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A Missouri Fox Trotting Horse, an example of a naturally gaited horse. | Photo courtesy of Missouri Fox Trotting Horse Breed Association

So you're looking for a new horse for trail riding...but you're only considering your tried-and-true walk, trot and canter candidates?

Maybe you should broaden your horizons!

If you don't know anything about naturally gaited horses, well, have we got the primer for you.

It's a series of questions based on myths and misunderstandings about gaited horses, posed by real horse people.

Sort of like myth busters—the horse version. Who knows, maybe after reading it, you'll start looking for something gaited as your next trail-riding partner.

10 Gaited-Horse Myths: Busted!

By Jessica Jahiel PhD

Myths and misunderstandings about smooth-gaited horses abound. Here, we'll bust 10 common myths, taken from real questions posed by horse owners from around the country. We'll explain why each assumption is wrong – and why you should consider a gaited horse for trail riding.

Myth #1: Smooth gaits are artificial.

“The walk, the trot, and the canter are normal gaits for normal horses. Gaited horses bother me, because their smooth gaits are manmade and artificial. I'm into natural horsemanship, and I want my horse to enjoy our trail rides. I could never ride a horse that was forced to perform an artificial gait!”

Busted! Relax. You can safely enjoy gaited horses, natural horsemanship, and trail riding – these three things go together very well. The show ring and the trail are two very different places. Good trail gaits aren't created by special tack or riding techniques; they're bred into the horses and brought out by sensible, sympathetic training.

Myth #2: Gaited horses are high-headed nutcases.

“I want a quiet, gentle horse, not a high-headed crazy one. I can tell by looking at those heads in the air that gaited horses are nutcases.”

Busted! Actually, most gaited breeds are exceptionally gentle and sensible, very far from being nutcases. It's true that many gaited breeds are naturally up-headed – as are some of the (supposedly) nongaited breeds, such as Morgans.

If you look at the silhouettes of horses standing in a pasture, you'll notice differences in the way their necks are set on. Some breeds, such as Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds, are less high-headed, with their necks appearing to

come forward out of their backs. Other breeds, such as Tennessee Walking Horses, American Saddlebreds, Paso Finos, and Icelandic Horses, have necks that are set on higher and carried more upright.

Some riders prefer one type; some prefer the other, but in no way does any horse's natural silhouette identify it as a "nutcase."

Myth #3: You'll need a long-shanked bit.

"I just bought my first gaited horse, and I'd like to take him out on the trail. However, I don't have the right kind of bit. I know you have to use a long-shanked bit and keep the pressure on all the time to keep a gaited horse gaiting. Plus, it seems like the kind of riding you have to do would be way too much work on a long trail ride."

Busted! A gaited horse does not need a special bit or heavy rein pressure in order to gait. Harsh bits and long shanks are bad trail bits for any horse; it's too easy for those long shanks to get caught in brush or on branches. As for pressure, that just makes the ride uncomfortable for you and your horse.

A good gaited horse will gait in a snaffle, a sidepull, or a halter and two lead ropes – and many of them will work happily in all gaits on a slack rein. In fact, gaited horses can be taught to neck-rein, which will make your trail rides that much easier.

Constant bit pressure won't help your horse's natural gait. With any horse, gait depends partly on genetics, partly on conformation, and partly on the horse's comfort level. Watch your horse when he's turned out in the pasture, and you'll discover that he can perform all of his gaits with no bridle at all.

Myth #4: You'll need a special saddle.

"My new Tennessee Walking Horse mare seems to be okay with her tack, but we're out on the trails for hours at a time practically every day. I worry about making her sore, because I'm using my sister's old dressage saddle and I know I need a special saddle made for gaited horses."

Busted! If your mare's saddle allows her to move easily and comfortably, everything is fine. It doesn't matter whether it's a good dressage saddle, an

endurance saddle, an all-purpose saddle, or a trail saddle – if it fits your horse, you're good to go.

“Special” saddles “designed for gaited horses” are all about marketing hype, not tack fit. They're really designed just to separate riders from their money. Save your money for quality tack, get good advice on tack selection and fitting (note that a well-made, well-fitting saddle won't pinch or interfere with your horse's shoulders), and you and your horse should have many happy years on the trails together.

Myth #5: The saddle should sit mid-back.

“I'm having a hard time keeping my horse's saddle in the middle of his back. After riding for about an hour, the saddle comes forward. He actually seems more comfortable when it's closer to his withers, but I know gaited horses need to have their saddles way back in the middle of their backs.”

Busted! This is a bad habit born in the show ring; placing the saddle far back puts you in a position to strain your horse's back. Gaited horses are just like other horses; they have the same skeletal structure and the same muscle groups. The spot where any horse is best able to carry a rider's weight is just a hand or two behind the withers.

If your saddle fits well, all you need to do is slide it back until you feel it settle into place, then look at it from the side to be sure that the deepest part of the saddle, the place where you sit, is the lowest part of the seat. If the deepest spot is near the cantle, the saddle is too far forward; if the deepest spot is just behind the pommel, the saddle is too far back.

Myth #6: Your horse will need special shoeing.

“My farrier has always done a good job with my nongaited horses. But I'll need to get a new farrier for my new smooth-gaited horse. He needs special shoeing to help him gait.”

Busted! Whether your horse wears metal shoes, hoof boots, or goes barefoot, he needs the services of a good farrier. The basics of trimming and shoeing are not breed-dependent. A good farrier will look at an individual horse's

conformation, gaits, and movement, then trim and/or shoe the horse's hooves according to the natural angles.

Your farrier will do his or her best to balance and align your horse's hooves in a way that will promote natural gaits and optimal soundness, thus allowing your horse to stand and travel comfortably, smoothly, and in balance. Your gaited horse should gait comfortably and easily whether he's barefoot, steel-shod, or wearing hoof boots.

A good, natural gait can be preserved through good hoof care (and ruined by poor hoof care), but the sources of a horse's natural gait are heredity, conformation, soundness, and training, not shoeing. Experience with specific breeds can help a farrier understand your horse's gait and performance level. If your farrier isn't comfortable working with your gaited horse, find a farrier who works with trail and endurance horses, not one whose specialty is "enhancing" gaits for the show ring.

Myth #7: Gaited horses aren't surefooted.

"I like the idea of a smooth-gaited horse, but not for trail riding. Those high-stepping horses just aren't surefooted enough to be safe."

Busted! This is a double myth. First, a good gaited horse will be a smooth-moving horse, not a high-stepping one. Second, a good gaited horse will be very surefooted, and will handle even tough trails in style. Don't buy into the notion that gaited horses are all eye-rolling, leg-flinging, high-stepping creatures.

There are quite a few working ranches where gaited horses spend their days stepping over logs, walking through water, and carrying their riders smoothly up and down hills, and over all kinds of terrain in all kinds of weather.

Myth #8: Purebred Quarter Horses don't gait.

"My Quarter Horse gelding does a sort of cross between a walk and a trot when we're on the trail. It's comfortable for both of us, so I just go ahead and let him do it. I don't show, so it doesn't really matter, but I guess his papers must be fake since he wouldn't gait if he were a purebred Quarter Horse."

Busted! Many members of "nongaited" breeds, such as Quarter Horses, Thoroughbreds, Arabians, and Morgans, can walk, trot, canter, and perform one

or more “trail gaits.” If your horse has an “extra gear” in the form of a comfortable trail gait, relax, and enjoy it. Don’t worry; your horse’s papers are probably his own.

Myth #9: Trotting ruins smooth gaits.

“Sometimes, I’d like to trot my gaited horse on the trail. I’ve seen him trot in the pasture, so I know he can do it, but I’ve heard that if you let a gaited horse trot, it’ll ruin his smooth gaits.”

Busted! Trotting is a natural gait for most horses, and is good for their backs, balance, and muscular development. Versatile gaited horses are quite capable of performing gaits that aren’t in their capsule breed description. If your horse walks, trots, and canters in the pasture, there’s no reason he can’t walk, trot, and canter under saddle.

Go ahead and trot your horse, encouraging him to use his belly muscles, lift and stretch his back, and reach forward and down with his head and neck. He may not get the chance to exercise these muscles in the same way when he’s gaiting, and it’s very good for him to do some cross-training.

Don’t worry about causing your horse to “lose” his special gaits, and don’t worry that he’ll begin offering a trot when you ask him for his running walk, foxtrot, or singlefoot. Relax, and trust his intelligence and versatility. To ensure that you get the gait that you want when you want it, simply teach him a specific cue to go with each gait. That way, he’ll understand exactly what you’re asking for at any given moment.

Many gaited horses can perform many gaits and do them all well; think of them as extra-special horses with extra gears. It’s perfectly possible for one horse to be able to perform a flatfoot walk, running walk, singlefoot, foxtrot, trot, and canter. Find out what your horse can do, and as long as he’s equally comfortable in all of his various gaits, encourage him to use the ones that are most suitable for your chosen activities.

Myth #10: Gaited horses aren’t true athletes.

“Gaited horses are pretty to watch, but they’re just for shows and parades, they’re not useful for real work.”

Busted! Gaited horses can be spectacular to watch at shows and in parades, but those are only two of the many places where gaited horses excel. From ranch work to police work to handicapped-riding programs, there are hard-working gaited horses everywhere.

They often do well in open competitions, and are increasingly popular for such activities as competitive trail riding and endurance riding.

If you do a lot of trail riding, you've probably seen and admired gaited horses without even realizing that they were gaited. Next time you're on the trail, ask each rider you meet to tell you the breed of his or her horse. I'd be willing to bet that many of those horses will belong to gaited breeds.

And if You Already Own a Gaited Horse...

Is your horse comfortable? Gaited horses typically exhibit great tolerance and great sweetness of temperament, and are usually smooth, comfortable rides. Any rider can feel comfortable on their backs. But is your gaited horse happy and comfortable?

No matter what sort of horse you ride, you owe it to him to become the best rider you can be. If you love trail riding and want to make long, challenging trail rides part of your life, then take lessons, practice, and work to achieve good balance and coordination in the saddle.

Learn to give aids and cues gently, and at the most appropriate times. Help your horse become strong and flexible, and develop endurance. Help yourself achieve exactly the same goals. You'll both have a much better time on the trail, and come home from a long ride sound, happy, and ready to do it all again the next day.