

Developing the Natural Running Walk

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The gait of running walk can for some folks seem one of the most difficult to bring out in their horse while astride. Oftentimes riders find it can be easier to bring about the gaits that require more of an essential tension in the horse's body such as the racking gaits or the stepping pace. This is because it is easier for many folks to stiffen in their own bodies and push a horse faster rather than relax and encourage the running walk. This article will give you some tools in your knowledge base to achieve success in developing this very smooth, ground covering, and efficient gait.

The benefits in developing the running walk naturally by working within the limits of how an individual horse is structured and understanding the proper way in which any horse is intended to move will keep them sound mentally and physically for a long life performing the running walk. A healthy emotional and physical working horse is also a safer horse.

A basic understanding in using this application

By nature, horses are back movers, meaning the shape of the top line affects how the legs will move. The horse works its body from the top down, in turn working from back to front creating forward movement through impulsion of the legs when given that choice. Often in the gaited horse world though horses are taught to move more as a turtle would move. The turtle is a leg mover, pulling it's self along as it has no spine. The turtle works from the legs up and from front to back. .

If a trainer does not understand the difference between these two anatomies and how to train the horse to use its back and hind end, the trainer must depend on other methods and equipment to bring about the running walks such as weighted shoes, harsher shanked and/or mouth piece bits, shackles, a variety of martingales, side reins, draw reins, tie downs; swinging them to create reach, etc. If a trainer works from the back down, teaching hind end engagement, nothing more is needed than a well-fitting, properly placed and strapped on saddle.

When starting a gaited horse, use headgear arranged for direct pressure applications, such as a pinch-less mouth piece with a snaffle cheek, well fitted and comfortable to the conformation of an individual horse's mouth. Other head gear arranged for direct pressure works well such as side pull or bosal. Headgear of opposing pressure applications can be used later once a horse is well educated, such as a curb bit well fitted and comfortable to the horse.

Hooves should be trimmed anatomically correct to the individual horse's conformation, bare foot or shoes for protective purposes only – no special angles or toe lengths are necessary because it is a gaited horse. All too often people mistakenly assume the gaited horse has more downward curve to its top line than its non-gaited counterparts. In my experience, this undesired top line shape is developed when the gaited horse is worked from the legs up and front to back, without regard to the natural anatomical function of the spine and hind end of the horse. Gaited horses should have a healthy and strong top line, with no more curve to the back than any other horse if we shape

them properly in a weight bearing posture when asking them to perform, with proper conditioning and education of the horse.

How to start from the ground

The first step is to establish the mental and emotional relationship with the horse. Then work on gait, which when done properly, has a looseness and relaxation element in its execution. This starts in basic ground work and should follow you into the saddle in starting a youngster or rehabilitating a horse. It's good to remember a horse is a reflection of everything you bring into the saddle and communicate from seat to legs and lead rope to reins. Communicate clearly and reasonably making it as easy as possible for a horse to understand while hearing what you are asking through your aids. Slow down, take the time it takes from ground to saddle and don't hesitate to back up if a horse gets confused or starts to shut down in confusion.

Second from the ground is teaching longitudinal flexion-- teaching a horse to lift its top line resulting in tipping the pelvis under the horse, engaging the hind quarters to maximize hind leg advancement; opening up through the shoulders to bring the horse off the forehead resulting in lifting the base of the neck and equalizing more of the horses weight to all four legs. Simply put, teaching a horse to lift itself in that weight bearing posture can be taught on the ground with belly lifts, wither lifts, pelvic tucks, vertical poll releases and flexion in which one can see the horse lift at cervical vertebra 3 and 4.

Lateral flexion exercises should also be a part of the program and bending in the rib cage at the three speeds of walk (dog walk, medium walk, flat walk) on a long line making circles, keeping the horse's body perpendicular to the ground not leaning into the inside shoulder and hip of the horse. Leaning to the inside and pulling on the line will encourage too lateral of movement such as pace or stepping pace. Keeping the head lower, relaxed, and stretching forward into the varying speeds of walk will work with upward and downward transitions. Encourage your horse to move forward from the point of the hip, walking a smaller circle yourself on the inside. This teaches the horse to drive from the back to the front and helps bring



Young TWH utilizing a lot of seat and leg support, lifting the spine while sending into the nose band of the headgear.

Leg position should be shoulder-hip-heel alignment with a bend in the knee. A woman may need a bit more bend in the knee than a man due to the difference in one's hip socket placement—a woman's being further back. Legs should softly drape along the side of the horse with no tension until asking for lifting of the spine, forward advancement and/or bending in the

the hind legs well under the horse in advancement. Poll releases right and left in which the horse softly gives you its head and neck when asked, not pulling or pushing on the head to get lateral poll releases and bends in the neck. When your horse can give you this in the ground work with soft signaling with hand aids anywhere on the body, it is time to bring the aids to the horse while astride.

Applications from the saddle

Sitting position is as close to the base of the wither as possible. This is the strongest part of the horse's back where it is easiest for the horse to lift itself and you, moving forward with ease. Sitting in this position also helps the hindquarters function properly and at full capacity, keeping them as open as possible to drive the horse's body forward and receive as much hind leg reach as possible within the horse's conformation without stressing it. The rider's pelvis should be level, centered and open upon the horse. Any other position creates interference for the horse to achieve what you are asking it to do naturally, making it hard for them to move themselves and carry a rider. Although it is commonly seen for riders to be leaning back while pushing their legs forward in the saddle, this closes the riders pelvis making it hard for the horse to engage its back and hindquarters and creates a tight back on the horse rather than an active back with that near invisible buoyancy we need for that soft subtle almost wave motion from back to front of the running walk.

rib cage. With Leg pressure applications, every horse has its individual response levels from the rider, more often becoming less responsive with poor training applications or over-reactive. Seek to create a responsive horse, not a numb horse. Let your thigh be on the horse but with no application of pressure until you need it – not as a constant push or pressure but a tightening of the thigh muscle and release repeated as much as needed when asking for a response. If needed, based on the individuality of the horse, work in adding lower parts of the leg such as calf muscle, on to ankle and last if needed, the heel. Again, in a squeeze release, not a constant pressure. This method of leg aids is termed "activating" the riders legs and is used when communicating to the horse with the riders leg being quiet when not needed. Often on the young, learning horse or a horse that has become numb to leg aids, I will roll the ankles along the horse's abdomen when asking them to lift the spine up towards my pelvis to bring it into an active level or upward curve of the spine. Each horse will be different in just how much raising of the spine is needed due to conformation. Having a level pelvis position is the only way to have complete freedom of our hip socket flexibility and mobility forward and back as needed to direct a horse. This also works as a shock absorbing effect of the entire legs from ankle, knee and hip.

Foot position of the toes should be

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Young SSH utilizing some seat and leg with rein support.

as forward as possible or even a slight toe-out due to variables in how the human legs travel out and down from the hip socket. The foot should be positioned in the stirrup on the ball of the foot and to the back of the ball of the foot, but not back to the heel of the foot. The foot should be level in the stirrup not heels pushed down as this will close your pelvis and in turn tell the horse to tighten its back and drop it downward making the horse's legs work harder, losing that natural looseness element we desire in this gait. There should be as little as possible *foot pressure* in the stirrups. The foot should be gently setting in the stirrup to keep the leg softly draped at the horse's sides until we activate our legs in signaling. A tense leg with heels push down and/or forward also puts pressure all the way up the stirrup leathers, which are attached to the saddle tree bars or stuffed panels. This creates a downward pressure behind the horse's shoulders, tensing the shoulders which can close them and put the horse on the forehand, limiting the lifting of base of the neck. This same pressure will restrict the front leg assembly in

advancement, lift and fold of the front legs. while telling the back of the horse to drop and stiffen. Think of the horse's hindquarters 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, we put a crimp in those muscles or fuel lines interfering with the energy of the hindquarters needed from back to front for the horse to move properly as it was intended to do.

Communicating with the hands and headgear through reins, one must remember that less is more and much like the leg aids, it's about having feeling hands and not over using them, yet not throwing them away either. Squeezing and releasing your fingers around the rein in a soft feathering of

the fingers--not pulling--communicates your desire to the horse. Pulling the reins causes a horse to protect its face and/or mouth locking the jaw, then stiffening and bracing at the poll. Remember we are striving to maintain that looseness element which is a very important part of a natural developed head shake or nod that is in time with the legs working as a counter balance to the horse. We often see head motion that has been mechanically manifested and not in time with the horse's legs, making it more work for the horse to execute this gait in a natural easy manner with the proper rhythm. The amount of contact will

depend on how much guiding, supporting and directing your horse needs at a given level in its training. In time many horses need very little contact when in condition and when ridden from the center of the horse first. They can actually hold gait without rein contact in self carriage in time, if properly trained and developed. Always try and give the horse the opportunity to find its own rhythm and support as little as possible as the horse becomes confident in how to carry itself and gait. Let the horse show you he is getting it and if he can't, support again in seat, leg and rein aids as needed.

Creating energy to advance from flat walk to the running walk without stiffening or bracing is simply breathing deep from your core (torso), not the upper body. This retains relaxation so the horse also maintains that looseness effect of the gait. Also by creating a soft stretch from our pelvis upward through our back muscles and spine, bringing our sternum towards the front part of our pelvis by tightening just as much as needed in our abdominal muscles creates a soft hollowing effect at the base of our sternum where our upper rib cage meets, about the size of half a golf ball. This stretch in your body puts you on to your seat bones for that deep, close contact seat. This opens your pelvis even more allowing the horse's back to come up to you. A rider will have one of those light bulb moments when this is found in that the rider and horse are working as one unit, not two separate bodies trying to find and understand each other. At this point everything connects. This activates your torso and makes it easy for the



TWH mare working hands free with support from seat and legs only.

...horse to hear your intent to move forward more and increase their energy to meet the needs for a running walk. Working in your mind helps to create the shape and energy we need from our horses, increase your energy forward in a positive emotion, creates the proper shape in your body in a vertical posture and the horse will try to mirror it back to you in its horizontal posture. Again remember the horse is everything you bring to the saddle—you're doing the running walk in your mind and your body communicates it properly and the horse gives you what it's hearing in your body language which is the prime method in which horses communicate to each other.

Some Final Notes

The most important advice is to "slow down". The running walk is not a gait of speed; it is a gait of efficiency, being ground covering. With time and proper conditioning, a horse will increase speed as it develops rhythm and confidence. It is up to the rider/trainer to know what the speed limit is going to be for an individual, not comparing it to another horse and trying to meet that. Amount of over stride and animation is also limited to a horse's conformation as is head position. It is a myth that all walking horses are to have a high head set. This can happen in the mechanically manifested frames a horse may be put into, often with a price of comfort and future soundness being paid by the horse. Developing the natural running walk is about creating a shape, not restricting a horse's body in to a frame. It takes time to train a horse properly but is worth it in return for having a horse that is sound, likes its job and you.

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postural development. If the horse understands the lateral flexions and he feels relaxed he will likely show a licking/chewing motion in his mouth. This is called a mobile jaw and it allows the horse to lift the bit with his tongue and swallow any saliva in his mouth. As he is being ridden the pressure on the bit should do no more than merely indent the tongue. I imagine the tongue like a sponge in the mouth, and I want my rein aids to simply compress the sponge a tiny bit, then release. Too much pressure on the tongue will trigger a whole series of defensive reactions in a horse, all of which will negate postural development.

When riding with the aim of encouraging posture it is important the horse moves in an optimal tempo. The tempo should allow for fluid movement that is neither too fast nor too slow. If the tempo is too fast the steps will be hurried and the back will likely tighten. If the tempo is too slow it will exacerbate any balance issues. A steady, consistent tempo with sufficient energy is desired. Sometimes the appropriate action is to increase the energy without increasing the tempo. The increased energy will fill up the horse's body, but the steady tempo will keep his movement organized and controllable.

Activity refers to the movement of the hind legs, and they need to be active without being rushed or hurried. Sometimes the way to increase activity is to ask the hind legs to leave the ground quicker, but there is a distinction between that and quick movement. If the pelvis is disengaged (so the horse is strung out behind) his hind legs will stay grounded until they are well behind him before leaving the ground to come forward. When they do come forward they don't land sufficiently under his body to truly carry him forward. Rather they land in position to push vs. carry. By asking the hind legs to leave the ground quicker it brings the swing range of the hind legs more forward and the horse needs to engage his pelvis to accommodate. The more the horse carries rather than pushes his body the shorter the swing range of his hind legs, but the farther they are under his mass. A racehorse, for example, exhibits the maximum swing range in his hind legs, but his hind legs are used exclusively to push or propel. The other end of the spectrum is collection where the swing range of the hind legs is shorter, but more under the horse's center of gravity.

In essence, we can say the horse who is calm, relaxed, attentive and who moves in good posture with a consistent tempo, optimal energy and active hind legs through a rounded topline is truly forward. He is in the best possible state to carry out his rider's wishes. When he willingly settles into his role as the ultimate riding horse and develops confidence, trust and respect for his rider he will begin to exhibit true brio. The brio of a truly forward horse is a sight to behold, and something rarely seen today. I propose we all make an effort to bring horsemanship and training back to its roots, which are firmly planted in the well being of the horse and not in the greed or ego of the human.