

From Flat Walk to Running Walk

By Elizabeth Graves Copyright 2009©



"Spirit" of Pleasure Gaits in Belgium

No short cuts here, this mare is a natural without the need for gimmicks and gadgets to bring about what she had in her and I don't advocate in any mechanical manipulation in training of any horse. Took her a just bit to soften up and feel what I was asking for. Notice no bit needed for it either, just a simple side pull of direct pressure application.

Getting the mental and emotional relationship established first of who is the teacher and who is the student is first in order which I will talk about later.

*First was getting her to respond to leg and seat aids in understanding how to be **straight**, meaning being perpendicular to the ground, no dropping of shoulders and/or hips and especially in a circle of a round pen. It's up to us as the guides, directors and supporters of a horse to help them find this and know we will support them in what we ask, not get in their way, but help them in the changed dynamics of carrying a rider. It is our job to help them, not hinder them in something such as carrying a human, which they were not put on the planet to do.*

*Second was getting her to step **deep under herself behind**. As always this has to come from behind but it's what we do in the middle of the horse and up front that helps this happen.*

***A.** Be sure **sitting position** is as close to the base of the wither as possible/or as the saddle your riding will let you. This is the strongest part of the horses back and the easiest place for the horse to lift and carry its self and you, no matter what gait your horse does and on gaited or in non gaited breeds.*

Any other seat position will in time be hard on your horse, sooner or later one can have performance problems as the body will start to break down in the worst case scenario. Often more so if saddle fitting problem exists, poor use of a fitting saddle exists, poor use of hands to head gear and / or hooves not being trimmed in balance and anatomically correct to the horses natural structure.

Sad to think it's after this happens that folks learn to change their ways of poor equitation habits and a horse has already paid the biggest price.

B. Be sure the pelvis is level, centered and open upon the horse, any other position gaited horse or not, immediately creates stress and interference for the horse to achieve what you are asking it do naturally within its given structure.

C. Leg position should be shoulder, hip, heel or as close to that as the saddle will let you. One inch to far forward can change position of leg and seat and make you work so hard in finding position you cannot concentrate on working with the horse , if stirrups are set to far forward, just drop the stirrups all together as helping the horse is impossible correctly. Hopefully a rider will have some kind of independent, working seat to be able to drop stirrups if they are in fact teaching/ training any horse.

Having this level pelvis is the only way to have complete freedom of hip socket flexibility forward and back as needed to direct a horse. Also have a shock absorbing effect of the entire leg from ankle, knee and hip. Bracing of the leg of any kind for any gait is unacceptable in upper level horsemanship and is an indicator of an uneducated seat, lazy and/or interfering seat allowing any gaited or non-gaited horse to eventually self carry in any movement forward to reduce resistance and over working of the horses body to maintain soundness and longevity.

D. Foot position of the toes should be forward as much as possible or even a slight toe out is acceptable. A slight toe out is more common in woman just because of our hip sockets being set a bit farther back than the male with our legs angled out so our pelvis can accommodate child birth, men maintaining a straighter toes is easier. The foot should be positioned on the ball of the foot and if possible to the back of the ball of the foot rather than forward on the ball. I am working on this refinement myself this year as a goal to maintain. More to the back of the foot ball helps those that lose stirrups often and more so if you are like me and put little or no pressure in the stirrups.

E. Foot pressure in the stirrups should be as little as possible. Just gently setting in the stirrup. If I was to place my finger under your boot and you smashed my finger with the pressure, this is too much and also tends to send the foot forward out of an open, soft, balanced seat.

I think of the hind quarters of the horse as the engine and the muscles that run along each side of the spine (Longissimus dorsi) as the fuel line. Any time we apply downward pressure into the stirrups which are attached to the saddle bars or panels, we put a crimp in the these muscles or the fuel line interfering with the energy of the hindquarters needed from back to the front of the horse. It takes the energy from the hindquarters to push the other 2/3rds of on the front of the

hindquarters to move forward. Any interference here makes more work for your horse to do the job asked.

F. Leg pressure applications. *Of course every horse has its own individual response level to leg aids application in response to application from the rider, more often this becomes less responsive with poor training applications or can be over sensitive again to poor training applications. I seek to make a responsive horse, not a numb horse or a reactive horse in the sides. This mare still had a very nice listening body so she was very receptive to my leg aids without any defenses or over reactions. I want my thigh on the horse but with no pressure application until I need it as an aid not a constant push or pressure. In this photo I am actually using my ankle to her barrel in a slight, very hard to perceive with the human eye a gentle rub asking her to bring her abdomen up to my seat bones to level the spine for a gait of running walk, in turn engaging her pelvis so she can step under herself as much as her structure and current conditioning would allow.*

Also in engaging the pelvis creates the pushing effect hinds, in turn lifting the loins, leveling the spine also raises the root of the neck to open up the shoulders for reach forward and pulling effect of the front legs. As this mare become more conditioned her reach in front with push behind will increase. You can't have it all at once without stressing the structure. Be patient and give them time to condition to the maximum their body will allow in gait performance.

G. Use of hands to head gear aids. *Prior to this photo it did not take long to get this mare first to the relaxation to finding "**long and low**" and then working to "**down and round**" in a relaxed manner in the walk before asking for her to move more forward with energy.*

In this photo I have straightened out my elbows and softened my fingers on the reins, saying to her with my hands "I trust you to hold this shape, to hold the gait". Earlier I had to help her and support her more to hold the correct shape for gait. When she would fall out of the correct shape I would then close my fingers and again create a bend back into my elbow to help support her in gait but when she held the shape on her own I would again let her carry herself in the shape.

F. Creating the energy *and open this mare up to increase her extension to running walk from flat walk without stiffening or bracing is simply breathing deep from my core, not my upper body to maintain relaxation, so the mare maintains her looseness effect needed for the gait. Also connecting my pelvis into my sternum by creating a stretch from my pelvis to my sternum with the muscles in my own body that run along each side of my own spine, stretch from pelvis up and forward until you feel the pull of those muscles up and forward all the way under your shoulder blades.*

I work in my own mind a lot to help my body create the shape and energy I need from the horse, so if I increase my energy forward in a positive emotion, not a negative one, as negative creates the horse to stiffen and lose that looseness element it needs for the gait. I am doing the running walk in my own mind the horse always follows through in its body if it's not a reb- hab horse that is not yet open to receiving direction from its human teacher.

Note: This stretch also puts you onto your seat bones for that deep close contact everyone talks about but can't seem to find. This opens your pelvis even more allowing the horses back to come right up to you, the rider with feel this as that light bulb moment in that you and your horse feel as one working unit , not two separate bodies trying to find each other. At this point everything connects.

Final notes in this mare: In this photo she is in the lowest point of her head shake and is in time with the right foreleg which is in full aerial phase sequence. As the head comes up in the head shake this leg will be coming down into full support phase sequence as the left fore starts forward and up in reach. What I want to point out in this photo is the mare has some flexing up at the 3rd and 4th cervical vertebra as she should with some flexing at the poll, not be broken only at the poll. As she conditions she will in time have much more flexing at these 2 vertebra up allowing for even more reach of the fores and the hinds opening her up to more ground coverage to the gait of running walk with that desired look of leaning into a plow . As she conditions will also have more speed in gait although she had a very good amount already.

Some things to think about: The running walk seems to be the most elusive gait to folks as they seems to blow right on by it going to a stepping pace or a racking gait and it's due to being body tight not having effective equitation. Just cramming, jamming and bracing is much easier than learning to really ride. I hear folks excuse all the time why they can't or don't need to do the work to be a good rider, it does not take rocket science to do this, just dedication, some use of one's grey matter , physical work and really not all that much time, just that it is correct.

Even in all the other gaits that are easier to come by is using up your horse if one does not learn how to help the horse do it's gait easily and without the stress. The horse pays more than you do with its soundness and even life in the worst case situations.

When you acquired your first horse weather you knew it or not, it needed you and is not a machine you can expect to just do what you want with no effort on your part. So riding like a wet sack of flour, with crummy equipment or miss-used equipment and behaviors like a humming bird on a sugar high or the opposite end like being gassed by a dentist is not going to give you great results. For those that have no feelings or attachment for their horses and just look at them as a tool, then think of it like this, if you don't take care of your tools, they don't last and it's just money wasted on your part.

No matter how big your trailer, fancy your truck, how big your belt buckle, your equipment colors are cute and match, have the most popular "in" brand name boots , or spend more time judging others horsemanship rather than working on your own, your horse understands none of this and it sure does not make any one a better horseman. Do the work, just get out and do the work!!