

The Walking Horse Headnod

Any horse will utilize the head and neck as counter-weight while walking, much like we swing our arms as we stride. The bigger we try to stride, the more we pump our arms...the same happens with a horse who's carrying himself in an *evenly-timed* flatfoot walk and running walk with neutral top line. The headnod has long been a signature characteristic of the Walking Horse. Due to the huge stride bred into these horses, they have the ability to utilize the head and neck weight as counter-balanced leverage to drive that huge stride, which in turn produces the headnod: more so than other breeds with lesser stride and looseness.

Horses (just like humans) will utilize counter-balance for any motion requiring effort to add leverage and power to that motion as well as for balance. The bigger, stronger the motion, the more counter balance needed. We don't *need* to swing our arms much as we're strolling easily ...just enough to balance our bodies. But when we add speed and power to our walk we work our arms in energetic motion to add leverage and power to the push in our feet. Biomechanics tells us that this also spreads that effort to push between more muscles throughout the body. Have you ever tried to throw a baseball without rotating your abdominal area or without counterbalancing with the opposite arm? Professional pitchers will even

raise the opposite leg to increase their leverage and add power to their throws.



You can observe while watching athletic events that the natural counterbalance used will be on the opposite side of a central pivot point, usually the trunk of the body for humans. The more power a horse needs to put into a walk the more he

will counterbalance with the most movable portion of his anatomy...his

head and neck pendulum. We all know that the power of a gait comes from the backend of a horse. With the power needed on one end, and the shoulders (bearing a majority of the weight) become his pivot point and the head and neck become his counterbalance. This *engine* needs opposite body counterbalance to utilize that power, and you can feel as his back feet all the way through to the poll becoming connected with energy that is somewhat hinged at the shoulders.

This connection and counterbalance is not as dramatic in other horse breeds because of their shorter strides and tighter coupling. Our walking horses will carry us in that faster intermediate speed while *remaining* in the neutral walking frame. A properly executed flatwalk and runwalk has no suspension and should be maintained in this relaxed frame.

Developing the naturally brilliant headnod: I constantly receive emails from folks who have seen my horses or watched my videos asking "how do you get that headnod on those horses?" I am happy to share this with anyone interested... I wish to see our beloved breed reclaim this signature gait characteristic that is being almost lost with the advancement of the performance gaits that are so routinely tied in the show arenas. "Don't be afraid to go to the middle!" There is a reason that all the old-time video as well as what literature there is from that period, speaks of an "evenly timed gait"; that is gait that is neither toward the step-pace nor toward the foxtrot. Performance trainers seem to be so *afraid* of the diagonal going or trotty horse that they deliberately veer to the pace side... and there are many reasons for this. Many modern TWH trainers have no clue how to work with a trotty horse, so much so that I've heard caustic remarks and recommendations for owners to "shoot him". I believe they simply have no idea how to help and correct the trotty horse. I, personally, love working with what I call "default trotters" because once they find their smooth, evenly timed walks, it sticks for life. Plus they carry themselves in better posture to more easily pick up a beautiful, rolling canter, which is another thing the performance breeding is losing for us. But I digress:

Steps to developing the headnod:

Please note that big headnod depends on neutral top line, even gait, long stride, relaxed and loose movement. If you can get all of these coming together in your horse, he will invariably give you the best headnod he's capable of.

- The flatwalk is where the headnod is developed. The increased tempo of the running walk will naturally decrease the depth of the nod... A horse simply cannot make that much movement in the lesser time allowed at the faster tempo. Just as you will not swing your arms as far when you increase your walking tempo.
- Bit train your horse to be soft and responsive to the bit. When you ask him to "give" to you vertically as well as laterally, and he must do so *without resistance*. I heartily recommend a non-leveraged snaffle (my preference is an English D) for training. Let's not create any more interference than we must.
- A comfortable, well-fitting saddle is critical for horses to carry the neutral top line AND to roll easily out of their shoulders.
- Start with a slow walk, where you can hear each footfall is evenly spaced.
- Keep head and neck level while "asking" the horse to bring his face more on the vertical.
- Bring up the energy of the horse slowly: remember we don't want them to "switch gears" so much as just extend and increase energy. "Rev the engine, don't change the gears!!!"
- Feel the front-to-back rolling in the saddle: more front-to-back means bigger stride is being used and will produce a deeper



headnod, so encourage this motion with you seat and legs... move with the horse.

- Using your seat, legs and occasionally a light half-halt with your hands, begin asking your horse to give you "BIGGER, NOT FASTER"... You want more extension while maintaining the moderate tempo of flatfoot walk.
- As long as your horse can keep his top line relaxed, rolling and neutral you will be able to get more and more boldness and brilliance from him at the flatfoot walk.
- The backend must remain engaged and never suspend. If you feel your horse tighten his hips, shorten his stride, he is getting ready to go off-gait toward the pace, rack or trot. Even if he keeps his timing even, this shortening of the stride will interfere with the brilliance of his walk... he'll end up being a "tail bobber". So be ready for this and correct it as soon as it starts showing up. You may have to slow down again, but just don't quit. Keep asking your horse to push his speed envelope and develop his stride with an engaged backend and strong but relaxed top line.

Utilizing these basic principles, you can get more and more brilliance, stride and headnod from your correctly moving walking horse. Tension in the topline is your enemy, so when working in an arena or walking for miles on the trail will help the horse to relax and drive while keeping it neutral and energy efficient.

So now if you hear someone say, "if he ain't noddin', he ain't walkin'" you can understand what they mean. Any horse will nod in a neutral walking frame, but the long stride of the walking horse makes it a show.

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