

Gait: It's All about Posture

By Anita Howe

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. Let's 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.