

# The Running Walk

By Elizabeth Graves



*Before the horse was yet given a name, dreams of men and women long gone came true with great pride of having owned, bred and utilized a horse with such a gait.*

**T**HE RUNNING WALK is an accelerated flat walk - a four beat gait in which each hoof lifts off separately and sets down separately. The timing between each lift-off and set-down is EVEN (1-2-3-4). The gait is only lateral in the set-down sequence of the hooves - right hind, right

fore, left hind, left fore. This does NOT make it a lateral gait. The "support sequence" is such that there are first two, then three, hooves on the ground at any one time. This is not a gait of speed, but of efficiency over distance, averaging 8 m.p.h.

*The running walk is a gait of several elements working together. Each is important and necessary. One is not more desirable than another.*

**Four beat** - timing of the hoof fall

**Evenness** - being exactly between the trot and the pace. Recognized by identifying the leg position at the beginning of a gait phase, when the right hind hits the ground.

**Two/three support sequence** - there are first two hooves on the ground, followed by three, then two, etc.

**Head Shake** - up and down motion of the head and neck, provides counter balance for the action of the legs. Contributes to the smoothness, overstride and length of stride.

**Over stride** - the hoof print of the hind oversteps the hoof print of the fore on the same side.

**Length of stride** - the distance from the right hind toe print to the print of the next right hind. The longer the stride the more ground covered with fewer hoof falls- less effort, more efficiency

**Looseness** - creates the fluidity of the gait. Due to conformation and relaxation.

## Recognizing Running Walk

THE GAIT IS FAMOUS for smoothness, yet there are many other gaits that are also smooth. There is a distinct difference in the feel of each, and I urge everyone, given the opportunity, to ride the mall to understand the differences. In the running walk the feel is unique in that it softly rolls the pelvis forward and back with the raising and lowering of the horse's back along with the rolling motion of his shoulders.

Recognition comes from watching, hearing and feeling the elements involved. You will see evenness, headshake, overstride and length of stride. You will hear the four evenly spaced beats. From the saddle, you will feel many elements, including headshake and the rolling motion of the shoulders. Overstride and length of stride can be felt as the horse slightly drops the hindquarters to engage and reach forward under himself. The hind hooves lift just enough to

clear the ground with minimal hock action, in a low, long, sweeping motion of the hind legs. Looseness can be felt in the smooth rhythmic flow of the gait from back to front. It can also be seen in the headshake, and in some horses, flopping ears. In some, looseness can actually be heard - lips flapping or teeth clacking to the rhythm.

***A great example of a correctly timed-up, even running walk was CITY GIRL, 1944 World Grand Champion.***

When a horse shifts from the flat walk to the running walk you can feel the engagement of the hinds. There back end drops slightly, there is no bouncing in the rear, and no movement in the croup. You can feel the horse shift forward with the pulling motion of the front legs. When horses develop speed in the running walk, they

tend to lean more forward. There is no side-to-side motion as in a lateral lift-off gait (stepping pace, stepped rack or rack), no slight bump up and down as in the hind motion of a diagonal gait (fox trot) or the hock action of a stepped rack.

Conformational differences can cause the feel of the gait to vary slightly from horse to horse.

## Structural Elements

STRUCTURE AFFECTS how a horse performs the running walk. Since the heritage of the Walking Horse includes a mix of many breeds, there are many possible combinations of structural elements for any individual. The name 'Walking Horse' is no guarantee a horse can do a running walk.

The rear end structure of a horse tells which gait(s) a horse will be inclined to do, while the front end indicates how the gait is performed. Look for conformational elements that allow a horse to be able to execute the desired physical movements of the running walk:

- \* Balance from front to back
- \* Up hill from stifle to elbow
- \* Down hill from hock to knee
- \* Shorter cannon bone in the hind
- \* Longer gaskin (stifle to hock)
- \* Shorter femur

Level carriage of the back is desired. Avoid horses with a long lumbar span, which can cause a hollow or ventroflexed back, more suitable for the rack or stepping pace. It is better for the lumbar joint to be placed closer to the point of hip rather than farther from it. In a mature horse the wither should be level or even a bit higher than the croup.

Look for a neck with nice length, set in the shoulder well. Closer to medium is best, as a high-

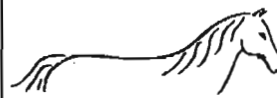




Dorsiflexed

### Back Carriage

Dorsiflexed is rounded, used in trot and canter.



Level

Level in running walk.



Ventroflexed

Ventroflexed, or hollow in racking gaits.



set neck tends to put a horse in a ventroflexed position. A short, thick neck hinders flexing at the poll for an effective headshake.

Close to a 50-degree shoulder angle is common in horses that perform a good running walk. The more upright the shoulder angle, the more lift of the front legs; the lower the angle, the longer the forward reach. The humerus making up 50% or more of the length of shoulder allows for a smoother gait with reach. A shorter humerus can cause choppier front-end action.

These are very basic structural elements. A whole book could be written covering all the possibilities of why a horse will, or will not, do a specific gait.

Finding a horse that has all the right elements takes time watching gait and evaluating structure. There can be some undesired structural traits, which can be counter-balanced, still making the running walk possible. Understanding the individual horse's structural traits will give you a good idea of how the gait should be developed and strengthened to the best of that horse's ability.

### Developing Gait

YOU MAY HAVE TO HELP develop the gait within your horse through training and strengthening.

First, be sure that all equipment fits the horse properly and does not cause discomfort or pain. This certainly hinders a horse in relaxing enough to start the basics needed to achieve gait.

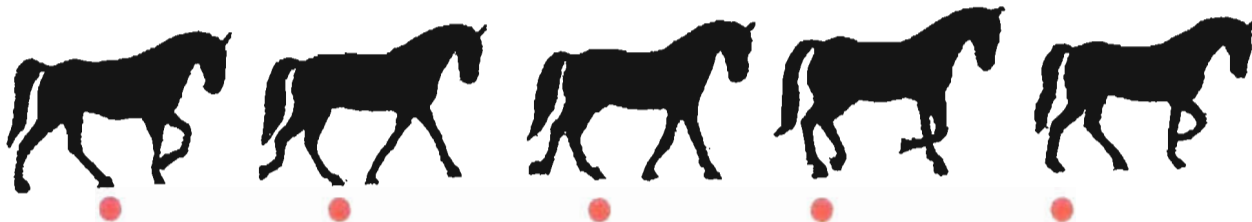
Another very important factor is equitation. Within this breed we see many variables in riding style from the hunched over "gangster" type of riding to the "chair seat" and the "feet on the dashboard" seat. These interfere with the

horse's ability to balance, carry weight and maintain maximum efficiency in gait. They make more work for the horse. The best seat is centered and balanced, in which an imaginary vertical line can be drawn from shoulder to hip to heel.

The most common error in developing the running walk is to push too hard, too fast. It takes time and patience to teach a horse to hold the gait. It takes time to build strength and muscle memory, and for the horse to find its own rhythm.



A centered and balanced seat least interferes with a horse's ability to carry weight. In comparison, a rack covers the same distance faster, but is more stressful to a horse.



## 2 hoof - 3 hoof Support Sequence Diagram of the Running Walk

*Starts when the right hind sets down*

1. Right hind, left hind, left fore (tripod support)
2. Right hind, left fore (diagonal support)
3. Right hind, left fore, right fore (tripod support)
4. Right hind, right fore (lateral support)
5. Right hind, left hind, right fore (tripod support)

### ***Pushing too fast too soon can send a horse past the running walk into a trot or pace.***

Avoid pushing for speed too early. Ask for speed in small increments and only once your horse can hold each new level consistently. This will come with time and strengthening. Pushing too fast, too soon, can send a horse past the running walk into a trot or pace.

Don't let a pacey horse pace or a trotty horse trot. However, if you can find the trot in a pacey horse, it works well to help break up the tendency for lateral use of the legs. Both types will benefit from exercises involving bending and flexing. Working on grades, hills and deep footing help the pacey horse to break up lateral movement.

The horse's back carriage is a good indicator for adjustment in overall body frame. The back should be carried level, not ventroflexed or dorsiflexed (rounded). Raising the horse's head and neck causes the back to drop, while lowering his head raises his back. In

each horse there is a correct point of head and neck carriage that creates level back carriage.

It is also important to keep the hindquarters engaged. All too often horses are pulled up and in through the head and neck. This tends to make a horse stiffen up and lose the relaxation needed for this gait. Correct collection is not

*Over the years, many people have helped to reclaim the true running walk. Whether through positive training methods, breeding for correct gait or teaching others, every effort to preserve the true natural running walk has contributed. And every contribution should be appreciated.*

from the front of the horse. It begins in the hindquarters and involves the entire body through to the front. Raising the back (to a level position) lowers the hindquarters and shifts the weight off the forehand onto the hindquarters. This makes it possible to get the back legs under the horse and allows the front legs to have maximum reach without being heavy on the fore.

Because the muscle memory of the running walk has been developed, a running walk taught - not

forced - makes it easier to regain the gait when a horse has not been in use. But when the gait is achieved (or attempted) through overuse (or misuse) of mechanical means, the horse tends to rely on artificial support to gait, rather than learning to carry and hold the gait on his own.

This type of training takes time to repair, and is in most cases is only a temporary fix. Long-shanked curbs bits are not necessary to achieve gait. Snaffle bits and bit-less rigs work wonderfully in teaching. Overly long hooves and weighted shoes do not teach gait, but force it. They can cause long-term physical stress over time, ultimately taking the horse further from the true running walk.

I can't stress enough that one needs to work from a good flat walk and build on it. The use of seat and legs is paramount, rather than trying to achieve gait through the bit alone. Don't worry about how high the head should be. If a horse has the neck for a higher head carriage, you can lift it, within his limits, once the gait is set. Don't sacrifice the gait for flash and flair. If they are within a horse, they will come with confidence and strength. They are not necessary elements for the gait.

