

# What's the point of Headsets?

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A biting rig, designed to teach a horse's muscles the desired head carriage.

**Overheard at a horse show: "Wow, that horse has a great headset" as the horse in question went by in a strong pace, with no hint of the gait he was supposed to be doing. Why, if his gait was so poor, was his headset worth remarking on? And what, if any, relationship should the position of a horse's head and neck have to do with his ability to work in his gait?**

## Headset and Esthetics

MOST OF US HAVE AN IMAGE FLOATING in our mind's eye of the ideal position for a well-trained horse's head and neck. Our idea of what is beautiful and correct head carriage may be influenced by artworks we have seen depicting elegant horses. Or, what we think is the perfect head set may be determined by the "frame" of horses that we are accustomed to see winning in the show ring.

Depending on the type of riding we are most familiar with, we may admire anything from the poll-below-the-withers position of the "peanut-roller" western pleasure horse to the high headed "look of eagles" carriage of the typical park horse. When training and riding we may try to achieve that winning look even in our trail and pleasure horses, without much thought as to why that position could be considered desirable, or what relation it has to how the rest of the horse's body works as he performs his gaits.

improving his "showy" look with high knee action by changing the dynamic of his back and shoulder as he moves. The environment of the show ring exaggerated these features of head and neck position, until the most extreme examples of both became valued, and in the process, the biomechanical advantage originally conferred by them may have become lost under the "look" desired for each discipline.



This horse works best in her gait with what most would consider a relatively low head and neck position. With a higher head she tends to fall out of her running walk into some other intermediate gait.

## Pretty Is As Pretty Does

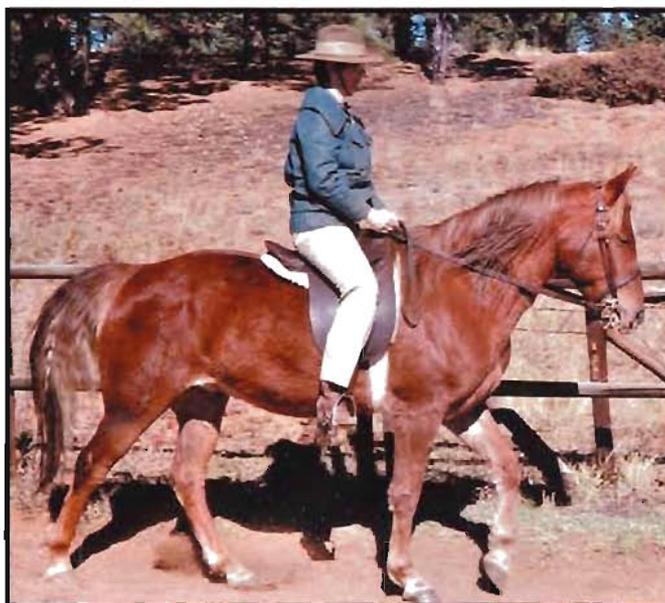
PEOPLE HAVE DEVISED MANY METHODS for obtaining the desired, sometimes completely artificial, head and neck positions for different types of riding.

**The head and neck position a horse uses as a result of the way his entire body is carried can be a powerful tool in helping him develop good gaits and a fluid, rhythmic way of going.**

## Fashion and Function?

EVEN THE MOST EXTREME headsets seen in the show ring have their roots in their ability to enhance the performance of the horse. Those "peanut rolling" Western Pleasure horses were originally ridden with a relatively low head carriage because horses generally relax when they carry their heads low, and they also have better vision of the trail in front of them and are less likely to stumble over obstacles if they can see where they are going.

The high head of the park horse generally enhances his ability to take higher steps in front,



This moderately elevated head and neck position, with almost vertical forehead, works best for this horse in his square flat walk.

A western rider may resort to a training fork or draw reins, a park rider to an overcheck or biting rig put on the stalled horse. In either case, the result is the look of a pretty head set, with little or no connection to the way the horse uses the rest of his body. This is a pity, because the head and neck position a horse uses as a result of the way his entire body is carried can be a powerful tool in helping him develop good gaits and a fluid, rhythmic way of going.

Head and neck position can determine the amount of stretch in a horse's neck and back ligaments, and in the degree of elasticity he

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has in his back muscles. In a classically trained dressage horse, the head and neck rise, and flex at the poll bringing the forehead toward vertical, only as the jaw relaxes and the haunches are lowered. This position stretches the neck ligaments over the poll and in front of the withers, and the back ligaments over the “joint” of the lumbo- sacral junction. In addition to a “pretty” head position, with the forehead vertical and the neck flexed and arched, this entire position allows the horse to collect himself, and change his balance efficiently to the rear for pirouettes or other dressage movements.

In a gaited horse, a modification of this position, creating semi-collection, can be the difference between a horse that does a hard pace, or one that works in a more desirable easy gait. But, this particular **head and neck position accomplishes nothing** for either a dressage horse or a gaited horse, **if it does not carry through from the hindquarters and body position forward.** A head set, in isolation from body use, will not play the important role of stretching the neck and back ligaments and helping the horse carry his body well for his gait.

The “pretty headset” of a gaited horse can only help his gaits if it is related to the way he needs to use his body in gait. For example, a position resembling, but not identical to that used in the classical dressage horse, will often help raise the hollow back of a pacing horse and allow him to work in a running walk or fox trot.



The high headset of this horse is intended to enhance the action of the front legs.

Not all horses work well in a particular gait with identical head and neck positions, however, because they have different conformation and muscle development. Some Walking Horses, for example, do a nice running walk with a higher head position than others. Some do better if allowed to nose out a tad, while others perform at their best with a vertical forehead. The same is true of the other gaited breeds and their specialty gaits.

The important thing when riding or training one of these horses is to find the head and neck position that works best for that particular horse and his particular gait, and then refine it.

## **Developing Body Position and Head Position:**

IF YOU WANT TO HELP YOUR HORSE DEVELOP A pleasing head and neck position consistent with semi-collection along with his gaits, the best way to do it is to forget all artificial head setting devices and ride him forward, developing the energy of his hindquarters and then “catching” it with the bit to help create the amount of stretch in his neck and back ligaments that works best for his gait.

This process takes time, because a horse needs to develop back and hindquarters strength to carry his head and neck slightly elevated and forehead vertical while relaxing his jaw on light bit contact.

It is usually best to start with a slightly lower than normal hand position and first encourage the horse to lower his head and neck while reaching into the feel of the bit, then to gradually raise your hands to no more than waist high, while asking the horse to relax his jaw and bring his forehead toward vertical, with light vibrations on the reins.

Practice this semi-collection at a walk, until the horse easily gives his mouth to you and starts to flex somewhat at the poll. Then let speed and his individual gait and ability be your guide.

Many horses are faster in gait if allowed to lean just a little on the bit and nose out while they are doing it. Others will stay even in their gaits only if they can carry a mostly vertical forehead with a higher head and neck position, with the poll well above the withers. Some others do their gaits best while carrying the poll even with the withers.

Listen to your horse and don't try to fit him into some arbitrary head set that may destroy his natural gait and you will both be happier for it.

