

Understanding and buying a Gaited Horse

There seems to be some confusion about what exactly a gaited horse is and how they compare to each other and to “straight” gaited horses.

First, let’s define what a “gaited” horse is. I get a lot of questions and there seems to be a lot of confusion. ALL HORSES HAVE GAITS.

A horse’s GAIT IS THE DEFINATION OF HOW HE MOVES HIS FEET. So, a horse that has a smooth jog and a soft lope can be said to have “smooth gaits.” If a horse walks, trots and canters easily, he can be said to have “good gaits.”

By definition, ANY horse has a walk, ~ it is a “4 beat gait” where each foot hits at a different time. You can count the 4 hooves hitting the ground, one at a time. When a horse moves faster, he will move into A) a TROT where diagonal feet hit the ground at the same time: left front and right rear, right front and left rear. B) a PACE, where both front and rear feet on the right side hit at the same time, then both front and rear on the left side hit at the same time. Harness racing Standardbreds, for example, MUST EITHER trot or pace. Since a pace is faster, they do not race against each other. C) a horse is said to be “GAITED” if they do some kind of movement where the feet hit the ground individually, creating a distinct sound for each foot.

There are a lot of variations in the type of “gait” a horse does, and each breed will call it by a different name. Like a trot, the movement may be up and down or long and loose. It can have short strides, or long, much actions or not much at all. Different Gaited Breeds have different styles of gaits, but they all have a four beat gait. The biggest difference, and the source of confusion, is that ALL breeds that TROT, the gait is called a “trot.” But every gaited breed calls the four beat gait by a different name.

The walk, (and other “gaits”) is a four-beat gait, meaning that each foot strikes the ground at a different time. When “straight gaited” horses move up in speed, they move into a two beat gait. That means that the right front and left rear strike the ground at the same time, then the left front and right rear strike the ground at the same time.

When the gaited horse moves up in speed, he continues a four beat gait, each foot striking the ground independently. What gives the speed is the impulsion. At speed, some gaited horses may only have one foot on the ground at a time. But not all gaited horses carry much speed. For many, the gait is kind of a shuffle that covers ground smoothly, but not swiftly. Others, like speed rackers, will cover ground at an amazing speed, approaching speeds of a gallop.

Let’s start by taking a look at registries.

Many popular breeds, TB, Morgans, Arabians, and Quarter Horses do a walk, a trot (a “jog” is a slower version of the trot, traditionally used for western riding.) and a

canter (a lope, the slower western version.) All draft breeds, all “Warmbloods” such as Trakehners, Holstein, Hanoverians and Oldenburgs, are trotting horses. So are Lipizzaners and Andalucian.

The American Saddle Bred has a natural trot, but it is recognized that it is able TO gait. The Saddle bred was popular for many years as a plantation horse and as a show horse. They are interesting because the Saddlebred is naturally a trotting horse, but many of them can be artificially taught to “rack.” Announcers at horse shows talk about the three “Natural gaits” and the two “artificial gaits,” the Slow Gait and the Rack. Both are four beat gaits, the Slow Gait is, as it sounds, slow, the Rack is faster.

The Standardbred can either trot, or “pace,” which is also a two beat gait, but the front right and the rear right land at the same time, and the front left and rear left land at the same time. Some Standardbreds can be taught to rack, and speek rackers are often Standardbreds or Standardbred crosses.

The Tennessee Walking Horse, was the first American gaited breed that is ONLY gaited. Although there are now several other breeds that are gaited, the Walking Horse was the original. Their gait is characterized by a long sweeping stride behind which stays low to the ground, and action only in the front. Many gaited horses, especially Walking horses, have what is known as an “overstride.” If you mark the place where the front foot of the trotting horse lands, the back foot will land near the same place. But if you mark the front foot of the Walking horse, the back foot will land anywhere from six inches to several feet in front of the place where the front foot landed. This is called the “overstride,” the distance that the back foot exceeds the placement of the front foot.

At the other end of the gaited spectrum is the Paso breeds. With these there is very little lateral movement. Horses have a lot of “action” (How high a horse lifts it’s feet.), but very short strides, which means they do not have much forward movement.

Today there is also several relatively new breeds that gait such as the two or more associations which recognize racking horses, and the Mountain horse registries (TN Mountain horse, KY Mountain Horse, Rocky Mt Horse, etc.)

Throughout the world, there are a number of gaited horses that are just now turning up in the United States. Foreign breeds which are gaited are the Icelandic and Norwegian Fjord Horses, the Marwari, the newly famous Indian breed, and both the Paso breeds, the Paso Fino and the Peruvian Paso.

What is a “Breed?”

The answer to this question depends on where you are in the world when you ask that question. Breed status in Europe and other parts of the world, is often an exclusive license of the government and it almost always includes set standards that all horses must display before they can be registered as part of the “Stud Book”.

“Breed” status in America simply means that some group of people have started to keep track of the lineage of horses. Breeds in the United States are usually started by simply finding a group of horses that show a common characteristic or characteristics. The owners pay a fee, which funds the association. Although breed organizations may be

non-profit organizations, they still make enough money to pay their employees, to advertise their breeds, and to promote their programs. They may print magazines, they sanction shows, they issue registration papers, usually signifying that a given horse was born of parents, but for new breeds, it may simply signify that the horse has met the criteria of being inspected and having characteristics of the breed. And, Breed Registrations set their own fees for registering foals and transferring horses from owner to owner. Most of these breeds, including the new and fairly popular Morab registry (Morgan X Arabian) are considered by many to be American “invented” breeds. The claim of breed status is often not recognized outside America.

Because anyone can start a breed, several groups may start registries of similar breeds at the same time. The Rocky Mountain Horse, the KY Mountain Horse, and the TN Mountain Horse are even the Mountain Horse, all similar and probably from the same genetic root stock.

Since the Paso breeds were Spanish in origin, and the Spanish brought many horses to the New World, it is very probable that these breeds found their way into the native American horses. In the 1950’s and before, a lot of Quarter Horse type horses used to do what was called “singlefoot,” or “Sugarfoot.” Today you see very few Quarter Horses that do the gait, as it has been bred out.

Horses that carried the gaited gene found their way into mountain pockets and were inbred, where the gaited movement was impressed into the gene pool. This is particularly true of the Smokey Mountains from NC through TN, KY and into WV. Some of them probably migrated with settlers to the Rocky Mountains. Three different breeds of similarly moving horses are registered by three different groups.

Also, many of these mountain horses are not registered at all. They are bred by people who have bred them as trail horses for many years, and who don’t “Buy into the notion” that they ought to spend money to register a horse!! Whether these horses are registered or not, especially since most of them are used as trail horses, is of little importance to their owners.

Traditionally the Walking Horse, has a longer stride behind, and the rear legs are stiffer with less hock action. The true walk is much slower than the rack. But many registered Tennessee Walking Horses “rack” with more hock action and more speed than true Walkers. Since these racking horses were controversial in the Tennessee Walking Horse show world, those who liked the racking horses started their own association.

Over the years many Tennessee Walkers that weren’t registered for one reason or the other, were still being bred. These unregistered horses have recently been gathered together in another Racking horse association, one for which inspection and gaits are required, but lineage does not have to be provided. When these horses breed, a lineage will be developed for their offspring.

There are some great gaited horses coming out of the mountain area in NC, TN WV and KY whose owners and breeders know good horses and take pride in breeding good, solid trail horses, but who would never spend any money to get a piece of paper!

These horses are usually a little heavier than Walking horses, often fairly short (14h to 15h) and very solid in temperament. They do a shuffle “gait” that does not have a specific name and is simply called a “Trail Gait.” They are usually smooth and quiet to ride and make excellent mounts. We buy a lot of these horses, mostly geldings because there is great demand for them.

CHARACTERISTICS

Although some gaited horses canter, many do not. People who are looking for nice gaited trail horses frequently are not interested in cantering. They are interested in smooth horses that will ride on the trail, alone or in groups. Since the four beat gait does not require posting as the trot does, and it is smoother than the jog, many riders like the ride. Since the horse probably doesn't canter, they like the feeling that they will not get run away with.

Another advantage is that gaited horses are often less expensive for a quiet trail horse. They do not require as much training because they don't need a collected canter and the gaits they do are natural. By nature, they have been bred to go on the trails and have a quiet temperament. Unlike many other breeds where individual horses may be quiet trail horses, but the breed as a whole is bred for some type of athletic sport such as jumping or working cattle, the gaited trail horses comes from a long line of horses who were expected to do nothing more than ride quietly and go where they were asked to go. So, their temperament fits their purpose. They are usually fast to break and they get experience doing what they were bred to do.

They are generally built with sloping croups, which makes it physically more difficult to buck, another plus for recreational riders. Even when young, gaited horses don't buck as frequently as some other breeds.

A difficult gaited trail horse will typically pull himself together, baulk, hop in the front end, or move sideways. Compare this to bucking or running off that might be typical of bad examples of other breeds, and it is easy to see their appeal to recreational riders.

On the negative side, they frequently do not typically carry a lot of speed, so riders who want speed, may not be satisfied. But many of them, especially Tennessee Walking horses, have a fast walk and it may be difficult to ride with straight gaited horses because of the difference in speed. Other gaited horses, such as the mountain horses or gaited trail horses, have a slow walk, one that is the same speed of other horses.

It is typical that **when** (and not all of them will) a gaited horse is difficult, he will flip his head. Another typical problem is that they may be difficult to mount. Sometimes they may move away from the rider and may be a little difficult to mount, but will be good, solid riding horses once you are mounted.

Another limitation is that gaited horses have lateral gaits, which makes them less balanced for movements requiring flexibility. Most of them do not do school patterns

such as circles, figure 8's, and serpentine patterns. Since there is no trot, they are not useful for posting exercises, and they often do not canter, so they are not useful in patterns which require cantering or loping. They do walk overs and some trail obstacles and they can be used for lessons on the rail as long as the instructor and the rider realize the differences in gaited horses, or lessons are adapted for gaited horses. Gaited horses can be fun to ride in a ring, but they cannot be expected to develop ring riding skills in the same way a straight gaited horse will do.

Gaits

I have often had people call me and ask me if a horse walks or racks. Or they want a horse that walks and not one that racks, etc. Showing gaited horses can be confusing to the outsider ~ to the insider also for that matter. Classes are called Ambling Pleasure, All Day Pleasure, Trail Pleasure, etc. Horses often cross enter from show to show, although they are sometimes prohibited from cross entering at any single show. If the class is specifically for Walking Horses, the announcer will call for the flat walk and running walk. In other classes the announcer will call for the walk and show gait, the walk and trail gait, or the walk and pleasure gait. The point is that there is no hard and fast for definition of a gait.

Horses may be registered in several different associations. They may be registered as Tennessee Walking Horses AND United Racking Horses. Some horses are registered in two, three or four registrations whose names imply that the horse will walk or rack.

The difference between these gaits is sometimes a matter of opinion. Even standing on the rail with people who have spent their lives breeding, training and riding these horses, there will be differences in opinion. Last season in Virginia, there was a horse winning the padded Racking classes, and everyone was complaining that he was walking, while at the same show, there was a padded Walking Horse winning that people complained was racking. In truth, both horses had wonderful front ends and it is probable that the judges either didn't see the rear end of the movement, or didn't care.