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## INTRODUCING THE GAITED HORSE

### Part 1: The Four Beat Gait

By Juli Realy

As mature horse-lovers continue to be drawn to the horse scene, gaited horses are becoming more and more popular for pleasure riding. They are known for their easy to ride, smooth, 4-beat gait. Along with their sensible personalities, and good work ethic, gaited horses are finally developing the recognition they deserve as wonderful pleasure horses.

When gaiting correctly, a gaited horse always has at least one foot on the ground, without any suspension between strides. This is what produces the gliding feel. The trot, in comparison, has a moment of suspension between every stride, which produces the bouncing a rider will experience when trotting. Those of you that have problematic knees and backs, or are tired of bouncing around, can continue riding successfully on gaited horses.

The gaiting quality is a genetic one, not a trained one, and gaited horses are born hard-wired to gait. But, what many people don't realize is that good gaiting doesn't happen automatically just because the horse is gaited. Some gaited horses will gait naturally with ease, but the majority will need some support from their rider to develop quality movement and consistency. In some cases, rider error actually interferes and hampers the horse's ability to gait correctly.

A good gaited horse is the same as any good horse, regardless of the discipline. If the riding isn't correct, the horse will not perform to his ability. A beginner rider may not be able to get a western horse to do a super slow collected jog or lope, even if the horse is a champ. A rider unfamiliar with dressage will not be able to get a dressage horse to perform high-level dressage movements, even if the horse is superb at it. A gaited horse is the same. Without appropriate skills, a rider may not be able to get a horse to gait correctly, and the horse will just fill in the best way he can under the circumstance.

Now you're thinking, what is this 4 beat gait thing all about? There are so many gaits out there, how do you know which your horse is doing? Is it a running walk, rack, single-foot, foxtrot, pace, stepping pace, amble, tolt, or paso llano? To simplify things, I will put all of the above gaits into just two categories; diagonal, and lateral. When a horse gaits correctly, the goal is for the movement to show a clear distinctive 4-beat rhythm. Regardless which gait he is doing, each leg should be striking the ground individually, and the sequence of the footfall will be either lateral or diagonal.

For clarification, first think of the trot, a two beat diagonal gait, where the 2 opposite diagonal legs strike the ground at the same time. So beat one of a trot is: Left Hind (LH) and Right Front (RF) striking the ground together, and beat 2 is: Right Hind (RH) and Left Front (LF) striking the ground together. (The legs that are kitty corner from each other) There is a moment of suspension in between trot strides, which causes the bounce of the trot. Some gaited horses, like the Missouri Fox-trotter, have a 4 beat diagonal gait. The legs strike the ground one at a time, in a diagonal pattern: Beat 1: LH, beat 2: RF, beat 3: RH, beat 4: LF.: Beat 1: LH, beat 2: RF, beat 3: RH, beat 4: LF. See figures 1 & 2. There is always at least one foot on the ground, with no suspension in-between strides, which is why the gait is so smooth.

For a lateral gait, think of a Standard-bred horse that paces. The pace is a lateral two beat gait. Beat 1 will be: LF and LH together, and on beat 2: the RF and RH strike the ground together producing a distinct 2 beat gait. The pace also has a moment of suspension between strides, which makes the pace a little bouncy from side to side as the horse switches from the legs on the left side, to the legs on the right side. A gaited horse with a lateral gait (like a Tennessee Walker) will move the legs in a lateral pattern, with each leg striking the ground separately to make 4 beats. The two legs on one side will strike the ground in succession for the first two beats, and then the 2 legs on the other side will follow with beat 3 & 4. The pattern is: Beat 1: LH, beat 2: LF, beat 3: RH, beat 4: RF. See figures 3 & 4.

If this seems too complicated to keep track of while you're riding, then don't even worry about

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the leg sequence, just focus on getting a nice 4 beat gait, so that the legs strike the ground separately and not as pairs. The best gait has an even rhythm: 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 -. A weak gait, while it still has four beats, will have a staggered rhythm: 1 2 - 3 4 -. When this happens, it is smoother than a trot or pace, but you are only half way to the correct gait, and need to work with the horse to even out the footfalls.

Before learning to ride a gaited horse, it helps to be able to watch some gaited horses gaiting, to learn how they look when working correctly, as compared to how they look when they break gait. Then when you ride a gaited horse, have someone familiar with gaiting point out to you when the horse gaits, and when he defaults to a trot or pace. Then, concentrate on learning to distinguish the difference between the way the correct gait feels, and how it feels when the horse breaks to a trot or pace.

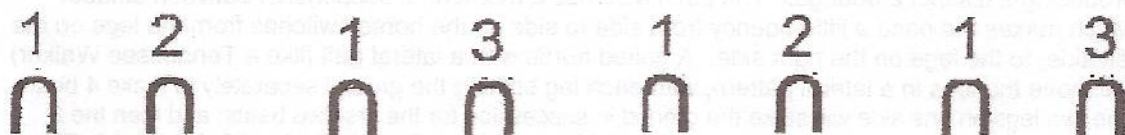
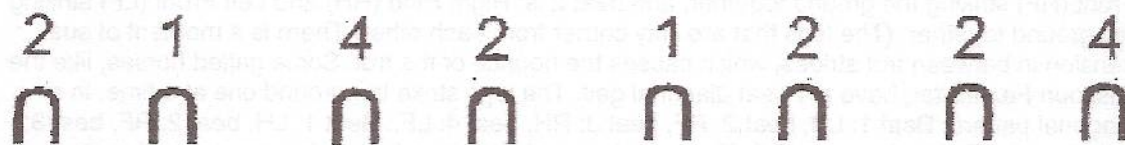
If you don't have a helper, you can try to identify the correct gait by riding on hard ground and listening to the rhythm of the hooves as they strike the ground. You will either hear 2 beats (trot or pace) or a 4 beat staggered rhythm of the stepping pace, or, the full even four beat rhythm of a correct gait, which ends up sounding a little like a locomotive chugging along. When you think the gait sounds right-focus on how the horse feels underneath you. With practice, over time, you should eventually be able to distinguish what the horse is doing.

It is interesting also, that some gaited horses will be able to adjust the speed of their gait, and are able to gait slower, and faster. I've also seen gaited horses that have more than one type of gait. There are also gaited horses that get "stuck" and are only able to gait at one speed, and when asked for variation, will default to the trot or pace. Of course, in many cases, the horse's flexibility within his gait is a direct reflection on the skill of the rider and his ability to bring out and refine any possible variations.

Developing the gait of the gaited horse will take skill, time, repetition and strengthening. I find that working gaited horses outside of an arena situation enhances their performance, as they are more energetic when they feel they are going somewhere. Riding on mild hills is also beneficial to the development of gait. Many of the popular gaited breeds evolved from horses raised and ridden on mountainous and hilly terrain. Without a phase of suspension, gaiting offers more stability of footing to a horse than trotting or cantering, and allows a horse to safely cover longer distances. The faster gaits are also smoother and easier on the rider's body than a trot or canter, when spending more time in the saddle.

In Next Month's Article: Gaited Horses Part 2: Saddles and Bits

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1. Trot 2 beat diagonal gait

2. Four beat diagonal gait

3. Pace 2 beat lateral gait

4. Four beat lateral gait