

# Gaits, Gaits and More Gaits!

## The Multi-Gaited Horse

By Elizabeth Graves 2006



After riding well over a couple of thousand horses in my career I am... most definitely not a breed snob I don't really even have a preference for any one breed; if it has a mane and tail I'm crazy about it But it's time to confess!

I have found that there is one thing I truly admire and strive for in my own choice of gaited horse - a horse that has the ability to perform more than one of those fabulous easy gaits.

For me, the appeal is the variety and the challenge in developing the skills to bring a horse up and down through that scale of different gaits

...do you want to develop **all the different gaits possible?**

upon command. In my travels I have yet to find one breed that does not have those special individuals that can offer this up, be it a Fox Trotter, Icelandic Horse, Mountain Horses etc.

We should remember that Man is the one that chose the signature gait required of horses in some breed registries, but Mother Nature -



who reminds us she can take control when she chooses - gives us that special treat of a horse that can offer up even more.

It's rather common to hear folks say, "My horse is pacing" when it's actually hard trotting, and also the opposite, "My horse is trotting" when it's pacing. To develop any kind of a range of gaits, one must first learn to recognize what the horse is actually doing.

Also commonly heard is, "My horse seems to be doing all kinds of things and they are smooth, but I don't know what they are". My ears perk up and it's time to start watching those legs and hooves that never lie in showing us what a horse is doing. Sure enough, I might see a couple strides of fox trot, then a saddle rack and maybe even a bit of stepping pace!

So the first question one must ask as the owner of a multi-gaited horse is, "Do I want to develop all the different gaits possible in that individual, or just stay with the one that the horse is more comfortable with and offers up most often?" Some people just would rather not put in the time it takes to bring all those gaits forth in a horse. There is no wrong answer - it's a matter of preference. But it helps for the rider to separate how he or she is going to have to support a horse to stay consistent in one gait, or learn the variables in supporting a horse to hold consistency in whichever gait is asked for.

### How Is It Possible?

WHAT WE KNOW TO DATE AS TO WHY our horses have the ability to gait is in what they have inherited. Within specific breeds we see a lot of variables in individuals, even though many breeds are easy to identify just by physical type and consistent characteristics. We know in the skeletal structure we have varying lengths, proportions of bones and placement

of joints, we also have soft tissue of muscles, tendons and ligaments all controlled by a the nervous system.

Also another important factor is the natural personality, does the horse have the willingness to offer up the varying energies it takes to achieve a variety of gaits?

Another factor is a horse's past history. In some cases - including the two horses we'll get to know in this article - there may be emotional issues to be overcome.

Some horses may be able to offer up the rack and stepping pace while others the fox trot and running walk. Any combination is possible. The two horses in this article are able to go through a larger number of gaits: the fox trot, running walk, saddle rack, stepping pace, along with the pure trot and true pace, and both are able to canter and work through three speeds of walk when asked.

What makes this possible in these two horses is an overall balance in all bone length and also a moderation in shoulder angle, humerus angle, lumbar span length and femur placement. Neither horse is excessive in any of these, which makes them both strong in all gaits.

What does separate these two horses is that April (the sorrel mare) has longer overall bone lengths than Buck (the dark bay gelding). Another difference is neck placement and length. April has a medium set to her neck where it attaches in at the shoulder, and more length, while Buck has a lower set neck and is shorter in length, yet both necks are balanced with the overall proportions of each horse. Due to these differences they can do the same gaits, but each will need slightly different supports from the riders to achieve them. April will have longer lengths of stride of the fore's and hinds, whereas Buck will have shorter strides.

## The Scale of Gaits

Work through the gaits as you would a scale of notes - one after the other in this set sequence:

- ◆ Foxtrot
- ◆ Running walk
- ◆ Saddle Rack
- ◆ Rack
- ◆ Stepping pace

Don't move on to the next gait until the previous one is mastered.

### How To Bring Out Each Gait

TIME AND PATIENCE ARE FIRST AND foremost.

As a rider, one needs to understand the characteristics of each gait, how each gait feels and how they sound. If you don't know, an educated ground person can help you to learn.

A rider also needs a stable, balanced seat that is flexible and supple to help support and bring forth a softer relaxed energy for the gaits of Fox trot and running walk, and more energy with specific tightening in the body to support the racking gaits and stepping pace. It seems folks find the less flexible seat and legs are easier achieve until their skills and confidence as a rider are established.

Remember each horse is an individual and a rider will find each horse to be different in how little or how much support it needs from the rider to understand and learn to hold each gait.



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◆ **Physical soundness and equipment checks are very important.** A horse can never perform at peak when dealing with physical discomfort. Maintenance of teeth and good natural, balanced hoof trim sets them up for success. An equipment check is a must, the saddle must fit, and be applied and ridden correctly.

Proper choice in biting as a tool of communication - not control - or bitless headgear, also works well to properly help signal and support changes needed at the root of the neck for the different gaits.

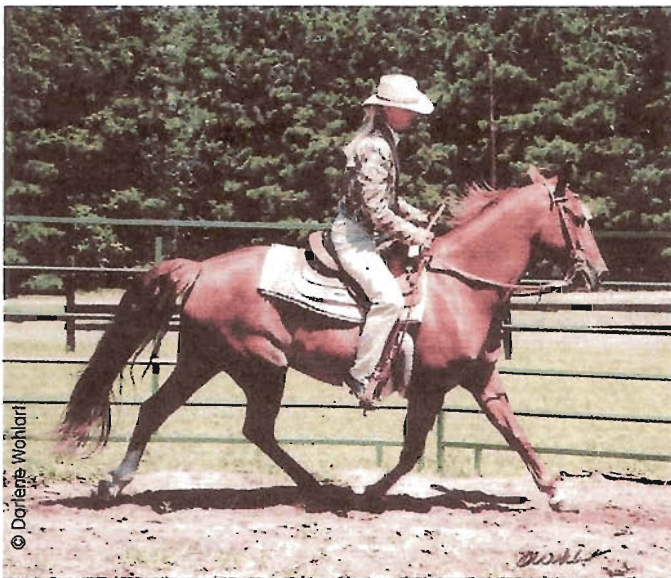
◆ **Working the walks** provides the basics needed to start. The dog walk (low and slow), the regular walk (with more purpose, but not in a hurry) and the working walk (done with energy, like a horse walking to get to the grain). Mastering these walks teaches a horse to rate

its speeds and teaches a rider how much it's going to take from the seat and legs to signal the horse to move.

◆ **Maintaining straightness is very important** and must be understood.

Straightness is achieved through the seat and legs first, with some hand-to-headgear aids, and you must be able to feel this in the horse under you. Good basic guidelines in this is to keep your spine in line with your horse's spine, while keeping the horse's body perpendicular to the ground at all times, not dropping a hip or shoulder. Straightness can be difficult for a horse to maintain, in that horses do not have a collarbone as we do, so the front quarters are attached only by soft tissue and not by a joint. Achieving straightness also means keeping an equal distance from the center of the chest to the center of each front leg.

◆ **Work through the gaits in order** so as to develop each without confusion. Work one at a time and do not proceed to the next until the horse can hold one with consistency. It's easier for the horse to do the more ventoflexed gaits (racking gaits, stepping pace) just due to the tightening they can bring up in the body through excitement or stress from a rider and/or environment, so these we work last. Getting the more relaxed gaits (foxtrot and running walk), which require an element of looseness, can take more time.

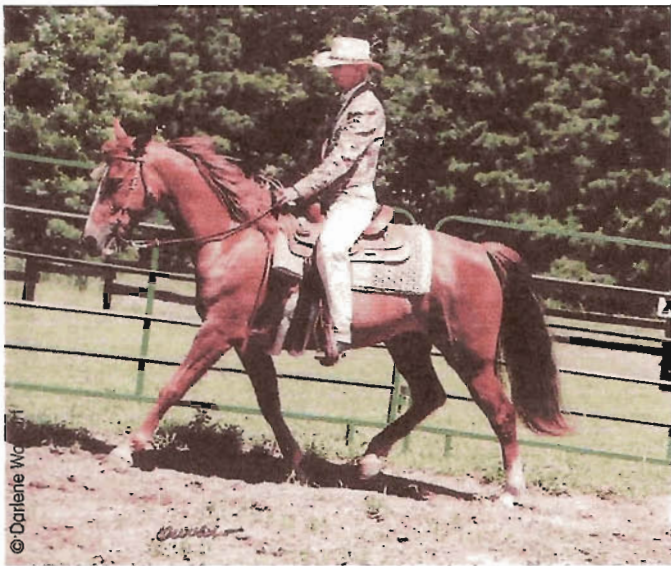


**In the trot** I have opened up her face allowing her to extend and keep a loose rein, keeping my hands low. While working with a forward seat and using my lower leg to ask her to raise and tighten her abdominal muscles in order to round up her back for the trot, I keep my knees open.



**In the fox walk** there is now a soft contact. I am still working to get the softness, but reducing the extension of the hinds considerably, and of the forelegs just a little bit to break up the 2-beat timing of the trot into the broken 4-beat timing of the fox walk. My hand height is about one inch higher. I'm settling into a deep, balanced seat with a level pelvis. Using much less leg brings her back down to very slightly rounded, and again the knees are open.

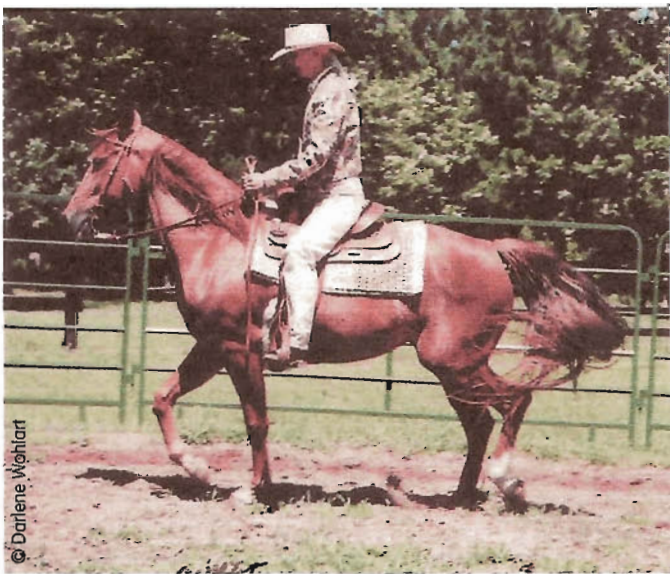




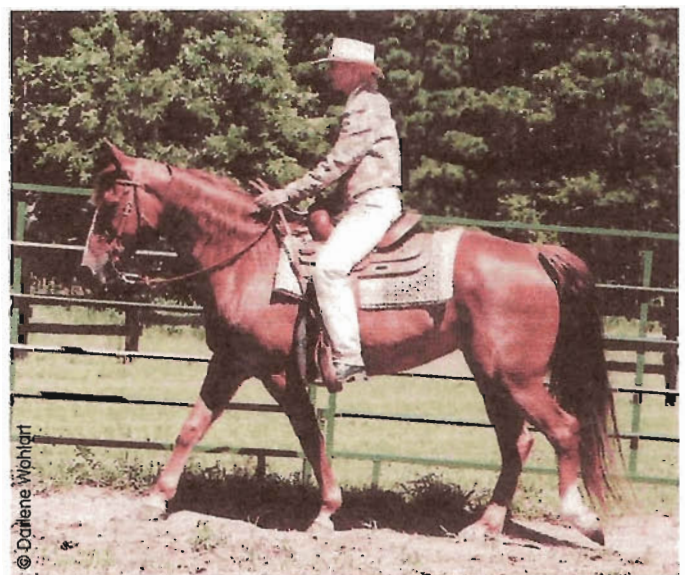
**In the fox trot** I have given April just a bit more rein, between what she needed for the trot and the fox walk, to extend her reach with the front quarters, but just slightly more with the hinds. This keeps the broken 4-beat gait. Hand position is the same as for the fox walk. The seat is still deep and level in the pelvis, the knees still open, but notice the energy I have pulled up and pushed forward in my own body without using added leg to increase stride and speed of this gait.



**In the running walk** the hand position has come up one more inch with a closing of my hands to create a contact. April can now work her headshake to help the rhythm she needs to achieve this gait. When her head is at its lowest position in these photos she burps off the bit to bring her head back up. The hands are held still, not moving with her. This contact has created a slight lowering of the root of her neck to keep her back level and to close up her extension in her front legs just a bit, yet increasing her reach behind. Seat is still deep and level, but not quite as much energy in my body being pushed forward and out as was in the fox trot. A soft contact with the calves and the knees are still open.



**In the saddle rack** everything changes considerably. The hands are raised now to lift the root of her neck. The seat is shifted back in a slight chair position and I've stiffened the spot where my spine attaches to my pelvis, creating an essential tightening in April. This reduces the extension in her front legs and behind, getting her legs to work more underneath her. I also have to bring my energy up and close my knees, making for more contact down my whole leg. April now has a slightly ventroflexed frame. The feel of the gait has more of a "ladder climbing" effect to the front legs than the "reaching and pulling" effect of the running walk.



**In the stepping pace** again different changes happen. The rein is lowered just a bit and softened some, yet I keep that slight chair seat to keep her back lower in order to execute the gait. The energy in my upper body is reduced, but is still maintained through the length of my leg. Knees are halfway between opened fully and closed.



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**In the fox trot** Bill has opened up his hands to allow Buck to reach with his front legs, while lowering his head to round up his back. Buck's neck being set lower means Bill has to use more leg, while keeping his knees open, to keep Buck lifting himself through the shoulders. This keeps them open to move forward so his hinds can lift and push off. Bill's seat is kept deep and level.



**In the running walk** Bill has now lifted his hands some to level Buck's back, and closed his hands to create the contact Buck needs to work off the bit. The seat is the same, but the leg has softened just a bit with the knees kept open. Buck has now reduced his extension of the front legs while increasing the stride in the hind legs.



**In the saddle rack** Bill has shortened his rein more. Moving his hands a bit forward he is working to contain Buck's frame and to create a slight hollowing of the spine for this gait. Buck's neck being set lower and his shorter overall body length means he does not need the lifting April does for this gait. Bill's back is slightly tightened to create that essential tension needed for this gait. Bill's seat position has remained the same, but his knees have now been closed to get the energy increase needed to achieve this gait.

### April and Buck

THESE TWO HORSES WERE NOT "CLEAN SLATES" WHEN they started developing their multiple gaits. When I purchased April she had been through some unkind treatment in a "performance" barn. Emotionally she was shut down, scared and defensive. Touching her head was an issue; she panicked in terror when one walked in a stall with her, and in riding she did not move forward at first, but would stand and kick out with her hinds not knowing if she should go forward or back. It has taken many years to bring her trust and confidence out, and it has been worth every moment in the horse I now have.

Buck had different issues when Bill and Jeannie Strand purchased him. He was named Buck not due to his color, but in that he had been tied to a tree, saddled up hard and fast in the breaking philosophy of "one must buck a horse out," which actually just taught him how to buck. Due to this he was tense and due to this tension he paced more than anything. Bill and Jeanne have brought this horse back from his previous experience to be one amazing performer and very happy in his job.

Both horses were brought into their trots after the walks were set, and from there each was worked in the order of gaits in our list above.

Notice through the progression of these photos how I change hand to bit communication and support

with a change of seat and leg use.

Notice how Buck's shorter-coupled body creates different body positions as he goes through his gaits, yet his legs work exactly the same as April's.

## **The Finer Points**

LEARNING TO BRING OUT A VARIETY OF GAITS AN INDIVIDUAL horse may have to offer can bring one to that higher place in the journey of horsemanship. The more gaits the horse may have the more a person will have to be very aware of his or her own body and how to use it to help the horse use its while carrying a rider.

Never get in a hurry; never put a time limit on developing these gaits, but take the time it takes. Make it easy for the horse to do the right thing. Think support, not control, when working through the gaits; controlling creates interference. When it becomes about control, then one closes the mind of the horse, making it harder for both horse and human to have success.

That higher level of horsemanship is an evolution achieved through knowing failures and successes, and the multi-gaited horse is a wonderful challenge to cherish and enjoy, as well as help you find that higher place in your skills in teaching the horse.

