



Gaited Horsemanship



with

Larry Whitesell & Jennifer Bauer.

Can Gaited Horses Gait with a Round Back?

In the last two years we have listened to many debates about whether a gaited horse will gait or trot if he is in a round frame. Many believe that the horse must be inverted or (*ventroflexed*) to gait and if rounded they will trot. We take gaited horses that have been through half dozen trainers, some are 10 years old or more and have never gaited a step in their lives. We have never had a horse that doesn't gait when we teach them "roundness".

We learned early on that what brings out the gait in a horse genetically bred to gait, is engagement of the hind end. It can be a false engagement or it can be a truly collected engagement. The problem with a false engagement or hollow back is the horse builds braces and resistance, such as pacing, or vices such as spooking, bolting or buddy-sour, etc.

Let us first give you some perspective and background information on Larry Whitesell and Jennifer Bauer.



Larry has been training gaited horses for nearly 30 years. For the first ten years he trained using traditional gaited methods of raising the neck and driving the horse forcefully into his hands. He won many regional and national championships. As he has said "I have done it both ways" Fifteen years ago he began to notice his horses didn't seem to have the naturally beautiful, relaxed movements of horses trained classically. He began to study with classical trainers who rode with some of the masters in Europe. The more he learned from this school of thought, the more he realized he was mechanically making horses do what he needed them to do to win ribbons. There was no art in his training. He didn't know enough about how the horse's skeleton and muscles related to locomotion, so that he could train the horse with "their" welfare in mind. To his surprise, at the time, when he started training his horses classically, they all gaited better and as only he would say: *"I wasn't even very good at classical training then."*

Jennifer specializes in gaited horse trail riding as well as diagnosing and rehabilitating problem horses. Her passion for horses started at a young age through 4-H. Jennifer is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin River-Falls with a degree in Animal Science-Equine Business. Her collegiate horse training program gave Jennifer exposure to several training disciplines ranging from Jumping 101 to Advanced Reining and Advanced Dressage. Additionally, she was able to take multiple courses in Equine Nutrition, Anatomy, Physiology, Reproduction and Biomechanics. She has used the knowledge she's gained from the various disciplines over the past 12 years along with her insatiable appetite for more knowledge to create and fine tune a well rounded and comprehensive program that she's applied to the gaited horse.



In partnership Larry Whitesell and Jennifer Bauer continue to strive toward excellence through education. As Larry would say: "A good teacher is never done learning" and they take that to heart. Larry and Jennifer continue each year to expound upon their horsemanship skills, seeking out and studying from the leading experts in their respective equine fields and focusing those ideas as they relate to the gaited horse. Larry and

Jennifer travel around the United States and Canada conducting three day clinics. They also offer five day clinics at their farm located in Baxter, TN. Visit Larry at: www.whitesellgaitedhorsemanship.com and Jennifer at: www.gaitedhorsemanship.com

"A Case for Collection in the Gaited Horse."

By Larry Whitesell and Jennifer Bauer

Often times people start trying to make a horse gait before the horse thoroughly understand our aids or even have the strength to carry a rider with enough collection to gait. This is why hollowing the back (*ventroflexing*) is still a popular way to get gait. It would be like building a house without a proper foundation. The house may stand for a brief period of time but its lack of integrity soon will show through most often resulting in disaster. We don't take the time to build the muscles the horse needs to do his job. Horsemanship calls for training in a way that is good for the horse and taught in a manner he can understand. When you work against the nature of the horse it creates stress and tension in both the horse and rider.

Figure A



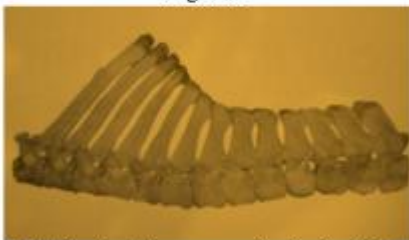
(A) Shows engagement of the hind legs, but no engagement of the hind end

Figure B



(B) Shows the equine pelvis rotated to engage the hind legs and hind end

Figure C



(C) Finched spinal processes on hollow-backed horse. This inverted posture makes saddle fitting a very difficult proposition

Figure D



(D) Thoracic vertebrae on a normal horse, showing plenty of clearance between vertebrae.

It is true that if you hollow a horse many of them will gait, but more often than not they get pacy. Pace is caused by a stiff, non-articulating back. Gait can also happen when you create engagement by rounding a horse into a collected frame. The horse rotates the pelvis lengthening the muscles of the back helping him to remain relaxed. The hind legs can be engaged without the haunches being engaged (Figure A). However if the haunches are engaged, the hind legs must engage and the horse can carry a rider better (Figure B).

A hollow frame contracts the muscles along each side of the spine; such muscles are tense and limited in movement. Since these are muscles of locomotion they need to be long and supple for the horse to have a relaxed movement. It is the abdomen muscles that have to be strengthened to carry a rider. A strong abdomen allows the horse to pick his back up and rotate his pelvis so that he can flex at the lumbosacral joint, truly engaging the hind legs. When the horse uses what is known as his ring of muscles used in collection, he will also lift up in the withers. Horses that are hollow look pregnant due to the development of the wrong muscles.

Ventroflexing a horse is going to push the cervical spine against the wind pipe, diminishing air flow. A horse that is ridden hollow therefore has a harder time breathing, just when he has to carry a rider in motion. This will cause stress. The horse is also going to become very tense in the long muscles of the back and the neck. Muscles held in tension have decreased blood flow and therefore compounded with the breathing restriction there is not much oxygen flow in the muscles. As the horse is held in this hollow frame to gait, the muscles begin to produce lactic acid which breaks the muscle down. The muscles must be long and supple, shortening and lengthening to move blood and get oxygen.

Many people go through dozens of saddles trying to find one to fit their horse, without much luck. Sometimes they are barking up the wrong tree. If your horse is ridden hollow, the horse will block at the first and second cervical vertebrae. If we ride the horse for a length of time with C1 and C2 blocked, which they will always be if the horse hollows, then it is common for the horse to be sore in the 6th lumbar vertebrae. This is often inadvertently blamed on the saddle and no saddle can fix that.

When the horse is hollow, the pelvis rotates backwards, making him stiff in these joints and

collection impossible. An upright neck or nose vertical is not collection, just a headset. (false frame) Conversely, a low neck and head is also not collection, but just a way to introduce collection to a young horse. People are too concerned with where the head and neck are and forget about where the feet are. They need to concern themselves about getting the joints more flexible and resistances out of the moving horse. See Figure D.

For a horse to be in collection it must first of all be in balance. This means all four feet have to work underneath the horse. For this to happen in forward movement the horse must rotate the pelvis forward to bring the hind legs under thereby lifting the back. One thing can't happen independently of the others. For the horse to carry more weight on the hind legs he is going to have to flex in the lumbosacral, stifle, and hock joints.

It really takes only a mild degree of collection to get a horse to engage enough to gait. To gait with more and more speed, you have to slowly develop muscles so the horse can maintain balance. Lack of correct muscle development is why so many horses fall out of gait when they change speed or direction. Then riders usually take stronger hold and drive harder, which punishes the horse for his lack of development. This would make us a very unfair teacher. Horses in true collection can gait from very slow to fast with a large window of speeds. Horses ventroflexed in a false frame, have a very limited range of motion in their back. These horses also cannot make slow transitions, but have to more or less explode into gait from walk because they thrust themselves forward.

If you have ever looked at a horse's skeleton or a picture of one, you see their backbone has what looks like fingers sticking up. These spinous process spread when the horse rounds. The horse even does this himself at liberty. If you hollow the back, these fingers will pinch together causing the horse discomfort (Figure C). As you know, when you don't feel good you can be irritable. If the pain continues over a period of time, it can cause emotional stress leading to more bad health and behavior issues. If I have to hollow my horse to get him to gait, resistance will soon follow. I won't do that to him, it would be very selfish of me.

We have found that if you train a horse without stressing him and teach him to move in balance, he will do what his genes tell him. If his genes say trot he will trot better, and if he genes say gait he will gait better. If putting the horse in a stronger balance doesn't bring the gait out, then our horses may not be as naturally gaited as we claim they are. Gaïting is something we want the horse to do for us, for our comfort. He could care less if he gaits or not.

When we start gaïted horses, we never work on gait. We don't need to teach the horse something his genes already tell him to do. We work on suppleness, balance and strength. We want the horse to learn to relax into the bridle. He learns to understand our aids and work in lightness. Lightness is obtained by teaching the horse to rebalance into collection and the horse just offers us the gait. He becomes very secure in his gait with most anyone riding. We don't need to teach our horses not to spook or not be buddy sour or a long list of other resistances. Horses trained to be in balance and light on the aids will allow you to guide them when they become afraid. I cannot teach my horse not to be afraid of everything in the world, but if collection is taught correctly the horse will stay between the reins and legs and allow the

rider to guide them when they are in stressful situations. Gait is something the horse will generously offer up when trained correctly.

It has taken us years of reading books and going to experts to learn the horse's biomechanics so we can train him on his terms. You can get a very good short course from www.equinestudies.org Dr. Deb Bennett, PhD. I highly recommend it. If you train professionally you must absolutely understand biomechanics to do your job properly. Do you and your horse a favor, become familiar with how he/she works. You will get better results and your horse will thank you!!

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