

Do You *Really* Need a Gaited Trainer?

by Anita Howe

People often email or phone me for training advice for their gaited horses. Upon extensive query, I often discover that many of their issues are not truly gait related but simply because their horse has never been trained with good, solid horsemanship basics. I tend to find they are often making some fundamental errors like over-biting the horse, or trying to use weighted shoes, or their horse has never been properly trained to give to their legs and respond to the bit.

I will watch video they send me and commonly see them pulling the horse's head up, having been told their gaited horse should be high-headed and "framed up." I will see horses that move extremely hollow with no bend or give and in very poor balance. Given just one these circumstances, it is impressive if *any* horse can gait correctly. Often horses are plagued by many of these problems.

Although there is a vast need out there for sound, gimmick-free gait correction help and advice, there are very few trainers who truly understand how to help people who are seeking to school their horses in natural gait correction without the use of harsh, mechanical "aids". So great is this need, and so few and spread out are those to fill it, that there is very little hope in making even a small dent in that need. Therefore, I want to advise as many of you as I can to make this very honest determination: do you really need gait correction advice, or might you be in need of a good natural horsemanship trainer *first*?

After all, gaited horses are not a different species, as many gaited trainers seem to want you to believe. They are first and foremost horses and should be trained first *as a horse!* It is only after you have a good, solid foundation of softly giving to the bit, bending and balance, flexing and moving laterally off your legs, willingly stopping and moving out, that you can even begin to determine if your horse "just might" have a real gait issue.

I have often advised people to find a good natural horsemanship trainer close enough for them to work with on a regular basis. It is amazing the number of "gait issues" that miraculously disappear after the horse learns to give, to bend, to flex, to move, and to respond to the rider in a soft and willing manor. I also highly recommend RFD-TV and the many natural horsemanship trainers offering their advice free of charge on their programming every week if you are fortunate enough to have it available on your television service

I also advocate that everyone train their gaited horses just like any other horse for the first 6-12 months under saddle, with the only exception being that they keep their horses at the flatfoot walk (or the equivalent) during that time. The focus should be on the basics of bit training, bending, balance and lateral movements. This is so very important and probably the single biggest payoff for every gaited horse.

It is invariably where I have to start with horses brought to me with gait problems because in order to correct the problem I must be able to influence their balance. In order to influence their balance I must have the cooperation of "willing" and fluid head and neck carriage as well as body posture and position. And you can do this yourself with the aid of natural horsemanship before you even contact a "gaited" trainer.

There are several other things that can mask themselves as gait problems:

- Horses with dental problems will be uncomfortable with the bit and will hold themselves awkwardly, often fearfully. This creates posture abnormalities, which then result in off-gaits. Getting a good dental check can reduce a number of current and future problems with horses working comfortably on and with the bit.

- Severe and badly fitting bits cause these same reactions and postures. When horses are afraid of the bit, you have lost a crucial method of communication with them.

■ Poorly fitting saddles create pressure points and posture issues, causing a horse to hollow or brace in carrying the rider's weight. Shoving a pad under a badly fitting saddle will not necessarily help and can often actually make the problem worse.

These are just a few of the initial checklist of things I run through with each horse and rider before we can even begin to look at gait. These issues must be ruled out first, and will often resolve many issues that owners had previously felt certain were gaiting troubles. It is amazing the number of times that people will email me weeks later and say they their horse is moving better once they found a milder bit, got that dental float, or found a saddle that actually fit the horse.

It is difficult to work with a horse's mind when their body is in discomfort, so take care of his body first. Then you can reach his mind much easier, and have a much more willing horse to work with. When their bodies get comfortable, many off-gaited horses suddenly find natural gait their owners had no idea they had.

If you do decide you want to find a gaited trainer, you should carefully look at the following, just as you would with any potential trainer...

Finding a Trainer for Your Gaited Horse

First educate yourself and do your research. Your prior preparation will be well worth your reassurance that your horse is not only being cared for, but is learning from someone who wants to help him/her become a better horse for you.

- **Define your goals:** it is your job to know what you want for your horse. Don't be sold on what a trainer is producing. Do you want show training, or trail seasoning? Do you want someone to start your horse under saddle or help with gait correction? Consider that you may not even need a "gaited" trainer, just a good, reputable, natural horsemanship trainer.
- Any gaited trainer should understand the fundamentals of gait correction through **carriage modification**. A horse must be *trained, not fixed*. Mechanical aids (weighted shoes, hoof angle modification, long curb bits) do not train the horse, and will not give you what you're paying for, they are simply short cuts and Band Aids.
- Know exactly how much mechanical influence is acceptable for you, *if any*. For instance: is anything heavier than a keg shoe acceptable to you? Are you comfortable with the use of curb bits? If so, how long of shanks? These are standards you yourself must know and adhere to before you even begin talking with trainers. Note: Do not try to convince a trainer of what you don't want. Trainers are notorious for doing things their own way. *Instead, find a trainer that already agrees with your standards right off.*

- A trainer should ask you about your riding habits, and what issues you feel you're having with your horse, what your riding experience level is, about your horse's history (does he have any "issues" to work through?), in order for him to have a good feel for "your" needs and those of your horse.
- Consider booking a lesson or two with a trainer to watch him/her work ... with other horses as well if possible. Do you agree with this trainer's philosophies? Does he/she answer your questions readily? Do they seem eager to share?
- Do the horses there appear healthy and in good flesh? Do they seem to feel comfortable with their environment, their work routine and this trainer? Do any of them appear to be in any distress for any reason? The horses can tell you a lot if you watch them closely.
- Observe how much of the hands-on work and daily handling is done by the trainer and how much by support staff. *Are you comfortable with this?* (Remember that your horse will be interacting with all of these people so you'll want them all to be competent. Any one of them can mishandle a horse and create a serious problem.)
- Are the facilities clean and *safe?* (*Good fencing, lots of clean water, available shade or shelter, etc.*)
- Are there a reasonable number of horses in training? Do the math... can all the horses reasonably be worked regularly by the trainer at the promised schedule?
- Is management careful about boarding policies? (Health and vaccination records required, regular shoeing and worming schedules maintained?)
- Is the overall environment comfortable and congenial? Do you feel relaxed? Pay attention to your instincts here...they are telling you something!
- Are visitors welcome anytime? Are you invited to drop in and watch your horse being trained?
- There should be a contract spelling out how often your horse will be worked and all contingencies. Read it, know it and above all be comfortable with it. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Good trainers protect themselves as well as their customers with the contract.
- Don't be afraid to ask for references. If they are any good at what they do, they will have plenty of people willing to say so. Many trainers fill their barns solely off of referrals.
- Set goals, discuss with the trainer about your horse reaching a certain point in 60 or 90 days...know that much of this depends on your horse and cannot be guaranteed...but this lets your trainer know that you expect results.
- Make sure the trainer plans to work with you as well. A trained horse is only part of the equation...your trainer must spend at least a few hours teaching you to work with your horse before sending him home with you.
- A good trainer should be willing to offer you even the opinions you really don't want to hear. Your horse's abilities are first defined by his conformation and breeding; training can only enhance natural ability, not create something that isn't there to begin with. A good trainer will honestly evaluate not only the horse's talent but also his temperament. If a trainer tells you early on that your horse is a difficult fit for what you want, you must be prepared to make the decision to persist or rather try to help this horse be the best at what he/she *is* most suited for.
- It is the duty of a trainer to help an owner come into a higher level of partnership with their horse. They will do you no favors in not being honest with you. Unfortunately there are trainers out there that will simply take your money as long as you're willing to pay them, without really helping you or your horse toward this goal. It is, as always, your job to constantly assess if progress is being made.