

# Cueing For Gait

From *Easy-Gaited Horses* by Lee Ziegler

*You've got a gaited horse;  
so how do you get him in gear?*



Dusty, a 5-year-old, registered Missouri Fox Trotter gelding in training for trail, and Susan Dearth, a gaited horse trainer at the AA Ranch, Anza, CA, show off a classic fox trot.

Cueing your horse for the gait you want means more than just asking for speed - it means taking into account how he must use his body in order to perform it. The different gaits require different body carriage and movement. How you set the horse up when cueing for the transition from the walk can help to make your request clearer and the execution of it easier for the horse, if you ask in a way that is conducive to the gait itself. You wouldn't crank a horse's head up to ask for a gallop, and so too, there are better ways than others to ask for the various easy saddle gaits. The following excerpts from *Easy-Gaited Horses* (Storey, 2005) explain the how and why of positioning your hands, seat and legs to ask for the gait you want.

## **The Flat Walk** (Pages 116 - 117)

IF YOU EXPECT YOUR EASY-GAITED horse to do a running walk, a paso llano or a fox trot as his intermediate gait, it is important for him to develop a good, consistent flat walk first. Old-timers used to say a horse should be ridden for at least three months in the flat walk to build his rhythm and strength before he even attempted to do a running walk or fox trot. Although you may not want to ride exclusively in the flat walk for that long, moderate work in the gait will improve your horse's overall condition and help him do most of the faster easy gaits with less effort.

The easiest way to ask for a flat walk is to speed a horse up from the fastest ordinary walk...

- ◆ Start in a fast ordinary walk on flat ground in a straight line. Sit straight in the saddle with your lower back and abdominal muscles firm but elastic. Arch your back slightly into the position you would use to back float while swimming.
- ◆ As your horse moves forward, keep your hands low, slightly below the base position, with light "plum-feel" contact on the reins.
- ◆ Squeeze/release with your calves, using both legs, urging your horse to increase his speed.

❖ If your horse tries to pop into something faster than a flat walk, release all leg pressure. Check his speed with a squeeze/release from your fingers on both reins and resist his motion slightly with your lower back. Move into the heavy seat to prevent him from speeding up into a faster intermediate gait.

❖ Your horse should go into a medium-speed, four-beat flat walk. Ride in that gait for a few steps, then relax in the saddle. Return to an ordinary walk and pet and praise your horse.

Gradually increase the number of steps he takes in a flat walk until he can go all the way around your arena work area or for a moderate distance on a flat section of trail. If you are working in an arena, be sure to work in both directions. Practice a little more often in the direction in which your horse is normally less flexible.

### **The Running Walk** (Page 140)

YOUR HORSE HAS A GOOD foundation for this gait if he has been working in a consistent flat walk or slow paso llano.

Tack him up in a snaffle bit that is comfortable for him, or a sidepull, Peruvian bozal, or jaquima. Try to avoid using a curb bit if possible, at least for beginning work in this gait. You will be able to give clearer aids with the snaffle bit if you need to adjust your horse's head and neck position to modify the way he uses his back and encourage the running walk. Later, of course, when he is set in the gait, you can use a mild curb effectively in the gait. Don't use a California bosal for much work in this gait; it can inhibit the way a horse uses his head and neck in the gait.

If possible, find a slight incline or a flat area with soft ground to start work on this gait. Do not ask for it on a downhill grade or a very hard footing. Remember that most horses are more likely to go into an even four-beat or a diagonal gait uphill and more likely to go into a pace or stepping pace downhill. Take advantage of this when you work in the running walk.

❖ Ride forward in the flat walk or fast ordinary walk with your hands in the base position, with one rein held in each hand and light contact on the reins if you are riding in a bit or only the weight of the reins in your hands if you are riding bitless. Sit straight and balanced in the saddle.

❖ Squeeze and release with your calves, asking your horse to speed up his walk.

## Cueing For Gait

◆ As you ask for more speed, lower your hands a few inches from the base position, asking the horse to flex a little at the poll with light squeeze/releases on both reins. Do not use pressure from the reins at the exact moment you ask for speed with your legs. Squeeze with your calves, release leg pressure, and then squeeze/release with your fingers to avoid riding with the brake and accelerator at the same time.

◆ Gradually increase your horse's speed until he is moving out at a fast, even, four-beat running walk or paso llano. Relax your weight in the saddle by breathing out and sitting softly, following the motion of the gait with an elastic but not sloppy lower back.

◆ The instant you horse starts to change his rhythm or gait, slow down and return to a flat walk; do not let him string out into a pace stepping pace, fox trot or rack.

### The Fox Trot (Page 135)

*Trocha/Marcha Batida*

The fox trot is the only diagonally timed easy gait. Due to this timing, it is a very stable gait that provides good support for quick turns. On the trail, a horse doing the fox trot can be very surefooted. In the American West, cowboys often preferred horses that did this gait because they covered ground well, were smooth to ride, and retained good balance for balance for working cattle. The moderate-speed fox trot, from six to eight miles per hour, has been described as being "easy on the horse and easy on the man" because it is an energy-efficient gait with no

wasted motion or extreme speed...

Most horses that are bred to fox trot will go into the gait when they are sped up from the fast ordinary walk or the flat walk. To begin work in this gait, tack your horse up in a snaffle bit, curb bit (if he is accustomed to it), sidepull or noseband jaquima. Don't use a California bosal for much work in the fox trot; it can inhibit your horse's head nod and affect his rhythm in the gait.

◆ Ride forward in the flat walk in the base position, one rein in each hand, with the light "plum-feel" contact on the reins.

◆ Ask for more speed with a squeeze/release from your calves. Relax your fingers on the reins each time you squeeze with your calves.

◆ Continue to push your horse for speed until you feel his rhythm change and he breaks into a slow fox trot. Discontinue leg cues and breathe out and relax while sitting straight in the saddle.

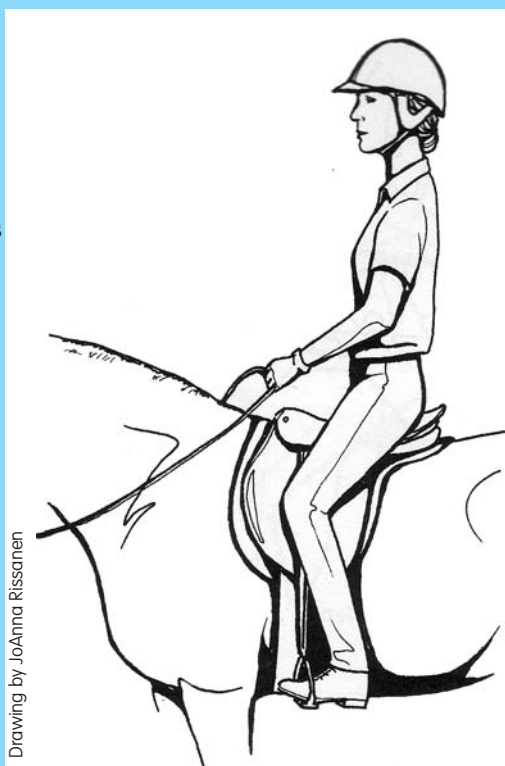
◆ Be prepared to squeeze/release your fingers on the reins and adjust your seat to a slightly heavy position to check his speed if he tries to move too fast, and gently touch him with your calves and adjust your seat into the lighter, allowing position to speed him up if he starts to slow down into a walk. Do not freeze on the reins or pull on them to slow him down or kick him in the flanks to increase his speed. Allow him freedom to move his head and neck in rhythm with his gait.

◆ Ride for a short distance in the fox trot, and then return to the flat walk or ordinary walk, using a light squeeze/release on the reins and simultaneously breathing out to relax your abdominal and slower back muscles. Praise your horse!

## Base position (pages 61, 63)

**Seat and legs:** A straight seat, with the legs directly under the rider and the rider's center of gravity directly over the normal resting balance point of the horse, is the most versatile for riding any horse on flat ground and the ideal position for riding easy-gaited horses. In this position your ear, shoulder, hip and heel are in alignment, balanced straight over the strongest part of the horse's back. To achieve it, sit erect in the saddle, balanced on the triangle formed by your seat bones and the soft flesh between them and your crotch. Stretch your legs down from your hips, letting your thighs hang as straight as possible, and with a slight bend in your knees to bring your ankles under your hips. Keep your feet flat, your toes barely pointed up into the stirrups, heels only slightly lower than your toes, without tension in your ankles.

**Hands:** Start at base position, upper arms relaxed, elbows close to your body but not clamped to your sides, one rein held in each hand about six inches apart and below your waist level... Keep your hands relaxed on the reins, using your fingers instead of a closed fist to hold them with elastic, soft fingers.



Drawing by JoAnna Rissamen

The straight seat, or base position.





Brigette, an 18-year-old, registered Missouri Fox Trotter mare, previous Champion Versatility and Performance Horse performs a stepping pace. Hope Adams up.

## The Amble or Broken/Stepping Pace

(Page 125) *Sobreandando*

THE AMBLE IS PROBABLY THE MOST common of the easy gaits. It is a broken lateral gait in which the hooves on one side of the horse lift from the ground close in time and set down close in time, but not exactly at the same moment, as they do in the true pace. The hind hoof sets down noticeably before the front on the same side.

Many horses prefer to go in a stepping pace at speeds above an ordinary walk. You can work in this gait in a snaffle, curb bit, sidepull, Peruvian bozal, or noseband type jaquima and any saddle that fits your horse and you and allows you to sit balanced and straight.

- ❖ Mount up and sit in the base position with your body relaxed and your weight centered over your seat bones.
- ❖ Try to use a light “plum-feel” on the reins. Hold your hands a couple of inches above the normal base position to encourage your horse to carry his head and neck slightly elevated. Don’t pull up or back as you raise your hands, just use the same light feel of the reins you normally keep at the ordinary walk.

❖ Move your horse out in an ordinary walk. Push him up into the stepping pace by asking for a little speed with a squeeze/release from both your calves while simultaneously relaxing your fingers on the reins. Your horse may automatically go into a stepping pace with virtually no work on your part.

Even though the gait is natural to your horse, you will probably need to help him travel at consistent speeds in it. Some horses will start out in a bold stepping pace while others seem to have a gait-inflation problem, starting at a



Joe Galarza of Farms of Ta-Dae (<http://farmsoftadae.com/index.html>) and his nine-year-old, 16.3 hand, registered Tennessee Walking Horse stallion, J.C. BLUE ULTRA PRIDE (a.k.a. "Big Man") execute the running walk.

moderate speed stepping pace and ending up going faster and faster in the gait. For trail and pleasure riding, you will want to be able to control how fast your horse is going and to maintain him at that speed until it is your idea to change.

### The Rack (Page 147)

THE RACK FAMILY OF GAITS includes the corto, largo, slow tolt, fast tolt, single-foot, saddle rack, and true rack. Although they range from the very slow forward progress, rapid step, and high action of the fino fino to the flashy speed of the fast tolt or speed rack, the members of the rack family of gaits are very closely related to one another....

Most horses go willingly into a saddle rack if you modify your seat a little bit from the base position and ask them to work with the essential tension over their withers and shoulders that goes along with the gait. Frequently, all you need to do is ask for some speed and enjoy the ride.

You can work in this gait in a snaffle bit, but a sidepull or other bitless headgear or a mild curb may be more effective in helping a horse use his body in the saddle rack. If you use a snaffle, you may find that it is difficult to keep your contact light and your hands quiet. If you do not like the idea of riding in a typical

curb, a low-port Kimberwicke/Uxeter bit with reins attached on the lowest slot can be very effective and almost as mild as a mullen snaffle. Ride with one rein in each hand as you start work in this gait.

Work on flat ground with a firm surface as you and your horse become familiar with the gait. Don't start out in deep footing or uphill because that may cause your horse to trot; avoid starting on a downhill

grade as well, because that may cause your horse to pace or do a stepping pace.

- ◆ Start in an ordinary walk, sitting in the base position with light, even contact on the bit.
- ◆ Modify your seat by tilting your pelvis into the heavy seat position. Press straight down with your backbone towards the saddle. This change in your pelvic position will cause your legs to hang just slightly in front of vertical with your heels a little in front of your hips. Don't lean back with your feet on the "dashboard," but do modify the normal, straight seat so that you are sitting heavier in the saddle.
- ◆ Raise your hands a couple of inches above the base position, until they are waist high, maintaining light but constant contact on the bit or noseband and raising the horse's head a little. This will help develop the essential tension in the base of the neck that must accompany the saddle rack. Don't pull back hard, just maintain the same even contact you normally use at the walk; don't hold your hands at your chin, just raise them to waist height from the original lower base position.

◆ Push your horse on for more speed with a strong squeeze/release from your calves. The saddle rack is an energetic gait, so you must insist that your horse move out with speed and energy from the walk. Squeeze and release with your hands held in the higher position if he starts to hop or tires to caner or gallop.

◆ If you keep his energy level high but prevent him from breaking into another gait, your horse should do a relatively slow, even, four-beat saddle rack, show walk, or paso corto. Because he is a trail or pleasure horse, you will want him to cover some ground in the gait, so do not try to hold him back or shorten his step. Relax your fingers a little on the reins, still holding your hands waist high, to avoid inhibiting his reach in the gait.

◆ Go for a short distance in the saddle rack, then lower your hands and return to the walk. Praise and pet your horse and repeat, gradually increasing the distance he goes in the gait.

At first, work in the slower, more contained show walk, or paso corto. When you are certain that your horse is solid in that gait and can maintain his rhythm without either slowing to a walk, hopping with his front legs, or skipping beats, gradually increase his speed, first to a saddle rack, then to a true rack, if your horse can do that gait.

Your horse may be more comfortable in this gait at first if you allow him to nose out, with no visible flexion at the poll. This permits him to maintain the correct tension in his ligament system for the gait with less stress than trying to keep a "pretty" head set. It is also easier for the horse to develop the essential tension over his shoulders and at the base of the neck if he is not asked to bring his forehead toward vertical. Once he is very comfortable in his gait, you can of course bring his nose to a more vertical position through light, intermittent squeeze/releases on the reins, if you prefer.

