

Park it!

By Elizabeth Graves



HIGH HATS BUBBA, a highly successful versatility show horse from the 1980 and 90's, exhibits a correct park in western halter. He has also earned multiple national Side Saddle titles over the years. He has been owned by the author since age two, and will be 24 this year, and is still a working lesson horse.

*Parking out is more
than a pose.*

*There are effects to this
stance that you
may not have
considered before.*

THE ACT OF STANDING A HORSE in park position has been around long before any of us have been walking the earth. It is very impressive and an elegant sight to see a large class of horses standing parked head to tail in a model or halter class showing the best of what they are. Done correctly and under the right circumstances, parking out can add that certain touch of class. But we need to determine just how to utilize this technique with our horses.

The Park

Parking a horse consists of more than just asking him to stretch out. The forelegs should be vertically beneath him. The hind legs stretched out just far enough behind to level out his topline. His head should be up with his eyes and ears forward in an alert, expectant expression. The horse should appear bold and energetic, not stretched out and strained.

Parking for Show

DONE WELL the park can be a benefit in presenting a horse in hand. It can also be a way of covering up incorrect structure, or of making a correct horse look flawed. Park position can diminish the elements of cow hock and sickle hock, as well as camped under or camped out hind legs. It can make a horse appear to be base wide or base narrow.

The correct park is done with the forelegs directly under the horse, not pulled out in front. The hinds should be somewhat out behind the horse, but not to the point that the back becomes dropped to a ventroflexed position. Over parking in the forelegs can cause a straight-legged horse to look toed-out in front, or conversely, help a horse that naturally toes in on the front to appear straighter. It can also cause a horse to look narrow or wide based in front.

As a judge, I like to see the horses parked in those classes where parking is called for, but will ask a horse to be squared up during the class to correctly evaluate total structure. In doing so a judge can make the correct decision and place the most correctly put together horse. **Not to evaluate a horse standing squarely can possibly allow a seriously flawed horse to become a standard in what it takes to win** - which is what everyone desires - possibly effecting future undesired traits to develop in our gaited breeds.

Effects of Parking

USING PARK for an in-hand class, when called for and done correctly, is fine on a mature horse once

their growth is complete and they can handle the physical stress it can cause to their body.

We need to be very conscious of the effects maintaining the parked out stance can have when held for long periods of time, of what being held in an over parked position can do, even to a mature horse, and of how parking, in general, effects a young, undeveloped horse.

When asking for a park we cause the spine of the horse to drop, which in turn, hollows the back out from a slight amount, to a considerable amount, when overdone. Parking with the forelegs too far forward and the hinds too far back will cause stress in a short amount of time and it really does not create a pretty picture, but makes a horse look weak. These kinds of stresses and strain can also certainly risk efficient performance while working under saddle.

We know a rounded back is stronger and a hollow back is weaker, **so when we ask a horse**

to hold this weaker backed position other parts of the body must take on the added stress.

This first takes place in the lumbar junction, hips and shoulders, and as the stress continues, it travels throughout the rest of the body via the neck and all the way down through the knees, hocks and hooves. It causes stress not only on the soft muscle tissue of the body, but also the hard skeletal structure. This I cannot emphasize enough in the young horse that has still not developed all the soft tissue for strength and the hard tissue for support. Over time, on any horse, this stress can wear away cartilage, bringing bone on bone friction of the joints, risking future soundness of a horse.

Parking Astride

MANY BREEDS ARE REQUIRED to park in a line up while showing. Parking correctly for small amounts of time can be fine if regular back strengthening is maintained at other times. If allowed by the show

Minimal Park



This mare shows the minimum amount of park in the hinds, just back of being set square with the hind directly under the horse for maximum structure support. The more pulled out behind, the less support. This mare could be pulled back in the hinds two more inches and have a showier appearance while still having a fair amount of support behind. The forelegs are correct, directly under the horse, causing no stress.

Overparked



This mare shows an extreme amount of extension front and back with maximum amount of stress possible to overall structure. The fronts are not perpendicular to the ground, as in a correct park, and the hinds are so far out behind they appear to balance the back end with no real support of structure. Notice how the back has dropped to a very hollow, weak position.

rules, I recommend standing square if that is an option. This does not have the stress of parking, especially with the added weight of tack and a rider.



Square, not parked.

When asking to back from a park, it is important to ask for your horse to **take a step up and forward before engaging aids to request the back.** Backing from the park is extremely hard on the horse's body and often a horse will show resistance in raising the head and gaping at the mouth. The result can be a forced-back dragging of the hooves, not a nice easy picking up and stepping back with each hoof.

Parking to mount has been very popular for many years now and can be seen just as much on the trail horse as the show horse. It has become common to make the horse shorter by dropping the back, thus making easier for a person to mount.

Using the park to mount is the most strenuous situation in which we can utilize that position. Not only is the horse holding its own weight



Correct park.

in a non-supported position, but also our own weight pulling on the horse. It is very common for many horses to start stepping up and forward to brace or balance when Over parked.



being mounted this way, and over time it may become a habit to move forward, and not stand still at all for mounting. Moving forward while mounting can also be a sign of discomfort - to pain- in the horse. Mounting in park can also cause saddle slippage, as the withers are dropped away from the bars of the saddle and the bars are what keep the saddle in position when mounting.

It is my opinion that **parking should not be used for mounting a horse**, in my experience I find way too many sore backs, which follow through to later performance difficulties.

Think First

WE MUST ASK OURSELVES if the convenience of parking in the incorrect way, or situation, is worth the price it can exact from our horses. As a judge, I feel what is best for the horse comes first, and a little shorter journey to the saddle is not worth the effects it can have physically on our horses. Parking correctly in hand, for limited amounts of time, offers a nice presentation of a horse but is not necessary to correctly evaluate the best horses.

Our horses rely on us to make the right decisions for them and all too often tolerate what we ask to their own price.

About the Author:

Liz Graves is a carded horse show judge, trainer, author, artist and popular gaited horse clinician.

