



Cures for the pace

By Lee Ziegler

Left: FoxWalk, just a bit fast to be a flat walk.

Training the Flatwalk - Part II

by Lee Zeigler

The showring flatwalk is a phenomenal thing to watch. Extended and collected. Smooth and fast. It doesn't just happen, but rather takes time and consistency to instill. In our last issue, trainer Lee Ziegler spelled out the basics of training this important gait. In this conclusion, she addresses correcting common problems that occur when pushing a horse for speed at the walk. She begins with horses that tend to become paces. Ed.

PACE: This is the most common and most frustrating result of pushing the ordinary walk into a flat walk. Most of the horses that pace or do a stepping pace — the same problem for training purposes — have a slightly lateral ordinary walk. This means that they pace a bit, even when they are going at a slow walking speed. You must get rid of this gait.

Horses pace for several reasons, none of which have much to do with the angles of their hooves. They pace because they are physically or mentally tense, because they are carrying their heads and necks in the wrong position, because they are in

poor physical condition (weak muscles) and some-times because they are "wired" to do the gait. Before you can teach your horse to do a flat walk you will need to strengthen his back, and change the way he holds his body.

Cures For The Pace: There are several techniques you can enlist to prevent pacing. It's important to remember to start with the most likely cause of the problem, and work from there.

The neck stretch

The first step in curing the pace is teaching the horse to travel with his head and neck stretched forward and down. This will loosen up the tense muscles in his neck and back and help him begin to use his body better so that he is able to do a flat walk. Don't try this exercise in a curb bit of any kind, a gag bit, or a mechanical hackamore. Use a snaffle, either a typical broken-mouthed one, a curved bar type (mullen mouth), or a Kimberwicke without the chain attached. If you are afraid you can't control your horse in one of these, use a Pelham with double reins, keeping the curb for an "emergency brake" and using the snaffle rein to work the horse.

To teach the horse to travel

with his head and neck forward and down, move him out in an ordinary walk, with slack reins. Next, holding your hands low and out to either side of his neck, give alternating light tugs and releases (squeezes, opening and closing your hands around the reins), down and to the side, not pulling back on the reins. The horse will begin to reach into the bit, tentatively lowering his head and nosing out. Do not try to tuck his head. Ride with just the weight of the reins in your hands, no pulling and no strong resistance. Keep your reins slack, so that their weight alone will help to lower the horse's head.

It will take a while for a horse that has been "bitted up" in typical fashion to learn that he can stretch his neck forward. You might need to work on such a horse from the ground, massaging his neck and enticing him to put his head down and forward with a treat or two.

Once the horse understands that you want him to travel with his head and neck stretched out, ride him at an ordinary walk in that position for increasing periods of time. It will help him relax mentally and stretch the tight muscles that produce the pace. Practice this exercise until the horse automatically moves into it when you ask him to with the alternating rein tugs. Once you've accomplished this

response, you have a valuable de-benefit - a horse trained to relax on cue.

beginnings of collection

With the horse in the neck-stretched position, on an uphill grade, gradually ask him to increase his speed, while slightly increasing the contact you have

with the reins until you feel something similar to the weight of a ball plum in each hand.

Keep his head and your hands low, but begin to put him more "on the bit" by pushing him forward with your legs, then slightly restraining with the reins, "catching" his forward

motion in your hands. Be sure to use your legs first, then your hands, never both at the same time — "riding with the brakes" is a bad habit and will lead to a stiff horse with tight gaits.

After some practice, your horse will begin to slightly round his body under you and walk with a faster step. The gait will be a fast ordinary walk. At any signs of the pace, return to the neck-stretching exercise and slow down. Then try again.

Practice this exercise, pushing the speed in the walk, until your horse is moving out in a fast, reaching flat walk. This

will take some time, but eventually your horse will go into a flat walk on the uphill grade with a little leg pressure.

When he has mastered the gait going uphill, try it on level ground. It may take a while, but alternating the neck stretched position and the semi-collected position will eventually allow

Note: If you have a horse that is "wired" to pace, while these exercises may help, the only effective cure is work on the longe or under saddle over large, heavy poles. You will need to "re-wire" the horse to hard trot, and then try to develop a flat walk. Ride over the poles and in deep footing until the horse discovers that it is less work not to pace, then go back and work on the flat walk.

you to keep the "pacey" horse in the flat walk on level ground. Don't try this on a downhill grade — it will make the horse more likely to pace. Some pacey horses never learn to do a flat walk down hill — others with enough time and conditioning can do a flat walk on a slight downhill incline, but it is hard work for both horse and rider.

Conditioning

If your horse is pacing

because he lacks muscle tone, ride him at an ordinary walk, alternating the neck-stretched position and a semi-collected position, until he develops needed strength and flexibility.

A young horse (2-3) will need time to grow as well as exercise to build up his muscles. This is a good reason not to ride young two-year-olds — they are frequently not physically strong enough to avoid the pace. Often young horses will outgrow the pace if they are allowed to develop physically before they carry weight.

Sometimes an older horse that has not had proper exercise to build up his back and neck muscles will pace despite his physical maturity. Be prepared to put some miles on such a horse, riding in nothing but an



A Flat Walk, note the neck and back use

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Cures for the pace continued...

ordinary walk. Do not let the horse speed up and pace at any time. Ride uphill much as possible, but avoid steep down-hill trails. The uphill work develops the horse's strength in his back and neck by making him push

Head Lowered:

The neck stretches,
the poll is lower
than the withers.

With time, the
horse can lower his
head and neck
—
more than this.



with his hindquarters and round his back. Downhill work puts a strain on his shoulders and front legs and makes him more likely to lose his balance and pace.

You can also improve a horse's condition by working him on a longe line over low poles or cavallettis. You can push him for a little speed here as the poles help break up the pace by making him pick up his feet and change the timing of his steps. Space three or four poles around the circle where you are longeing the horse. He may hard trot over them, but at least he will not be pacing over them, and his back and neck will be getting good exercise, especially if you longe him in a halter without side reins.

After your horse has spent some time developing strength in his back, push him for more speed in the walk in a semi-collected position. He should move easily into a flat walk, with an

occasional reminder from you not to go too fast or start pacing.

FOX-WALK, JOG AND TROT:

If your horse does one of these gaits when you ask for a flat walk, you are probably asking for too much speed, too soon.

Go back to the ordinary

walk, establish the walking rhythm and then just barely push the horse on for a longer, faster step. Let him relax, then try again.

You may find that the neck stretching exercise, followed by riding with light contact while asking your horse to semi-collect will encourage him to flat walk. Try some slight downhill grades while pushing the horse in the walk, but restraining him from breaking into the trot. Most gaited horses will be slightly trotty going uphill and less so going down. Sometimes just a little work on a very slight downhill grade will increase a horse's stride length and keep him working in the flat walk.

Often horses that jog or fox walk need to have the walking rhythm established. It helps to ride them in the ordinary walk for a long time, then ask for a little speed in the walk. With

time and conditioning, the speed can be increased until they are doing a respectable flat walk. It is possible to teach a hard-trotting Quarter Horse to do the flat walk with plenty of time and work at increasing the speed of the ordinary walk. The process with a gaited horse is much easier.

Improving the Flat Walk

Once your horse has learned to move out in the flat walk, you can polish the gait by working him in it until he is even in his speed, rhythmic in his motion, and loose in his stride.

Practice urging him on for more speed in the gait, while checking him just before he starts to break the gait. This takes timing and skill. Use your legs to squeeze and push him on, while being ready to use a gentle pull and slack with your hands on the reins the instant he starts to go beyond a smooth, even four beat flat walk. Keep him working at his best speed, continuing to use your legs if he slows and your hands if he speeds up. At the same time you are working on speed, you can improve his looseness and stride by working him in soft footing or on a very slight downhill incline. Be careful to keep contact with the bit light and steady, allowing the horse free motion of his head and neck, but preventing him from stringing out into some other gait.

With time and the "wet saddle blanket" treatment your horse will be flat walking with the best, on the trail or in the show ring.

