

## Are We Obsoleting Gaited Horses?

When working with Mountain Horses, Missouri Fox Trotters, and Tennessee Walking Horses, careful considerations of your horse's gaits should always be a top priority with your training program. When a rider or trainer calls a stepping pace a walk, or confuses a stepping pace with a rack, or makes the suggestion the walk should be a lateral gait, your horse's back will suffer from abuse! Not only will this physically abuse the horse to ruin but the mental side of the horse will also be destroyed. Learn to watch, listen, and interpret your horse's behavior. Hollow back gaiting rears its ugly head with Gaited Horse owners who don't recognize that a hollow backed horse is very detrimental to a horse's overall health. There should be continuous improvements (1) calmness and (2) proper development strengthening of the horse's back. Most of the time with good slow training practices, the stepping pace will diminish, and the horse will learn to separate his feet into a nice flat walk!

Keep in mind, at liberty with no weight on the horse's back, the pacing action will not hurt the horse. However, when you add the rider's weight, the rules change. Care must be taken to develop the horse's back, not only for long term health of the horse, but to ensure proper saddle fit.

This also applies to Non-Gaited horses, when you add the rider's weight. It takes a lot of practice to "sit the trot" and "post the trot" correctly! When most riders come from other disciplines and feel the step pace for the first time, they are often overwhelmed by how smooth this gait feels. This leads many owners to the false conclusion of a correct gait. "The old timers called an uneven gait a 'bastard gait.'" This description is just as true today as it was a hundred years ago. If we don't take the time to understand how a Gaited Horse uses his feet and back, you will shorten the horse's useful life span by years. Always remember, when the walk becomes uneven and the back is hollow, it can never be called the mother-of-all-gaits, which is a clean flat-foot walk. A flat-foot gait is even in gait, with head shake and over stride. The horse moves his feet independently with four even steps; each foot moves the same amount of distance as the prior foot. The

horse shakes his head in a nodding action, in time with his hind feet. It's the head shake that puts the power in the walk. A horse's over-strides can be as little as two inches or as much as twenty inches. An overstride is where the hind foot steps beyond the print left by the front foot. No overstride does not define the action of the gait; it's an indication of the amount of push from the hindquarters coupled with natural back movement in perfect timing creating evenness of gait. Remember slow work defines your gait. The walk does not have a moment of suspension like the pace or trot. Our goal is a smooth even continuous gait allowing proper development of the horse's back. The flat-foot walk can become an extremely effective gait for long distance riding .

Riders beware of association rules, clinicians, friends, trainers, Gaited Horse Show Judges and Dressage Judges that don't understand the difference between the rack, step pace, and the pure gaits needed for the long term health of our horses! Understanding there are very fine lines between the step pace and the rack is essential. At any given time both gaits can be very harmful to the long term health of our horses. For the future of all Gaited Horse Breeds we all need to strive

for good, clear Gaited Horse definition and high standards of movements that seeks to minimize confusion. If this is not done correctly, and the Gaited Horses are continually forced into too much speed, thereby losing natural rhythm and the ability to find true gait the horse will become obsolete! The final approving authority, regardless of breed, will always be the horse. Be good to your horse, and he will be good to you.