

To Park or Not to Park

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Somewhere in mankind's continual desire and need to make everything a bit showier, the idea of parking the horse evolved. Parking **correctly** certainly does seem to add elegance in how we present our horses. Done incorrectly, in the wrong circumstances it is creating some adverse effects to our horses.

My goal in this article is to give you a better perspective of how to identify a park done correctly or incorrectly and what the effects are.



Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3

Above are 3 pictures exhibiting different stances of a horse.



In **Photo 1** this horse is being asked to over park. This is a very common site to see. In most descriptions of the park, (some of which can be found in rule books) the front legs are to be under the horse (perpendicular to the ground) with the hinds **slightly** back.

In picture 1 the horses legs are:

- out in front
- far out behind

In this picture take notice of the front pastern angles of this horse. They are extended down and past the natural angle seen in pictures 2 and 3. This is not the only stress presented here. Due to this extension a horse is also stressed through all the tendons and ligaments up the leg. This is also the case in the hind legs.

- The pastern angles of the hinds are being pulled in front of the natural pastern angle.
- At the same time this is forcing the hindquarter weight to be supported towards the front of the hoof instead of the entire hoof bearing the weight.
- The tendons and ligaments on the front and back of the hind legs are over stretched.

The longer a horse is asked to hold this position the more stress and strain applied. This type of extension in the front can create stress to the knee joints on our horses and should be especially avoided in our young horses which the knees have not yet closed and the bones throughout the entire body that have not yet fused.



In **Photo 2** this horse is presented closer to a correct expectable park position... The fronts are more under the horse and the hinds not nearly as stretch out behind as in **Photo 1**. The fronts could actually still be an inch back and the hinds an inch forward and still is in a nice park.

Photo 3 is of the same horse closer to being squared up with all four legs under the horse. There is no stress to the horse's body in this position.



In these example drawings I am just using the forelimbs. Please relate this as well to all the joints, tendons and ligaments in the front and hind limbs, back, shoulders and hips that are being asked to over extend, hold and bear weight.

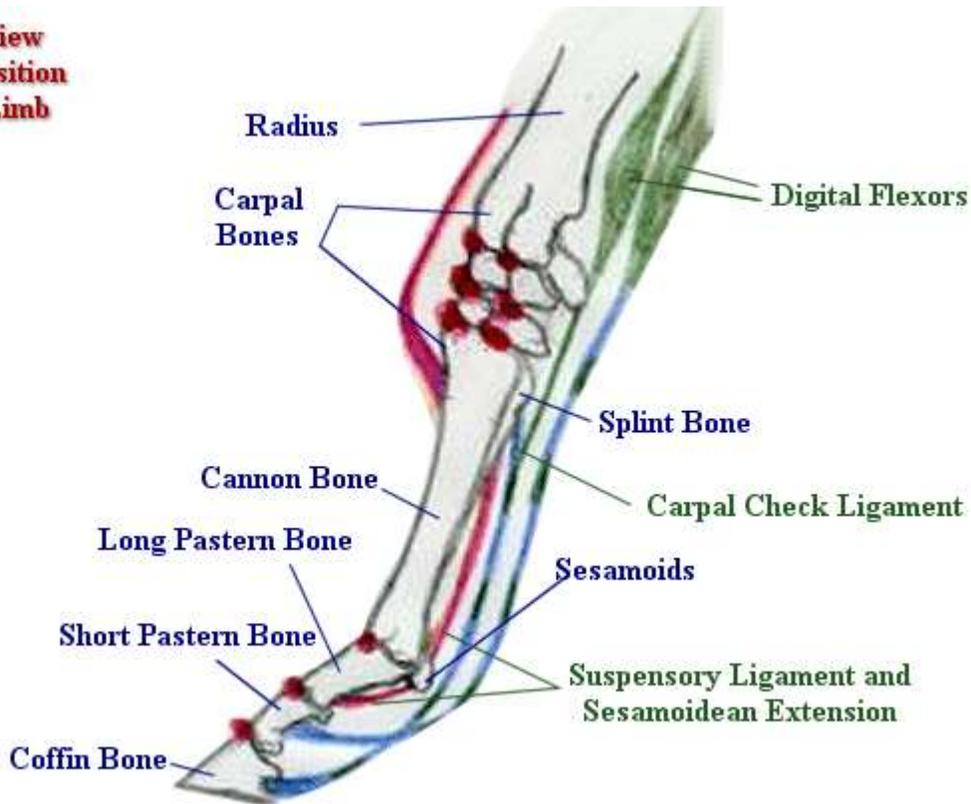


**Normal Knee (Carpus)
Front View**

Drawing A shows a normal knee. Notice the dark spaces between the carpal bones. Between these bones lays synovial fluid and cartilage creating, put simply, cushion and lubricant to the joint.

Drawing A

**Side View
Park Position
Front Limb**



Drawing B

Drawing B shows a forelimb of a horse in over park position. The red dots marked are areas which synovial fluid can be pushed out and friction can be caused with repeated over extension

wearing away the protective cartilage and bring bone to bone possibly causing wear and deterioration to the carpal bones, pastern bones and coffin bone.

Continued use of this stance can also cause stress or injury to the;

- Radial check ligament
- Carpal check ligament
- Digital flexors
- Suspensory ligament
- Sesamoidean extension

This is at higher risk through mounting, holding a riders weight or backing out of park position.

When and When not to Park

Utilizing the park is standard in many gaited breeds when shown at in-hand classes. This has changed in some breeds and should be found in the applicable rule books. Some are now asking for a horse to stand square or you may be asked to square a horse up from park position for a better evaluation of a horse. The position of park can hide conformational flaws in a horse as well as create the illusion of flaws that don't exist.

Under saddle

It is common to see horses standing in park position with the weight of equipment and rider. Check your rule book again here as well. Many times one is given the option to stand square or park. I recommend square position to eliminate the stress and strain to a horse. In park, and more so when a horse is over stretched, the horse ends up with their support base diminished. The legs that are supposed to support have been moved out of position. The back, shoulders and hips are now going to bear more stress and strain in holding this added weight.

Parking to Mount

Somewhere along the line people discovered the position of park brings the back of the horse lower to the ground, making it easier to mount. This convenience to us can cause a multitude of problems for a horse. **The position of park was not intended for mounting** at least not by those that understand what it can do to a horse.



Photo A

Shows mounting a horse in park. Notice in this picture how the saddle is pulled off center of the back while mounting. In park the back of the horse is dropped so the tree of the saddle does not hold on the off (right) side of the horse's spine and the rider's weight pulls the saddle to the near (left) side, applying more pressure on the back on the near side. This horse is being mounted correctly holding rein and mane, while the right hand is on the off side of the swell. The horse is being mounted with little pull on the horse yet the saddle still rolls some on the back. Next look at the girth which is now

angled back on the horse also allowing for the saddle slip. Where the saddle is held on the horse without the saddle rolling completely off the side is at the off side withers, when the pressure should be applied evenly along the back. It is not uncommon to find sore or inflamed withers on a horse that is mounted in park position.

Photo B

After mounting in park look at the horses legs. They have moved. The right front moved back and the right hind moved forward. **The horse had to move the legs closer to being under himself to hold his balance for me to mount.** My position in the saddle with the horse in park has thrown my seat back and out of centered with my legs out of line with the hips and shoulder. The horse's back is at this time having to hold my weight and its own putting more stress on the shoulders, hips and lumbar span. When asking this horse to move up out of park it will cause stress and strain when the horse has to coil at the loins to bring the back up and the hind legs forward.





Photo C



Photo D

The pictures above are the same horse being mounted in the same manner but in position of square. There is no saddle slippage. The horse has not moved the hinds at all and the left fore moved half a hoof length. With a horse standing square I am able to sit centered and in the correct, most effective riding position for myself and the least amount of stress to the horse as well.

Some Final Notes

For those that opt to park your horse while mounted in a line up. One should **ask the horse to step up out of park before executing the back**. Asking a horse to back from park position causes a horse to lean back sending the forelegs more forward while dropping the back of a horse. This makes a horse drag the front and back legs back instead of picking the legs up, back and setting them down. This also causes the horse to bring the head and neck up and many times opening the mouth when bit pressure is applied. A horse is unable to round the neck, break at the poll, bring the muzzle in to bring up the back to collect for lifting of the legs in the execution of back.

Don't feel pressured to back incorrectly under that judge that walks the line up at the back, but does not take the time to actually watch each horse back individually. To me as an exhibitor and judge this says they are not putting much emphasis on the back as they should when it is called for as part of a class protocol. This is the same for a judge that asks for mass back (all at one time). Be kind to your horse and ask for that step up out of park before backing or better yet just square in a line up. At one time the step up was a required procedure published in many rule books but seems to have disappeared due to lack of understanding the importance.

So in closing, the park used correctly can be an added touch to overall appearance to some, though not necessarily a good thing to be done incorrectly for our horses and can certainly affect overall performance of a horse.