



BORROW A TRAINER

Developing the walk.

**By AQHA Professional Horseman Carla Wennberg
with Christine Hamilton**

THE WALK IS NOT A FORGOTTEN GAIT.

As judges, we are putting a lot more emphasis on the walk for every kind of horse from the all-around horse to the hunter under saddle horse, western pleasure or horsemanship horse. We talked a lot about it at both AQHA and National Snaffle Bit Association judges' seminars.

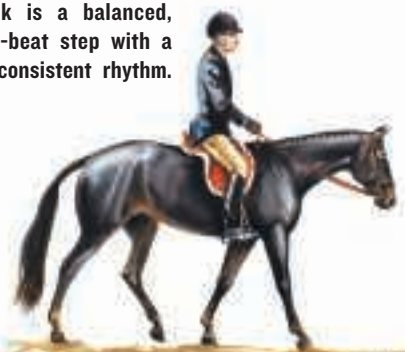
In any discipline, a good walk is a balanced, relaxed, four-beat, reaching step. It's all about length of stride, even though the horses are going slowly. It's not a walking-across-the-pasture walk, it's rhythmical and steady. In hunter classes, we expect a little more forward and longer stride.

The rhythm of the footfall, 1-2-3-4, should be consistent, and the front legs should take the same step in distance as the back legs. The horse should be relaxed and happy with expression. The overall picture is positive: The horse is quiet, steady, relaxed and confident with you.

The topline should be relaxed and level. I like to see a horse looking through the bridle for what's coming next. That's hard to keep in a horse you show a lot; you have to work at it, and it takes trust.

It has really been fun to see people putting more emphasis on the walk in their training. During the past years, the walk

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JEAN ABERNETHY

had deteriorated in the show ring to the point where horses often didn't perform it as a four-beat, forward gait. I think we let it deteriorate, unfortunately, because of the time factor in judging horse shows. We let it become a gait that we used as a transitional gait, instead of really judging it.

The walk should be judged because it tells you so much about a horse. In top competition, it does separate the horses in expression and quality of movement.

And it gives riders a chance to have a thought process on how to ride into the next gait or maneuver.

Common Problems

IN THE SHOW RING, THE WALK IS AN ANXIETY MOMENT FOR horses. It's a moment where the horse knows that something is coming – he knows he's going to have to jog/trot or lope/canter or perform a maneuver. Anxiety will affect the walk in rhythm and pace.

Whether you're riding English or western, when you pick up your hand, push your horse into the bridle and gather him in the walk, he anticipates something. His reaction will depend on his personality type, and it tells you how much homework the rider has done.

Another problem is a horse that gets lateral in his stride, or what we call "pace-gaited." Instead of the legs moving in a distinct, even 1-2-3-4 beat, the legs move almost in lateral pairs, 1-2 – 3-4, losing the rhythm of a quality walk.

A horse can get that way from being ridden with too much collection. Where a rider has ridden him too much pushing him together from front to back, to make him stay underneath himself, not ever letting him change pace and stride out.

Think About Your Horse

In the warm-up pen at shows, I often see riders sitting on their horses just talking, and then a rider will walk off and suddenly jerk-jerk-jerk the horse's face, surprising the horse in the mouth. I think riders do it without thinking about it.

But your horse will have a reaction to whatever you do to him, and that kind of action affects the trust your horse has in you. When you pick up on your horse in any gait, but especially in the walk, it really does affect him mentally. It will make him anxious and will affect his walk. That's something that I would like to see people think more about.

Luckily, we ride American Quarter Horses, which are the Labrador Retrievers of the horse world. They are so kind and forgiving; they put up with a lot.

What to Do

IT IS A HARD SUBJECT FOR RIDERS TO REALLY FOCUS ON BECAUSE the walk is a boring gait to most people. You really have to practice the walk.

Desensitize your horse in the show ring. You want your horse to be as natural and relaxed as possible in the show ring, so you have to work at not letting the walk be an anxious moment for your horse.

To do that, practice picking up the reins, pushing your horse into the bridle, preparing for a transition and then go back to relaxing the reins. Pet him and give him confidence back, letting him know that's what you want. You want to tell him to trust you – whether the reins are loose or you pick up, he should just wait and relax. It's hugely important.

It takes a lot of time and trust, and you forget how much

WATCHING WALKS

The pleasure horses and hunter under saddle horses at the 2008 AQHA World Championship Show were brilliant in the walk: It was a joy to watch. The riders understood that the judges wanted to see a good walk. They were walking out, and the horses were quiet and had their ears up and were relaxed. It was fabulous.

But I still see a lot of people who break the rhythm of the walk by almost stopping and then starting again; it doesn't look like a relaxed, even gait.

As a judge, I absolutely can win a class for you with a good, confident walk, especially in pleasure and hunter under saddle. For me, it's plus-plus-plus.

until you get into the show arena. As judges, we read the body language of your horse – watching to see if the horse is relaxed or anxious and not keeping an even pace.

Work on rhythm and pace. If you're being judged on performance in a gait, the rhythm and the horse's expression is hugely important. The 1-2-3-4 walk rhythm is very important.

My riders practice a lot of walking. We slow the walk and speed it back up, just as you might if you were trying to find a place on the rail. But when you do that, you still try to keep the horse's leg motion relaxed and in rhythm. It takes a lot of practice to feel the rhythm; it's a developed feel for any rider.

For a more laid-back horse, you can use your seat and leg and push him to not be lazy-legged and keep the rhythm.

Ride on uneven ground. The best way to help a poor walk – such as with a horse that is very lateral or pace-gaited – is to get out on uneven ground or even walk up and down slight hills. You have to get the horse out of flat footing and challenge his legs a little to find that correct rhythm again.

Walk more, walk longer. You need to find ways to work the walk into your training, and walk longer. Work on pushing your horse up into the bridle and keeping the legs relaxed and confident. You might walk a square, or move laterally and then go straight and forward again and let him relax into it.

I have a young mare that is a beautiful mover, but when I go back to the walk she gets quick in her footfall because she's anticipating what's next. As an instructor, I spend a lot of time riding her at the walk while I'm coaching. I can feel her relax and take a deep breath. ■

Christine Hamilton is editor of The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to chamilton@aqha.org.



AQHA Professional Horseman CARLA WENBERG is the western team coach at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina. She has trained and instructed young riders and horses for more than 20 years, from Colorado State University to the University of Georgia. Wennberg holds judge's cards with AQHA and the National Reining Horse Association, and she is an approved Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) steward. She was awarded the title of 2009 Professional's Choice AQHA Professional Horsewoman of the Year.