a neutral or rounded back.

Exercises to improve bend and flexibility should be incorporated in any conditioning program; first from the ground, and then from the saddle after the horse has reached a certain stage of performance. A horse's gait is determined by the way in which the animal moves its legs and places its hooves to obtain forward movement.

— Each gait, be it a smooth “easy” gait or “normal” gait, produces a different feel for the rider and a specific muscle and frame usage in the horse. Horses who have been pasture ponies (not in regular use undersaddle), newly started-to-saddle horses, and horses returned to riding after an extended layoff, will usually need to be conditioned to enable them to perform at their optimum in gait or in some instances to be able to gait at all.

— It is important that a horse enjoy his work. A young horse or one you are re-training for gait will slowly develop the right muscles in the right places. If you wanted to improve your level of fitness from that of a couch potato to an athlete, you would need to go to the gym five days a week to develop your body slowly with the right exercises. It is the same for a horse. Start by walking the horse 15 to 20 minutes each day and

slowly increase riding time over the next four weeks to one to two hours a day.

Developing good rhythm with forward movement in the horse is the best start to develop all the correct muscles he needs to become stronger and enable him to be comfortable at establishing and maintaining strong gait.

Incorrect training is one of the main reasons horses break down when they should be in the prime of their lives. It is vital that the horse be allowed to develop in gentle stages his own balance and rhythm, and he is not forced into full work before he is physically capable. We will be going over some exercises that will benefit all gaited horses, and explaining why some are more important for horses that are performing specific gaits. There are really none of these workouts that will be negative for any of the soft gaits. Just some gaits Frame dictate different usage and the body needs to be strengthened more specifically.

4.9 Muscle Memory

It is through correct conditioning that we also begin the first level of developing Muscle Memory in the horse. I just typed that sentence without having to look at the key board. Continuing the analogy of typing to elaborate on the development of Muscle Memory in the horse we can actually come to a fundamental