



Gaited Horsemanship

with

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Function Follows Form

By: Laura Harris, DVM

Over time hundreds of breeds of horses have been developed to provide specific function and aesthetic appeal. With this specialization have come conformation differences that allow specific desired functions to be performed. This is not to say that every breed of horse cannot go trail riding, that any breed of horse cannot be used in a variety of ways; only that once a breed becomes specialized the owner, trainer, and veterinarian should respect the unique attributes of the breed and modify their expectations, training techniques, and treatment protocols accordingly. If we have specific goals in mind in your equestrian pursuits we should select appropriate athletes and then train them accordingly.

The Ferrari automobile was developed and designed to provide speed and handling on level roads at high speed. We would not buy a Ferrari, equip it with off-road tires and go out in the desert. Similarly, most people would not have a one ton pick-up truck lowered and outfitted with street tires when planning to pull a goose-neck trailer. You are smiling, but you get the point. Yet we push our horses to unsoundness and create disappointment for ourselves when we don't apply the same logic to our expectations, training and treatment programs that we would apply to vehicle purchase and use.

The American Quarter Horse is a good example of breed specialization. The original short, stocky Quarter Horse was developed to provide short bursts of high speed travel going in a straight line. If you look at the body type of the original Quarter Horses you see big hindquarters (the motor), a short powerful back and a level neck set. This is a sprinter. This horse can catch a steer, run a barrel pattern, separate cattle or spin on his rear end better than any other individual overall. However, in order for this athlete to deliver maximum performance we must respect his unique conformational attributes.

If we force a Quarter Horse to travel with his neck below level, as in many Western Pleasure classes, we have lifted his hindquarters, his "motor", off the ground and jammed his front end into the ground. Further, if we force his face up to or past vertical in a false head-set; we force him to try to flex at the poll beyond what his conformation is likely to allow. And, now that we have him completely jammed up, let's ask him to drop his hocks and slide and spin in the current stylized reining configuration. In just this short paragraph we have short-circuited

all of the animal's conformational attributes to achieve a look that is not only "tweaked" past function but grossly uncomfortable for the animal. If we think about it logically it is no wonder the front feet are sore, the shoulders are sore, the neck is sore, the back is sore and the hocks are sore. After "sore" comes permanent damage to joints, soft tissue, and the animal's ability to do any job.

The modern Arabian Horse has been developed from the ancient desert bloodlines. Originally built for stamina over long distance, these animals were also selectively bred for a neck set above level which allows more vertical motion of the forearms than is possible for a Quarter Horse. The long elegant neck with a refined throat latch allows for flexion at the poll and a vertical face when in the bridle. And, the short flat back and croup and the sculpted head provide a visual aesthetic appeal that few viewers can resist. Again, as with the Quarter Horse, in order to maximize the horse's athletic potential we must respect both the conformational advantages and limitations of the breed.

Even with the naturally high neck set of the modern Arabian Horse we must be careful not to over-train and create a false elevation with the inherent inverted neck and hollow back. Almost immediately, when the neck is inverted and the back hollowed, the horse becomes sore in the back, the sacroiliac region, and probably in the joints of the rear limbs. Additionally, it is never appropriate to force a horse's face past vertical. With current Arabian Horse show bridles which hold the mouth shut, not only does the past vertical face unbalance the horse and cause neck and shoulder problems, but it creates tremendous pressure and dental discomfort. In order to minimize mouth pain the horse locks his poll and becomes rigid in the bridle and heavy on the rider's hands. contrived manner of going the horse becomes sore in the mouth, poll, neck and shoulders. Next, in order to allow elevation of the front end and the extreme front end motion of which the modern Arabian Horse is capable we ask him to squat behind and move up under himself. Overtraining in this position will cause damage to the hocks and stifles if appropriate conditioning and shoeing is not an integral part of the management of the horse. If we plan to capitalize on the unique physical attributes of any breed and maximize natural ability we must be prepared to provide support to the athlete in the form of sufficient conditioning, appropriate hoof-care, whether barefoot or shod, prophylactic dental maintenance, adequate protective gear and comfortable well fitted tack.

Another glaring example of potential inadvertent over-enhancement of natural ability is horses of any of the modern gaited breeds. These individuals were selectively bred to create a comfortable forward-moving way of going. They were developed on two continents to provide all day transportation for the rider without physical discomfort to the horse or rider. The original gaits were efficient, balanced and smooth. Much of this original concept has been overshadowed by individuals presented to the show ring and judged on stylized enhanced criteria that bear little resemblance to the original breed representatives. Heavy shoes, painful feet, inverted necks and hollow backs may create extreme "action" in the short-run but these training gimmicks will certainly be career and even life limiting if routinely applied in any training program.

These are just three breed / type specific examples of various demands we make on modern show-ring animals. I have provided them not as a condemnation of the horse show industry. I

strongly support the horse show industry. The horse show industry supports equine health research and nutritional advancements; publicizes and promotes a glorious species; and allows a true bond between human and animal in a largely non-rural society. I have provided these examples to bring to attention training and care methodologies of which every horse owner and rider must be cognizant so we can avoid damaging our largest companion animal.

The horse is a quadruped which is designed to carry his weight on four feet, balanced 60% in front of his head to tail mid-point and 40% behind that mid-point. He is designed to carry weight equally left to right - 30% on each front foot and 20% on each back foot, on average, over time. He does not naturally carry most of his weight on the haunches, slide forward over distance, or spin repeatedly in place. Likewise he does not naturally trot or canter in place or cross his front and rear legs repeatedly to travel to his left or right. He does not by choice jump over six foot vertical obstacles. And, he does not as an evolutionary advantage perfect his own cadence and audible rhythm while moving repeatedly across a sounding board.

The horse is an inefficient herbivore which is designed to graze almost continuously when not sleeping or avoiding predators. The dietary requirements of the original free-range horses were met by foraging at various heights on a variety of plant materials. There were no concentrates, supplements, or predetermined meal times. Feed was not pre-ground, heated, extruded, or hung from the wall.

The original free-range horse did not perform any unnecessary physical activities. If an action did not pertain to eating, sleeping, escaping predators, or reproduction (including maintenance of herd hierarchy) the "wild" horse wasn't a participant. These individuals did not climb mountains to see what was on the other side. They went around the mountain only in response to diminished feed or increased predation. They did not chase other herbivores across the prairie and drag them back to the fire for branding. And, they did not travel more than a few miles in a twenty-four hour period.

Originally horses did not hold their head or neck in a fixed position for more than a few moments at a time. Nor did they hold their mouths tight shut locking their molars together over prolonged periods of time. And, they certainly did not invert their necks or hollow their backs in order to exaggerate production of their natural gait or way of moving forward.

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