

Can A Walking Horse Be Too Square?

I have done a little research and found that the term "square" is often used in trotting horse breeds and competitions to describe a trot. But in this aspect I don't believe that it is used in exactly the same context, but more as a description of the *evenness and balance of both sides of a horse's stride and carriage*. Maybe this could account where the crossover and confusion about the term square are stemming from. I've heard dressage instructors, for example, reference a nicely square trot.

However the original misapplication of the term came about, most agree that its common use in today's walking horse world is in describing the *timing* of the footfalls, and most commonly as a complaint rather than a compliment. For this use, I still maintain that it should be considered a training **goal** for the pleasure flat-shod walking horse: for all walking horses for that matter. *A true "walk" should always be dead-even in footfall timing.* I will shock many people when I claim that a fox-trotting walker needs to "square up" his timing!

I don't expect to make converts of those that want to believe otherwise, but here is some thinking to backup this assertion. A horse executing an evenly timed walk will exhibit a deeper, from-the-shoulder headshake than one who's timing has moved in either direction from that centered evenness. While both the more laterally and more diagonally timed horse can, and often do, shake their heads some, it is a shallower movement originating more from the poll (head flop) than from the shoulder junction. If you closely observe the headshake exhibited by horses executing these off-timed gaits, you'll quite often see a change in aspect between the jaw line and the neckline of the horse. It's more of a "nodding nose flip" than a shake. I think we can all agree that a true walking horse headshake should not change the alignment between jawline and neckline (at the poll); all up and down motion should be derived from the shoulder pivot indicating it is properly connected to the backend stride.

I believe because a horse must tighten the chain of dorsal muscles along the spine in order to execute a two beat gait (trot or pace), as the timing of the runwalk moves away from the dead-center-even toward either of those two-beat gaits it's quite natural for a horse to begin tightening those muscles, reinforcing the connection between spine and neckline and reducing

looseness. Again, if you closely observe off gaits such as the step-pace and foxtrot, you'll see very little flexion, almost a stiffness, in the topline from the back up through the poll. Try this brief exercise: jog in place with your legs, ankles and feet *but loosen and roll your hips* --- you do NOT suspend, your hips roll and absorb the action from your feet and legs. In order to actually jog (suspend) you must *lock your hips* for your legs to push off and lift your weight up. So in order to have suspension in either the front or back end on a horse, he must lock the hips and/or shoulders for that suspension. In executing a trot or pace, since both front and back ends are suspending, both are locked as well as the neckline.

The headshake becomes shallower with the more off-timed the gait. The shoulders have less roll and reach, and the entire trunk is elevating in a jogging movement that upon foot impact causes a slight downward nod with the head, and is more a result of impact from the entire body moving up and down. You don't get the "pump-handle" off-set motion (as I characterize it) as you do in a "true" walking gait. You can also feel that tightness engage as they make the transition from a flatfoot walk. I, personally, have never seen a horse have the deep, shoulder-pivot headshake while executing a stepping-pace or even a more diagonally timed gait such as a foxtrot. I have watched hundreds (perhaps thousands?) of horses at shows, looked through hours of video, using freeze frame to try and analyze what various gaited horses are actually using their bodies, and it seems to be consistent that the further the foot timing is away from dead-center-even, the less headshake is produced.

Many in the "traditional" walking horse industry are perfectly willing to sacrifice a true, square, headshaking gait for what they view as a faster, showier (and more lateral) stride. This need for a "bigger" back-end overcomes the desire for a balanced horse that uses it's front-end to reach just as far as the back-end drives. (I'll address in another article exactly how they're fooling themselves into thinking they're getting more stride from lateral timing!) Many will say today's performance horse is better, but I say you're sacrificing the balanced, energy efficient locomotion that these horses were bred for in the 30's and 40's. I say the headshake and the "square", even timing are hallmarks of the breed, and go hand in hand. It's what makes them unique. There are many other breeds that pace or trot, and dozens that can perform a variation of the rack, or single-foot. We mustn't lose the uniqueness of our breed to the greed for a performance blue ribbon.

by Anita Howe, owner/trainer