

## Producing the Gaited Athlete

Below is a quote from an article titled "VERSATILITY HORSES" out of the "SINGLE-FOOTING EXPRESS" (summer 2000 vol. 4 no. 4).

"Most of the stockmen have given Walking Horses a try at some time or another and all have agreed 'the cow turns, the horse keeps going straight.' Most of the gaited horse world does not understand that a horse bred to take as long a stride as possible front-to-back simply cannot have sufficient lateral flexibility in the quick turns. .... Virtually all the gaited breeds are dominated by their almost total focus on horses who excel in going in circles for ten minutes on level ground."

Unfortunately, there is some truth to this statement. In the feverish pursuit to produce performance horses with monster stride over these last decades, many gaited horse breeders have allowed all other conformational characteristics take a back seat. We now have a number of bloodlines within these breeds that are less than athletic. However, this is only partially to blame for horses that now have a reputation of being stiff and inflexible. The rest of the responsibility must lie with the riders and trainers who have failed in the way these horses are taught to move and the ways they are ridden every day.

You've probably heard me rant before about how hollow-backed horses not only tend to pace and rack, but carry their heads so high that they have difficulty in seeing where their feet are stepping. Well, let me point out one more bi-product of this posture: the lack of bend in the horse. A horse with hollow carriage will typically find bending that trunk very difficult because of the locked top line. A self-collected horse will release the spine as they engage in true collection. Most athletic endeavors require a certain amount of collection for both impulsion and balance on the part of the horse. They then become more able to bend through their ribcage, strengthening lateral muscles that will in turn increase their balance and fluidity.

It's easy to get so caught up in training a horse that goes around the ring and covers straight ground on the trails so well that you can often find "seasoned horses" that have never been asked to move or bend laterally. Let me draw the analogy between a distance runner and a dancer. Both are very toned athletes: the distance runner will have very well developed muscles that are used to run in a straight line. The dancer, on the other hand will bend, stretch, twist, lean and overall develop a very high sense of balance and grace. Their entire manor of movement, even when they're simply walking, will reflect the poise that comes from lateral toning and conditioning. They then become well adapted to fast changes of direction, and movement; more responsive and flexible. What we, as breeders and riders of gaited horses need to understand is that this is just as much a result of conditioning as it is from conformation or build.

We can use lateral conditioning with our horses as well to improve their balance and responsiveness. We need not have horses that only go well in a straight line and seem to fall through their turns more than impulse into them. Our horses *can* learn to bend, flex, step into turns, shift their weight back on their haunches for quick maneuvers, side pass responsively and basically be better overall athletes. All this is attainable *by teaching lateral movement*. When a horse bends and changes their balance in preparation for lateral movement, he will naturally gather himself in light collection and engagement. He will utilize abdominal as well as other lateral muscles that are needed less in straight-line gaits, and by doing so strengthen them. Your horse will add softness, grace and balance to all his movements and gaits as these muscles become more developed.

\*\*\*It is important that we focus on the bend, and do so only at a walk. Also I recommend soft bell boots for hoof protection, because like anyone learning a new dance, our horses may step on a few toes. These exercises should always start on level ground, and many young horses will not be ready for them if they exhibit *any* unsteadiness in carrying a rider. Young joints going through growth spurts are very fragile at that time and can easily be pushed beyond tolerances, which end up producing injuries that could become lifelong problems for that horse. So please exercise caution and start this as slow conditioning work. It's very well worth it for a more athletic horse and speed is simply not required or even beneficial at the start.

Here are a few of my favorite exercises for developing lateral fitness in your horses:

- I have always been a big believer in the lateral flexion when giving to the bit and bending at the poll. This is really just basic bit training. But we can then take this a step further to get more bend through the body and less in the neckline. Instead of simply pulling the one-rein toward your thigh or knee and waiting for the horse to move his nose toward his shoulder, try pulling the rein straight out to the side and away from your body about 14 inches then asking your horse to walk forward into a turn while you nudge with your outside leg aid. Watch closely for his *inside front foot* to step into the turn. When you see this immediately release the rein but keep him walking forward, then repeat again and again. What you want is for your horse to no longer fall into his turns by stepping over with the outside foot, but bend his trunk, shift his weight off that front shoulder and *step* into the turn with the inside leg. Don't let him cheat by trying to move his hindquarters around the turn...this is why it's important to keep the forward motion and start working in 5 to 10 meter circles. Once he begins moving into that turn well, you can tighten the circle and get him to step more and more toward the side thereby bending and shifting even more. Don't forget you must work both sides. If he has more difficulty one direction, that is the direction that requires the most work and the most toning. Otherwise work both directions equally for a balanced horse.

- Another regular part of my routines is the shoulder-in, which has a tremendous amount of benefit beyond the lateral toning. Note: you will need to have trained your horse to move off your leg responsively in all directions before beginning this or it will most likely frustrate him and you in trying to get this movement. For those not familiar, a shoulder-in is where you bend the head and neck to one direction, say 2:00 o'clock on the dial, then using right leg pressure ask your horse to step out with his outside front foot toward 11:00 o'clock. You will want him to develop the ability to cross his front legs in taking multiple steps to the outside. This will not only help him learn to lighten his front and roll his shoulders, but also demonstrates to him that your hands and reins only direct his head and neck position, and it's your legs and seat that direct his body position and movement.
- For anyone who has not yet trained their horse to move their body away from leg pressure I consider this a must for all horses as well as more advanced lateral movements. Here is the exercise I use to train this. Starting from the ground, place pressure just in front of the girth with your fingers and "push" lightly on your horse, then firmer until he makes a slight step away from you with his forehand. Release your pressure immediately, rub and pet to let him know this was the correct answer, then keep repeating until he moves with lighter and lighter pressure. Next move your cue to approximately 12 inches behind the girth, low on his side toward his flanks, while using one hand on the reins or lead rope to stabilize the forehand and check any instinctive forward movement. You then wait for him to move his hindquarters away from you; release and repeat. Do this on both sides of your horse. Once you have a responsive horse moving from your hand pressure, you're ready to use this cue from the saddle. Begin using your legs and heels in these same areas to illicit the same steps away from pressure, again using the reins to counter forward movement and support the lateral movement you're asking for. A riding crop used as a gentle tap of "emphasis" can assist and save your leg muscles some. Your goal is to have a horse that readily moves his forehand and hindquarters in both directions from your leg cues. I call this "putting the power steering on your horse". Note that once you have a horse moving forehand and hindquarters readily in response to leg pressure, the sidepass is almost a done deal. It's a simple extension to train the pressure spot forward for the front only, the pressure spot back for the hindquarters, then by alternating at first, you can soon have him moving both from one middle pressure position.
- You can always improve balance, as well as teach a horse to pay attention to ground obstacles by walking him over cavaletties (ground poles) spaced from 3 – 6 feet apart. Encourage him to drop his head, look and pay attention in picking his way over them. While the horse doesn't need to bend laterally to go over cavaletties, it will encourage him to release his topline and utilize the abdominal

muscles. This is also good for a rider to learn what they need to feel in a horse who is releasing his topline.

The icing on the cake is that as your horse gets more athletic, balanced, fluid and conditioned his gaits will also improve, especially the runwalk. So how is that for incentive? Try adding these simple exercises at the end of your rides, when your horse is more relaxed and willing to listen to you. Take an additional 10 minutes per ride and make your horse a better athlete. It's a nice change of pace for you both and feels more like a game.

I submit to you that it's not just conformation and breeding that cause so many gaited horses to have difficulty in their athletic maneuvers, but is really more a result of our riding habits. The author of the quote above probably doesn't realize that gaited horses come in all shapes, sizes and conformations and can be as adaptable as any breed to any particular job or chore. Many of them can and do work the cattle and ride the rugged trails with ease and confidence. Because just like us, a horse becomes a product of his endeavors. Maybe this is just one more example of form following function. Good riding.