

# Learn to Know What Gait It Is

By Elizabeth Graves ©2012



## IDENTIFYING GAITS

Learning to identify gaits for a first time gaited horse owner can be intimidating and confusing in the beginning. However, learning to recognize different gaits empowers the buyer who desires to purchase a horse with a specific gait; create a solid reproduction program when wanting strong gaited horses with specific gaits; and when learning the training tools of how to guide, support and direct a horse in training to shape it's body correctly to execute a desired natural gait and carry a rider at the same time.

Developing an eye to see the gaits first will be the easiest. Learning to feel the different gaits while astride will come next and hearing them correctly often is the final piece in knowing them with clarity. The reason that hearing them correctly can be the most difficult is that all correct rhythmic easy gaits are of a 4 beat timing, yet being able to distinguish between an evenly timed 4 beat gait and a broken timed 4 beat gait can be difficult when developing an ear for gait. Starting with still pictures is a good method to begin working without have one's eyes trying keep up with legs in motion in the early stages of learning. In many cases, having several photos lined up side by side photographed in consecutive order will best show the changes through a gait cycle, rather than one photo that only shows a single frame of a gait cycle. This is best done with a digital camera with no or short delay time between photos taken. Multiple photos will make gait distinction much clearer than a single photo. Some gaits during hoof stance support and swing phase can look the similar without the following frame showing the next change of leg movement and hoof placement.

I like to encourage folks to watch

the legs first and other varying factors, such as head movement, later. How legs and hooves move will always tell what is real, while some other factors can be manifested through training techniques and sometimes fool a person as to what gait is truly being executed by a horse. It will take time and examining many horses to develop the eye for identifying gait.

## BASIC GAIT LOCOMOTION TERMINOLOGY

*Locomotion:* Act of moving from place to place.

*Rhythm:* Timing of footfalls during a stride.

*Footfall sequence:* Order of footfalls in gait.

*Stance Phase:* When hoof is in contact with the ground.

*Swing Phase:* When the hoof has no contact with the ground.

*Limb support Sequences:* Single limb (unipedal), 2 limbs (bipedal), three limbs (tripedal).

*Suspension:* No limb is in contact with the ground (aerial phase).

## START WITH HOOVES AND LEGS

1. Watch the fore and rear on the side nearest you, these are Lateral legs.

- *Do they appear to pick up and set down Independently of each other?* This is a Running walk. Timing 1-2-3-4, alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof stance phase sequence.
- *Do they pick up together and set down together?* This is a Pace. Timing 1-2-1-2, alternating 2 hoof stance phase sequence.
- *Do they pick up together or closely together, yet move downward and set down independently of each other?* In the racking family of gaits (saddle rack or rack). Timing 1-2-



# Learn to Know What Gait It Is

from pg 5

3-4. Saddle rack alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof stance phase sequence, or a true rack, alternating 1 hoof, 2 hoof stance phase sequence.

- Do they pick up together or closely together, start downward together or closely together yet the hind hoof sets down prior to the fore hoof? This is a stepping pace, also termed lateral dissociation to the positive. Timing 1-2—3-4, alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof stance phase sequence.

- Is there a moment of suspension? Pace or true rack.

2. If you see none of the above it's time to look at the hind leg on the same side nearest you and the opposite front leg, these are Diagonal legs.

- Do they move forward together and set down together?

This is a trot. Timing 1-2-1-2. Alternating 2 hoof stance phase sequence.

- Do they move forward closely together yet the fore hoof sets down prior to the opposite hind? This is a foxtrot also termed as a trot dissociated to the negative. Timing 1-2 -3-4.

4. Alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof stance phase sequence.

- Do they pick up together or closely together, yet come down independently of each other? This is a Fox rack.

Timing 1-2-3-4, alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof stance phase sequence

- Is there a moment of suspension? This is a trot.

## REST OF THE HORSE

1. Watch the Whole Horse

- Look at how the top line of back is shaped. Is it slightly rounded upward, is it level or does it have a tension that makes it somewhat inverted?

- Look at how the croup moves, does it stay level or does it bob up and down?

2. Look at the Head and Neck

- Do the head and neck remain relatively still?

- Do the head and neck move up and down in a vertical motion?

- Does the head just nod a little?

- Do the head and /or neck move from side to side a little or a lot?

- Is the base or the neck (root of neck) flexed downward or flexed upward?

3. Look at the Tail

- Does the tail work in a bobbing motion up and down?

- Does the tail swing from side to side?

- Does the tail seem slightly lifted in a water fall effect?

## OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

1. How much energy is the horse utilizing to execute the gait?

- Some gaits require more energy than others. The running walk and foxtrot are similar in energy use where the gaits in the racking family require more energy.

2. What are the qualities of a gait?

- Smoothness, different gaits feel different

- Reach of forelegs (length of stride)

- Lift and fold of front legs, more or less

- Capping of hooves (the hind hoof steps over the track of the fore hoof on the same side (length of stride)

- Speed

When considering quality factors, gait must be achieved first and foremost as shown through the hooves and legs. Other movements are just nice extras that may or may not be present in an individual in varying degrees. The points I have provided above are just a good simple base of knowledge to start training the eye to see gait. In time we will apply this work to moving horses. It helps on moving horses to use one colored leg wrap on two legs on the same side of a horse. Then use another color on the same front leg and the opposite hind leg of the horse to see what lateral or diagonal leg movements are present. With a little time and patience it won't be long before a person is able to look at all four legs in motion and see the gaits easily. Stay tuned for the next installment. **(MORE FROM LIZ PAGE 35)**

