

Collection and Headset

[...in the Tennessee Walking Horse]

Walking horse owners often hear the advice to "*set his head and collect 'im up!*" and far too many of us are willing to try it. After all, isn't that what the "walking horse bit" was designed to do? But what is collection, and do I really need it with my walking horse? What does headset actually do for him and why?

Pardon me for giving you my take on this "sage bit of wisdom" but I believe headset and collection of the walking horse has become so overwhelming popular as a tool to break up a lateral two-beat pace into a not-quite-so-lateral four beat stepping pace, in both pleasure and show horses. The perpetrators of this mostly mechanical manipulation use it to encourage a racky lift and fold in the front feet, increasing the arc of those feet, slowing their placement and allowing the back feet to impact first. This breaks up the pace creating a smooth but racky, stepping pace; adding to that is the snappy fold and lift is flashier for the show ring. Wow, a two-fer! But is it really collection? I've often wondered if they just don't know any better, or are attempting to somehow legitimize their riding technique by calling it that, but nothing could actually be further from the truth.

Collection is either true or false; and if true collection, I then considered it on a scale from "light" to "high" collection. True collection is not a product of pulling in the headset, or "framing" up a horse. Collection comes from *self-carriage*; a gathering of the horse's body from the hocks, through the croup, spine and neck, all the way to the nose. He must *pull himself in* to offer the rider balanced impulsion for forward movement. It's something that is *given* by the horse when "asked" for, not forced or held in by the rider. The neck should be gracefully arched from the *wither all the way through the poll in a continuous line*. I illustrate true collection by using the analogy of a little league baseball player. The first time a child gets up to bat, his coach must help him position his body to make a proper swing at the ball. As he gains experience, the batter learns not to simply stand there on flat feet, holding up the bat. He learns to flex at the knees, roll up on the balls of his feet, shifts his weight back and leans his upper torso forward in anticipation. He "gathers" himself to add power, smoothness, quickness and grace to his

forward swing. This is similar to what your horse should do when collecting himself, as he prepares to engage in forward propulsion with energy.

A little league coach can position the batter's body all day, and still get a lifeless swing without much power. Something similar to this happens when a horse travels while held into *false* collection with a hollow spine. His feet getting strung out, and he not only has difficulty in maintaining a four-beat gait, but sacrifices balance and impulsion as well. Usually the rider *believes* he is collecting the horse by pulling his nose into "headset". Frequently we see riders forcing headset using serious leverage from curb action bits in an effort to frame the horse. They've been told that's how you ride a walking horse, but unfortunately they are just cramming him into the bit. What far too many don't realize is that pulling the head up in this manor can actually *cause* the spine to hollow out, which in turn *encourages* that two-beat off-gait (the pace) from the horse. It becomes a catch-22 with the rider cramming the horse more and more until finally the horse begins moving his front feet in that racking manor, creating a stepping pace and the rider becomes satisfied with a smoother ride. It becomes a complete picture for those that recognize the story it tells: weak, flat neckline just in front of the withers; over-flexed muscles at the poll with bulging resistance muscles along the front of the neck with the head held overly high for the conformation. The infamous "U" neck that in reality indicates that a horse is locked from jaw throughout their shoulders. These horses are trying vainly to find relief from the severe curb action by trying to hold their mouth behind the bit. When what we really should want and look for is a horse's neck showing a nicely engaged arch from the withers to the nose indicating good self-carriage and allowing a natural rolling motion in the shoulders.

Then there is the concern of how much 'true' collection do we want and need in a walking horse? *Horses can and do move around all the time in a four-beat walk with absolutely no collection.* So the first thing you need to understand is that collection isn't *necessary* for a flatfoot walk and running walk. As a matter of fact, "high" collection will probably push your horse into a nice jog trot. High collection occurs with significant "rounding up" in the spine, and the pulling in of the back feet, croup and neck. It's what the dressage horses are drilled. But most of us don't want our walking horses moving in a jog trot. I should note here that high collection is actually a good thing for a horse moving in a two-beat gear that creates impact, such as a trot or pace. The engagement and connection of the spine evenly distributes the rider's weight, front to back and helps prevent orthopedic stresses from

developing over time. But because our gaited horses *should* be traveling in a level and smooth manor without significant impact on the skeletal structure, the possibility of this decreases along with the benefit and necessity of collection.

So what do we ask our walking horses for? I like to use the term "light collection" and recommend it only for horses being ridden in an English or saddleseat discipline; and then only after they have learned a good flatfoot walk with no collection. Light collection can add balance, grace and animation to the horse's carriage producing a more elegant stride, executed with more impulsion. Again, it must be given by the horse and not forced by the rider. The horse needs to learn to carry the walking gait first to develop the muscles needed. He can then be asked to add light collection while maintaining the correct gait. The horse should keep a neutral spine, neither hollowed nor bowed, to preserve the correct gaiting form, but may be encouraged to tuck the croup engaging the backend, as well as arch the neck in a graceful and continuous line. This neck carriage will engage those muscles directly in front of the withers for proper development as the headshake works from the rolling and reaching shoulders. But this is as much true collection as I recommend for a walking horse. When a horse connects his spine up in either a hollowed or bowed carriage he more solidly connects his front feet with his back feet and this will push his gait toward either a trot or a pace. Horses working in a western discipline with lower head and on loose rein should not require any collection at all other than a brief half-halt in preparation to execute more complex reining maneuvers. Again, it's the horse doing the collecting, not the rider.

What I want to stress is that forcing false collection is the absolute last thing to do to *cure* the pace in a horse. False collection creates many more problems than it solves, never mind the fact that the horse is off-gaited, stiff and uncomfortable to boot. I recently had a mare brought to me for gait correction, that carried herself in just such a manor, and realized upon watching the owner ride her that *he* needed to learn as much as the mare. His hands were held high with an eight inch curb bit pulling the mare's head even with *his* chest, and she was traveling with a very short-strided and choppy pace, clearly as uncomfortable as the rider. The first thing I did was put a snaffle bit on this mare and ask her to lower her head so the poll became level with the withers and round her neckline. From this posture she can more easily learn to find and keep her spine neutral. At that point I could feel the tension drain from her frame and could feel, and hear, her stride go

to even timing as well as see the headshake start to develop. Within a couple of sessions she softened her entire neckline and started to engage the bit; and with that her stride went from a choppy pace to a nicely loose and correct flatfoot walk with 24 inches of overstride. It will take this mare many months to develop the muscles needed for this gait to become automatic and consistent. It will be up to the owner to resist his desire to pull the head high and push for speed; to not cram her into the bit. She will eventually be able to lift her head up higher as her muscles develop and the stride becomes cemented into her muscle memory.

True, light collection can be a good thing in a walking horse when it's given by the horse. I hope I've illustrated that the false collection of the "U" neck is a flag for incorrect gait and uncomfortable posture, and that we should look for correct carriage and muscle definition in our walking horses. The old "collect 'em up" attitude using the infamous walking horse bit has done quite a disservice to the breed and riders as a whole. We need to move this bit of

"sage old wisdom" into the myth category. **Gait: It's All**

about Posture

By Anita Howe

[{return to "Articles"}](#)

I'm not about to go into an equitation session here and talk about heels down, hips shoulders and heels lined up. I will leave that to those much more qualified than I am. No, it's not *our* posture that I'm referring to (even though good equitation can be *very* beneficial to you and your horse). It's your horse's posture and use of his body I want you to pay attention to.

When asked what the single biggest concept I would wish to get across to people, who are training their gaited horses, my response is *to quit focusing on the legs and feet*. Quit obsessing with hoof angles, shoes, training aids, action devices, etc. Yeah, that's right, stop looking at where the feet are and what the timing is. Because the simple truth of biomechanics is that everything happening with those feet and legs *starts with the back, the shoulders and the hips of the horse*. There is nothing that *can* happen with those extremities that doesn't start with the body posture. Just like we can't so much as lift an arm without engaging the muscles of our back, a horse's use of his legs starts with his back; his primary support structure. Get the posture and you'll get the gait; the feet will take care of themselves and do exactly what the body tells them to.

As gaited horse owners we are inundated with a multitude of gimmicks and appliances to correct gait that some creative people have dreamed up and are trying to convince folks to spend their money on. Lets face it, we are often so desperate to "get the gait" we're willing to spend money on just about anything that tags itself "for gaited horses", and they know this. Bits, shoes, saddles, pads, and the one that sets my teeth on edge the most: gaited farrier services. You see articles all the time on how farriers specializing in gaited horses can help correct your horse's gait (and all without so much as getting on him). That just reinforces how few people actually "get it"! Understand that all those appliances and foot modifications are not only very limited in the alteration of gait and timing, but are really only Band-Aids to any gaiting issues. They will never cure it, just cover it up for a time. You would be far wiser to spend less on shoes and invest more in a *well fitting* and balanced saddle for your horse (but again I digress into an area better left for those with more expertise).

While a horse's natural ability to gait will always be defined by his conformation, it's his own posture and carriage that actually give us that gait. While most horses are built more for trot (or pace), many gaited horse breeds have been bred to have elements of both in their structure that allow them to find an easy gait of some kind in between the trot and pace. Even those horses with great conformation allowing for gait are not always going to give you that gait if they have learned to carry themselves incorrectly. Conversely, even if a horse has limitations in his conformation that may inhibit gait you can, through patient and consistent correction, help him find an easy gait that is comfortable for him to manage and be a pleasure for both of you. It may not be textbook, and it may take a lot more patience with some horses (generally those that have been moving off-gaited for many years), but it is attainable.

In order to train, we as riders must first learn to feel the horse. To focus on how his body action and posture is functioning; the way his back, hips and shoulders move when he's gaiting correctly; his balance and carriage. A ground-man with a good eye can be very helpful early on to aid you in learning to feel when your horse is indeed moving correctly. But as you begin to feel those movements and begin to understand what you're feeling, you can then begin to correct the horse when you feel him alter that ideal posture and carriage. This is a huge benefit, because we can become sensitive enough to detect those minor, preparatory changes (what he does just before he alters his gait), then we can actually *correct him before the timing change reaches his feet*. Imagine correcting an off-gait before it fully becomes an off-gait.

It's a fundamental principle of training that the sooner you correct a horse when you feel inappropriate gait, the easier it is for him to realize that it was his change that *caused* your correction. Helping him understand that you're not just engaging the bit, seat and legs for no reason, but in response to his actions. You then have the opening of a good dialogue. So we can truly start communicating to the horse "hey, don't tighten your spine" because we've know that's what he does when he's getting ready to rack. Or we say "don't go heavy on the forehand" because we know that's what he does just as he's moving into a trot. Or "don't bring your head and nose up" because we know he does this to get hollow to start pacing. Then we can really start *training the horse* to carry his correct gait on his own.

When someone says you need to put heavier shoes, turn-backs, to lower angles, strap on rollers, add trailers or weighted bell boots, they're really demonstrating that they are still among the ones that just "don't get it". All those things simply *force a modification to what the horse is doing with his body posture* and you're just one farrier visit or pulled shoe away from losing whatever limited gait it may produce. We must get the horse to change his posture to truly correct what he's doing from his back, hips and shoulders. If you can instruct your horse to carry his own gait; to find that sweet gear that lets him cruise along with no correction, support or engagement from the rider, then both of you will be much happier "down the road". We are so fortunate that these wonderful creatures *want* to please us, and it is our responsibility in the partnership to be clear in what we want and help them do so.

Anita Howe, owner/trainer

I also want to encourage you to stop in and read *THE BEST ARTICLE* out there on [TRUE COLLECTION](http://www.equinestudies.org/knowledge_base/true_collection.html) written by Dr. Deb Bennett. Go to: http://www.equinestudies.org/knowledge_base/true_collection.html Well worth the time, and has wonderful photographs and graphic illustrations.