

RIDING THE GAITS

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THE IMAGINARY HORSE

Envision a talented gaited-bred horse, responsive in every way to bit, hand, leg and weight cues, with no strong preference for one gait over another. [He is not mentally or physically "stuck" in any gait, but is willing to do any and all of them.] This horse will trot and pace at liberty in a pasture, is in good physical condition, with a strong but flexible back, well set-on neck, and (since he is imaginary) straight legs, long sloping shoulder, good deep hindquarters, well-proportioned hind legs with no tendency to sickle hocks or to camped-out conformation. Of the conformation traits mentioned earlier as inclining a horse to travel with a hollow back, he shows no more than two. He is shod in keg shoes at his natural angle, with no action devices of any kind. You can paint him any color you want.

TACK HIM UP

Since we want to do a number of gaits on this horse, we need to put a saddle and bridle on him that will allow us to position his body differently for each of them. That means for a saddle we should use either a "Balanced Ride" Western, which puts the rider over the horse's center of gravity but allows some leeway in the seat position, or an "All Purpose" or "Three Day Event" type of English saddle, which will allow a rider to sit in either a forward, a dressage or a saddle-seat position. Naturally, this saddle will fit him perfectly. For a bridle and bits we will fit him with either a full double bridle (curb and snaffle bit, reins to each) or a Pelham. This type of biting arrangement allows the most flexibility for a rider in positioning a horse's head and neck, the curb raising the head and tucking it, the snaffle lowering it and causing the nose to extend forward. Remember this is an imaginary ride, so the rider will be skilled in the use of this piece of equipment even though most people who ride gaited horses do not use a bridle fitted with double reins. The horse will also be totally responsive to the effects of both types of bit, even though most gaited horses are not trained in this type of equipment.

MOUNT UP

Put yourself on this imaginary horse with this imaginary tack. You will sit in the straight or dressage seat to start out. Your stirrups will be adjusted so that you can lower your heels and you will sit with your body aligned so that shoulder, hip and heel form a straight line. You sit on the center part of your seat, weight on the ischial tuberosities (seat bones) with neither crotch nor buttocks bearing weight. Your hands are about even with your hip bones, the reins held so that a straight line can be drawn from your elbow to the horse's mouth. You hold two reins in each hand, the snaffle coming up through the bottom of your hand, below the little finger, held in place at the top of the hand between the thumb and index finger, the curb coming up between the little finger and ring finger, also held in place between the thumb and index finger. This is the base position from which you can make adjustments to change from gait to gait.

MOVE OUT

Start out your horse in a walk. To do this, squeeze both legs once against his sides, and then return them to the base position. At the same time, take light contact with the horse's mouth by slightly tightening the snaffle rein. Since this is the perfect, responsive horse, he will move out in an ordinary walk, nodding his head rhythmically in time to the undulations of his spine accompanying the motion of his legs. You will feel and hear each foot as it hits the ground in an even 4 beat cadence. The horse will be traveling about 3 1/2 to 4 mph. His head and neck will be stretched slightly forward and down, his poll somewhat higher than his withers.

FLAT WALK

So far, so good. The horse is walking, the way any normal horse will. Now, let's put him in a flat walk. This gait, common to Fox Trotters and Walking Horses, is a faster, more animated version of a walk. It requires a slightly rounder body position than an ordinary walk. To move into a flat walk, squeeze once with your legs, while this time taking a slightly stronger contact with the curb rein, slacking off a bit with the snaffle. This will cause the horse to raise his head and tuck his nose a little, while the action of your legs makes him reach forward more strongly with his hind legs. Since this is a perfectly responsive horse, your squeeze will generate enough impulsion to move him forward in a slightly rounded position. [Ordinary horses sometimes require more continuous leg pressure to move forward in a rounded frame.] You will again feel and hear the even cadence of his footfalls, and see his head nod up and down in rhythm with the motion of his shoulders, back and legs. Your speed will be between 4 1/2 to 6 mph in the flat walk.

TROT

We don't like to ride our gaited horses in the trot, but remember, this ride is imaginary, and so you won't have to bounce along in this gait except in your mind. To move out of the flat walk into a trot you will again need to change the frame or body position of the horse. To trot, our gaited horses need a longer, more stretched frame than that he uses for the flat walk. This time, slack off the rein pressure on the curb rein, lightly increase pressure on the snaffle, lower your hands so that they rest just on either side of horse's withers, no higher than the pommel of the saddle. This will make the horse stretch his neck forward and down, while "nosing out" a bit in front. At the same time, rotate your weight in the saddle so that you are sitting more towards the front of your crotch than in the middle of your seat bones. This will place your center of gravity forward on the horse. Since he is a totally responsive imaginary horse, he will shift his own center of gravity forward so that he can stay in balance with you. Squeeze with your legs to drive the horse forward into the action of the snaffle. He will willingly reach his neck down into the light pressure of the bit, at the same time taking longer strides. He will start to trot. You recognize the trot because you bounce up and down in the saddle (however, since this is an imaginary ride, we will give you the ability to sit the trot, so you will only feel the rise and fall of the horse's back, but you won't bounce). You hear the even one-two rhythm of the footfalls, and you feel the alternate use of first one diagonal pair of legs, then the other, as the horse moves forward. Head nod disappears as the horse uses his back, legs and shoulders in a way far different from those he used in the walk or flat walk. Your speed is 6 to 8 mph.

FOX TROT

Enough of trotting. It isn't much fun even in your imagination! To change from the trot into the easy gait closest to it, the fox trot, you will again need to ask your horse to modify his body position. Shift your own body position by rotating your seat so that you are sitting with your weight on your seat bones and buttocks and return your hands to the base position. Take a slightly stronger contact with the curb rein, asking the horse to raise his head and tuck his nose a little. Keep up the momentum of the trot with intermittent squeezes from your legs. Your responsive horse will adjust his center of gravity to the rear, lose the exact synchronization in his diagonal legs needed for the trot, and begin to fox trot. You will hear the broken 1-2--3-4 rhythm of the gait, the beats closest together coming from the set down of the diagonal hooves. You will feel a back to front rock in the saddle, and notice a stutter-step feel to the set down of the hind hooves as they set down just after the diagonal front ones. You will notice that the horse starts to nod his head up and down with the motion of his shoulders as he returns to a gait which requires more flexibility in the spine than the trot. Your speed will be between 6 and 8 mph.

RUNNING WALK

The next step on the scale away from the trot is the running walk. To change into that gait from a

fox trot you will again need to modify the body position of your horse and yourself. Shift your weight so that you are sitting a bit more firmly on your buttocks, in the position described last time as the "braced back". At the same time, maintaining contact with the curb reins, raise your hands into the waist high position, keeping the horse's nose tucked. This will change the horse from the neutral/round position of the fox trot to the neutral/hollow position needed for the running walk. For our ideal horse, this change in position should be enough to shift him from the diagonal fox trot to the more square/lateral running walk. For a less ideal horse, it may be necessary to also slightly shift your own weight from side to side, resisting the motion of the fox trot and helping the horse change to the more lateral running walk. As soon as he has picked up the desired gait, any side to side shifting of your weight should stop so prevent him from going overboard and moving into a pace. The horse is now doing a running walk. You will hear an even 1-2-3-4 rhythm. You will notice that his head continues to nod with the motion of his shoulders and undulations of his spine in this gait. You will feel a strong driving motion from his hindquarters as each hind leg moves forward with a long, gliding step. At the same time you will feel a pulling or rolling motion in his shoulders as he pushes strongly against the ground with each front hoof. Your speed will be in the same range or slightly faster than that of the fox trot.

RACK/LARGO/TOLT (Same gait, different languages)

Next on our list of gaits is the rack. To shift to this gait from the running walk you will need to change the horse from a neutral/hollow frame to a hollow one, and you will need to raise his head and neck even more. First shift to modify your seat, tilting your pelvis so that you sit on your buttocks and tailbone in the "backward leaning" seat with your legs and feet thrust forward so that your shoulders are behind your hips and your hips are behind your heels. This will hollow the horse's back. At the same time, raise your hands above your waist so that they are in the "high" position mentioned last time. Maintain light tension on the curb rein, allowing the horse to nose out just a bit from his position in the running walk, but raising his head at the same time. This will accentuate the dip before his withers that indicates a hollow neck. Increase his speed from the running walk by squeezing strongly with your legs as they hang forward on his body. The horse will now rack. You will continue to hear an even 1-2-3-4 beat, however you will notice that his head nod has disappeared as has any feeling of undulation in his spine. You will feel an up and down motion in the hindquarters and a sensation that the horse is "climbing a wall" with his front legs as his shoulders become very active in this gait. Your speed will be much faster than that of the running walk.

CORTO

The corto is a slower, shorter-strided rack, in which the legs still move rapidly, but the steps cover much less ground. Since our imaginary horse is willing as well as versatile, it will not be too difficult to shift him down from the rack/largo into the more "collected" corto. [Actually, the better term is shortened, since collection implies a rounded back and lowered hindquarters, a position that is not possible for a horse doing a lateral gait.] To do a corto the horse must maintain the hollow back position he used in the rack/largo, but compress and slightly round his neck. To change from the rack to the corto you must shift your seat, so that you are once again sitting in the base "dressage" position with your shoulders, hips and heels aligned and your weight on your seat bones. Do this by rotating your pelvis again so that your buttocks and tailbone are no longer carrying weight, and slightly bending your knees to bring your lower legs back from the "dashboard" position of the rack. Keeping your hands high, take strong contact with the curb rein, tucking his head so that his face is vertical. This will slow him and inhibit the length of his steps. Continue to drive him forward with your legs while strongly restraining him with the curb. Since this is an imaginary ride, you will know when to slack off to prevent the horse from stopping, and since this is a perfect imaginary horse, he will not be resentful of this treatment and will willingly shorten his rack to a corto. You will feel basically the same motion you felt in the rack, with the same even 1-2-3-4 beat footfalls. The horse will be very animated in

his movements, show no head nod, and move with a quick, short step. Your speed will be somewhat slower than that of the fox trot. As you can see, if you continue this process you can, with the right horse, go on to shorten the corto even farther to produce a fino gait. This is a lot to ask of our generic gaited-bred horse, since even horses that are specifically bred to do that gait are not always physically or mentally capable of it. Let's move on to the remaining gaits.

PACE AND STEPPING PACE

If you are like most of us with gaited horses, you don't want to ride a stepping pace or pace but you end up doing so from time-to-time because your horse does it on his own. Our imaginary horse, however, must be cued to do either gait. Why bother? Because if you know what will make him do the gait, you will be able to do the opposite to keep him from doing it. Let's bring our imaginary horse down from the corto into an ordinary walk before trying the stepping pace. Slack off on the curb rein and again take light contact with the snaffle, lowering your hands back to the base position. This will tell the horse to lower and extend his head and neck away from the high, tight position of the corto. At the same time, slightly shift your weight forward. This will help him relax his back from the tight hollow he needed to maintain for the corto. Slow him down, and he will be doing an ordinary walk. (Since he is a perfect imaginary horse, he did not get physically "stuck" in the corto. Real horses sometimes do and need to be put through a series of stretching exercises to return to a less hollow gait.) Now, to shift the walk to a stepping pace, the horse will need to change from the neutral position of the walk to a hollow one. To make him slightly hollow, shift your weight to the rear in the "braced back" position, raise your hands a little so that they are at waist height, push the horse on for a little more speed. To encourage him to shift his center of gravity from side-to-side in the pacing gait you will need to shift your weight from side-to-side in the saddle, while at the same time using the reins to make the horse swing his head from side-to-side. This will interfere with his walking rhythm, make him start to move his legs in lateral pairs, and he will break into a lateral walk. Discontinue the weight and rein aids. With a little squeeze from your legs to encourage speed, the horse will be doing a stepping pace. If you want to go farther and make him do a hard pace, you can continue the side-to-side motion and rein cues.

Now, let's change him from this stepping pace into a fox trot. How? By now you should realize that to do the fox trot he needs to have a neutral/round frame and that to get that position you need to shift your seat and hands so that his back is no longer hollow. Return your seat to the base position, lower your hands to the base position, use your snaffle rein to lower his head and then your curb to tuck it, sit straight, maintain forward motion with your legs, don't wobble laterally in the saddle, and the horse will stop doing the pace and start doing the fox trot. Good lesson, it time to dismount and give our imaginary horse an invisible carrot.

NOW YOU KNOW

naturally, real horses are not always so easy to work with as this imaginary one, and most of us don't want our horses to do all of these gaits. We want Walking Horses to running walk; Fox Trotters to fox trot; Racking horses to rack; Icelandic's to tolt (and maybe flug skeith, another subject altogether); Paso Finos to Corto, Largo and if we're lucky, Fino; Peruvians to llano or at least sobreandando without any of them doing any gait we don't want at any time. Unfortunately, most of these horses will do other gaits besides the ones expected of them. The age-old question has always been, how we get the gaits we want. Well, now you know. Use your seat and hands in a certain way to position a horse's body in a certain way and encourage a certain rhythm in his movement and you will make him do a certain gait. The trick is to make him responsive to your aids (which communicate with his brain), physically able to respond to those aids (through conditioning exercises which work on his muscles, making them able to sustain the body position necessary for the gait you want) and not to ask for something that he is not structurally or mentally capable of doing. [Imagine, if you will, a Lipizzan trying to do a rack or a Fino horse doing a running walk. No way!] Know what you are doing with your body as you ride, what your

horse is doing with his as you ride him, and how the one effects the other -- that is the secret of riding any horse and the key to riding the gaits.