



Gaited Horsemanship

with

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Think Dressage for Gait

When training our gaited horses, teaching or developing gait cannot be more important than the horse's physical and emotional development. While gait is the reason we own our horses, we need to remember that we must train them according to equine biomechanics. It is my experience in training hundreds of gaited horses that when I train the horse using correct techniques, it only makes them gait smoother, more easily and with a greater range of speeds. When working with a gaited horse I have never concerned myself with gait names or what the breed standard says the horse needs to do. I just make the horse as supple, relaxed, and strong as possible and the horse offers me what genes and ability allow. Most of the horses I train can be ridden carrying a cup of coffee without spilling any when they offer gait. I don't care what you call the gait, it is extremely smooth and the horse is safe to go anywhere.

I use classical dressage techniques to train gaited horses. "The main goals of dressage is that all the rider's aids can flow through the horse's body and reach the targeted muscle group without impediment. This is called "permeability to the aids". It can be achieved only if all muscles and joints communicate with each other in such a way that they pass on the impulses of the hindquarters as well as the rider's aids in all directions (forward, backward, right, and left). This requires on the one hand perfect suppleness and on the other hand a certain steadiness. Only soft, supple muscles can function adequately as conductors for energy impulses. Stiff muscles, on the other hand block them: the aids either get stuck or reach their target in a very much weakened state". Dr. Thomas Ritter "Dressage Principles Based On Biomechanics, Cadmos Verlag GmbH, January 2012"

The rider or trainer has two main tasks. 1. All muscular stiffness has to be found and eliminated. 2. All joints have to be framed in such a way that the horse cannot bend in the wrong place and does not yield with the wrong joint.

To supple and strengthen muscles they must be lengthened and shortened. If you only ride the horse straight forward without bending there is no suppling. Because horses at first don't understand longitudinal bend (nose to tail) the muscles must be supplered first by lateral bending. Longitudinal flexion is the beginning of collection, which results in improved balance and poise. Imbalance always leads to tension. Relaxation is only possible when the load is distributed as evenly as possible over the four legs. To achieve collection, biomechanically several things must happen; the horse must lift the base of his neck and raise his withers, he must rotate his pelvis and bring his hind legs under, and maintain the tension in his supraspinous ligament which runs along the top of the spine, so that his back remains round and his locomotion muscles can operate correctly. This will allow him to flex in his lumbar sacral, stifle, and hock joints. If the horse works in a ventro flexed or neutral back, he will not use these joints and most of the weight goes on the front legs, and the long back muscle, the longissimus dorsi, will have to hold the rider's weight. A horse not using these joints makes it hard for the rider to access the hind legs and therefore must use more energy to gait.

Things you can do to create the flow of energy from the aids to the muscles are:

When you teach the horse a movement or exercise, focus on the aids you give as much as the actual movement. Reward small pieces of the movement, so you are rewarding the horse as much for answering the aid you gave as for the movement. When the horse learns a movement, then don't drill the horse with the movement, but ask for the movement with the correct aids and reward for answering the aid. As you get better at giving the aid, the horse gets comfortable with how you ask for things.

Ride lots of upward and downward transitions. This supples and strengthens the hips and shoulders. It also builds longitudinal flexion, which is stopping and speed control. The downward transitions are as important as the upward. All transitions should be gradual and not abrupt. Abrupt transitions, while impressive to humans,

creates tension in young horses.

Ride turns. Turns must be gradual to be beneficial. Small or short turns take uneducated horses out of balance creating stiffness. Large gradual turns work on abdominal muscles, hips, shoulders, and neck. A prerequisite for eliminating stiffness is balance. therefore larger turns and circles are necessary.

Bending; circles, serpentines, teaches the horse to flex to the leg aids. Serpentine help the horse understand change of rein or direction, learning to change balance. Works abdominal muscles, neck, poll, shoulder, hind legs.

Sideways stepping. Spiraling in and out on a circle, leg yield and if the horse gets more advanced, shoulder-in and haunches-in. Spiraling in and out helps the horse understand the inside aids and the outside aids in addition to the movement suppling the horse.

Rein back. It is important to teach rein back so that the horse learn to rock his weight to the hind legs before starting to back up. If the horse pushes back from the shoulders or front legs the movement does more harm than good. It is easiest to teach the rein back from the ground first. The horse must lower the head and neck and not raise them when performing the rein back. This strengthens the hind end and works the joints correctly. You are developing the muscles for collection and also stopping. If the horse backs from his shoulders you are deteriorating your stop. When beginning, actually reward the horse just for shifting the weight backwards at first. Follow this by asking for only a step or two.

When you train your horse with the correct building blocks he will engage the hind legs which results in gait in a horse genetically bred to gait.

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