

From Camel Walk to a Pure Walk

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Those who have ridden a gaited horse executing what is often termed the “dreaded Camel Walk” usually are in no hurry to repeat the experience. The Camel Walk can be found in all the gaited breeds but is more common in the Tennessee Walking Horse.

Defining the Camel Walk. The Camel walk is when a horse will walk laterally; in which the legs on one side move together or closely together in the pickup phase (Aerial phase) and then laterally downward to the set down phase. A horse will then switch and repeat this to the opposite lateral legs and hooves. Both legs on one side may set down together in timing such as in a pace or in an order where the hind will set down just slightly before the front, similar to a stepping pace.



Working fox trotter in rating walk speeds and shortening length of stride at walk in ground work before carrying weight of rider.

This is not a gait compared to 1) a flat walk or a regular walk when the hooves will be working in a flat hoof transfer; 2) a running walk or fox trot when the hooves work in a rolling hoof transfer; nor 3) the racking family of gaits when the hooves work in a leaping hoof transfer. The camel walk is possible in a low headed shape of the horse’s body and also in an upright body carriage.

Cause and Effects of the Camel Walk. There are many factors which may be the cause of a horse executing this kind of movement. What a horse inherits genetically would be the first element. We know that gaited horses inherit in their nervous system that ability to move in a different manner than their non-gaited counterparts. We commonly refer to this ability in biomechanics and locomotion as to “how a gaited horse is wired”. This unique wiring is how the nerves fire the muscles to move the skeletal structure.

In addition to this special wiring, the horse (gaited and non-gaited) also inherits variable muscle masses being from a flat type to a rounder, bulkier type of muscle mass. This inherited type of muscle mass dictates variables in strength to support a horse’s skeletal structure and how it can use it and move its structure. Lastly, the gaited horse will inherit a skeletal structure which will influence what gaits a horse may or may not be able to execute.

Typically, the Camel Walk can be experienced in an individual strongly wired and structured toward lateral movements. The Camel Walk is a very correctable movement. When the Camel Walk is possible due to added structural influences, then it can recur when an individual loses conditioning from lack of proper work. But with proper training, conditioning and time, it is still correctable.

In some cases, a Camel Walk may occur simply through a developing physical discomfort made possible through many factors, such as improper equitation, ill-fitting equipment, a structural misalignment in the body or an unsoundness developing in a horse, where none was present before. In cases of a possible permanent unsoundness, the Camel Walk may not be correctable.

The most typical causes in the development of the Camel Walk though are due to improper training; when the horse’s body has not been educated, shaped, and supported properly. The Camel Walk is a movement that has the possibility of creating stress to a horse’s physical health over time due to the lateral nature of the movement in



Fox trotter executing the Camel Walk

that the top line is not working in a healthy manner. Consequently, the hindquarters will not be moving in an engaged manner. Even in those individuals with a lower headed Camel Walk, they are strung out with the base of the neck not lifting upward correctly to bring the horse off the forehand. They need help in raising the entire top line and engaging the hindquarters in a healthy weight bearing posture. A horse's weight in the Camel Walk will shift from side to side transferring an incorrect weight burden to shoulders and hips. This in turn, stresses joints and soft tissues from the top downward through the legs and hooves.

Correcting the Camel Walk to the Pure Walk. When working to correct the Camel Walk, first ensure there are no physical discomforts or misalignments to a horse's body before proceeding. A good ground work program can be a great place to begin to open the body up and teach the horse to lift the top line correctly, longitudinally. This also entails work using lateral flexion exercises before asking it to do so with the added weight of a rider.

When riding, using a slick seated saddle and a non-grip breech or pant is recommended so it is more comfortable for the rider to work with the horse until a pure walk is achieved. The goal is to first shorten the stride and slow the horse down when astride which will help achieve this purpose in the early stages of correction.

Gaited horses, as with any other type of horse, should be able to have variable speeds at the walk; different speeds of walk can also be taught in ground work. Shoulders-in and shoulders-out, executed properly, are good exercises to teach a horse lateral flexion of the body while helping to bring the hind quarters working more under the horse. Adding the half halt to the training regimen will also work toward building proper movement and strengthening the hind quarters; getting the horse more under itself and lifting through the loin area, while gathering itself from back to front. Working serpentine patterns while maintaining straightness will also have benefits in developing purity at the walk.

In time as the horse walks correctly in the slower walk speed and maintains it, it will then be time to slowly ask for more extension at the walk. The horse should still carry itself in the good weight bearing posture which it achieved while working at the slower walk previously developed. This can take a considerable amount of time to correct in some horses as reworking muscle memory almost always takes some time to change when correcting. Patience, in addition to taking good care of the horse's emotional wellbeing, will also add to better results. Having an opportunity to correct a horse with the Camel Walk is a great experience in advancing one's own skills as a teacher and rider of gaited horses.



Fox Trotter working in the correct Flat Walk.