

# Collection and the Gaited Horse

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We have all heard it, well-meaning advice when our gaited horses have trouble staying in gear, either on a downhill incline, around a curve or even on a nice straight level path: “collect him up to get him to gait.” Not exactly sure what this means, many riders take stronger contact on their reins, and squeeze harder with their legs, or use spurs, trying to shove the horse together so that he will raise his head, lean on the bit with a vertical forehead, and take slower, often higher steps, all in hopes that he will stop beating them to death in a hard trot or pace. Sometimes it even works! Is this really collection? Not exactly.

**WHAT IS COLLECTION:** The concept of collection in horses is very old, dating back to well before Xenophon. Following the classical definition of the term, true, complete collection is the condition of a horse, either in motion or stationary, in which his weight is shifted toward the hindquarters, through a sustained lowering of the haunches (pelvis) at the lumbo-sacral junction, increased flexion of all the joints of the hind legs, a raised or basculed back, and finally, an elevated head and neck with increased flexion at the poll at the highest point of the neck. The motion of a horse’s legs when he works in collection is generally more of a spring upwards from the ground than a push forward from it, often leading to shorter, higher steps. Horses working in true collection will carry more of their weight, for a longer period during each stride, on their hind legs than they do in an uncollected state. For an example of a horse working in perfect collection and lightness, see the picture of Spartacus accompanying this article. This is the ideal, the end goal of training for collection, that is the mark of classical dressage.

## WHAT IS NOT COLLECTION:

Because the term has been used in connection with horsemanship for so long, most people who ride have an vague idea of what collection is, consider it one of those “good things” we all need to strive for in our horses, and tend to use the term loosely to describe everything from strong tension on the reins to slow speed. However, if you apply the classical definition of collection, it is clear that many horses (whether trotting or not) that people call “collected” are anything but. A horse may have a vertical forehead, reach under the body with his hind legs, take short and slow steps, and have high action with his front legs without working in true collection. Horses without lowered hindquarters and basculed (raised, rounded, stretched) back and neck may be shortened through the body and may have high action or short steps, but their motion is not collected. They generally continue to carry significantly more weight on their forelegs than their hind, and to keep the front hooves in contact with the ground longer than the hind during each stride.

**THE COLLECTION CONTINUUM:** The perfect collection of the classical dressage horse is at one end of the scale of body positions or frames possible for horses. At the other end of this scale is the “hollow” position, in which the back curves downward, the cervical ligaments are slack, the abdominal muscles are slack, the hind legs trail behind the movement, and there is no downward flexion at the lumbo-sacral junction and there is no lowering of the hindquarters.

At liberty, most horses carry themselves in what could be called a neutral frame, right in the middle of the continuum, with occasional moments of collection (think of a stallion showing off for a mare) or “anti-collection” (think of a horse taking off when startled by a deer jumping out behind him in the woods.) During training a trotting horse gradually changes from the hollow frame that is the inevitable result of carrying the weight of a rider on an unconditioned back, toward a more collected position. This

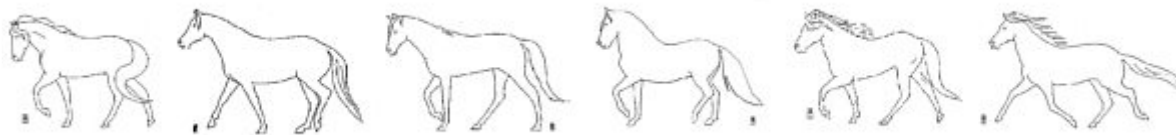
happens in small, visible increments, as the horse's body and his gaits are changed and refined in each new phase of balance. The horse shifts his weight and balance to his hindquarters, lifts his back, and stretches his topline through conditioning and exercise, until he reaches first neutral, then semi-collection, then moderate collection, and then, if he is very well trained and built to sustain the position, complete collection. Obviously, not all trotting horses make it as far along the scale as Spartacus (pictured here), but most at least make it to a neutral frame, and many attain semi-collection as a way to stay balanced under the weight of a rider on their backs.



**Spartacus exhibits the ideal of classical collection.**  
(with permission of Michel and Catherine Henriquet)

**THE GAITED HORSE AND CLASSICAL COLLECTION:** Sustained collection in the classical sense was perfected for non-gaited horses in European riding academies during the 17th and 18th centuries at a time when gaited horses were rapidly disappearing from the European landscape. Virtually no training with collection as a goal was applied to gaited horses as the concept was being developed. Perhaps this occurred because an interesting thing happens when a gaited horse begins to change his body frame from hollow to truly collected in the classical sense. As he gets much past a neutral frame, his easy gait disappears and he will start to trot! This phenomenon of gait changing as the body frame does has long been noted by dressage riders who may ride a non-gaited bred horse that shows a tendency to “amble” or do a stepping pace. They have discovered that if they round up the horse, help his back rise and hindquarters lower, his ambling gait will evaporate as his body changes and he will start to trot. The dressage world has also noticed that when a normally trotting-bred horse, through poor training, is put into a shortened but hollow frame, he will begin to amble.

**THE CONTINUUM FOR GAITED HORSES:** So, what are our gaited horses doing when we think they are collected? What is happening in a horse's body as he does a fino fino or running walk or even a fox trot? Through close observation of the body positions of many gaited horses in all of the easy gaits, you can see how these gaits fit into some of the slots along their own particular collection continuum, which stops about the place a trotting horse begins to become classically collected.



**From right to left: hollow gaits, neutral gaits, semi-collected gaits.**  
Drawings with permission of Lynn Marie Kara.

At one end of the scale are horses that travel completely hollow in the pure pace. In that gait, horses are never show a hint of collection. Think concave backs and necks, and trailing hindquarters! Close to pure pacers, but slightly less hollow in their back and neck position are those that move in a stepping or broken pace. Next come horses performing the rack family of gaits - the corto, largo, true tolt, stepped or true rack, and even the fino. They exhibit a certain “essential tension” in the cervical ligaments at the base of their necks, hold their heads relatively high with more or less strongly braced muscles under their necks, maintain a somewhat hollow back (but less so than many horses in the pace or stepping pace) bob upward and downward from their lumbo-sacral junctions, but do not maintain a consistent lowered position of the hindquarters. Their steps may be very shortened for some of the gaits in this group, especially the paso fino and paso corto, but although they may have a raised head and neck, flexion at the poll, and more or less vertical carriage of their foreheads, they do not have the raised, “basculated” backs, sustained lowering of the hindquarters and increased flexion of all the joints of the hindlegs that mark true collection. They carry themselves to the hollow side of the neutral position on the continuum.



**Horse traveling hollow or ventroflexed in a rack. Horse traveling in a neutral position in a fox trot.**

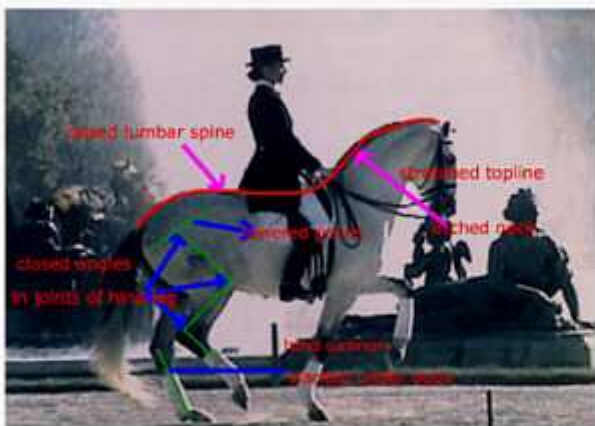
At neutral to very slightly hollow on the gait continuum are horses performing the true (not necessarily the show version) running walk and the paso llano. Their backs are level, not raised, but certainly not visibly hollow. They do not exhibit the “essential tension” at the base of the neck that is seen in horses performing the rack family of gaits, but instead have some stretching along the entire length of their cervical ligaments, not as much as in a truly collected horse, but certainly more than in horses that are pacing or stepping pacing. They may take long steps with their hind legs, overstepping the track of the front but they do so without sustained lowering of their hindquarters from the lumbo sacral junction, and without increased flexion of all the joints of the hind legs as they move.

Finally, at neutral to semi-collected on the scale, are horses working in the fox trot, brock tolt, or trocha/pasitrote gait. Their backs are usually slightly more raised than horses in the running walk or paso llano, their hindquarters are often more lowered than those of horses in the other easy gaits, even though they may not step as far under their bodies as horses in a running walk or paso llano, and there is definite stretch in the entire length of the ligaments supporting the neck. If horses in this gait are taken one step farther, and asked to truly collect (assuming their conformation allows it) by raising their backs that extra bit, bringing their hindquarters under them by tilting their pelvises downward, and rounding more in the topline, the fox trot/trocha, will disappear, and they will simply hard trot. They will have been “collected” right out of the easy gaited world!



**Paso Fino in containment.**  
**Picture courtesy Darlene Wohllart.**

**COLLECTION OR CONTAINMENT?:** In a way, that well-meaning advice to “collect him up” is correct. Even slight changes in the amount of slack in a horse’s ligament system or in his back muscles will change his frame enough to help him stop pacing and start doing at one of the easy gaits. As he does this, the horse does somewhat “collect” himself, since a neutral position is certainly more rounded than a completely hollow one. However, it is not really accurate to call what he is doing “collection” when his overall frame never gets beyond what would be considered neutral in a trotting horse. A better word for the process of shortening a horse’s body while maintaining his easy gait might be “containment,” especially for horses doing one of the rack family of gaits. The energy developed in the hind quarters of such horses does not just “flow forward” while their bodies string out, but is arrested and channeled by the rider’s leg, seat and hand aids into both upward action in the front legs and increased hock action in the hind. This happens without any bascule in the back or sustained downward tilt of the pelvis, so it does not fit the ideal of collection, but something that feels like collection is happening with these horses. They are “contained” by the aids, even if they are not truly collected by them.



**collection**



**containment**

**Comparing a horse in classical collection to one working in tight containment.**

HOW FAR CAN YOU GO? Assuming you are working to truly collect your gaited horse in the classical sense, how far can you go before you lose the gait? With a horse doing one of the racking gaits, not very far. Even the slightest rounding up of a horse in those gaits will produce a running walk or fox trot, although they can be “contained” to the shortest step of any of the easy gaits. For a horse doing a running walk, however, you can go a bit farther in asking for a raised the back. Horses are able to do a running walk in variety of body positions, ranging from slightly hollow to slightly to the rounded side of neutral. With more than slight collection, however, the running walk either turns into a flat walk or a fox trot. If you are dealing with a horse that fox trots by preference, you can go even farther in raising the back and rounding the frame of the horse. While horses can certainly fox trot in very hollow positions, they can also maintain the gait in some semi-collection, with raised backs and somewhat lowered hindquarters. Perhaps it is the diagonal nature of this easy gait that allows it to be done in a more rounded position than the others.

It is not a bad thing that gaited horses don't really collect very much in the classical sense; it is simply one more interesting facet of these sometimes-complicated creatures we ride. It is also something to keep in mind the next time someone tells you to “collect him up” to get him to gait.

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[Back to Article Index](#)