

Renaissance of a Breed

For those of you not overly familiar with the Walking Horse industry, and the division within the breeders and exhibitors, let me give a brief synopsis, as I see it.....

In the early days of the breed, the walking horse was a family/plantation, all purpose mount, bred for not only smoothness and stamina, but temperament as well. It was prized as a plantation horse and used by owners and overseers to cover hundreds of acres as well as pulling the family buggy for outings. Shod with flat, working horseshoes it exhibited a naturally smooth, 4 beat stride that ate up the miles while not overly tiring the horse. Their stride had a characteristic "swing" to the back legs, without the normal lifting of the hocks that epitomized the "walking" gait. Coupled with the naturally rolling shoulder creating a pulling front step and a headshake originating from the shoulders, it worked all parts with a gliding propulsion. This was a gait uniquely their own, smooth as glass and awesome to watch.

But as with many things, the competitiveness of the show ring brought about changes; some subtle, but many not-so-subtle. Temperament and smoothness of gait began to take a back seat to a showy attitude, swinging backend and most specifically an artificially high, front step. Next was the emergence of the performance (or padded) horse, who's gait evolved to carry large pads and heavy chains on their front feet. Please note: in order to execute a 4 beat walking gait with heavy equipment nailed to their front feet, breeders began to select naturally pacing horses to compensate for the weight of the action devices.

Picture a scale with the hard "pace" at one end and a hard "trot" at the other, with the natural 4 beat flat-walk right in the middle. By manipulating the weight on the front feet, a horse's natural stride can be altered along this scale, changing a natural "pace" into an unnatural walk. A naturally flat-walking horse with pads and chains added to his front feet would begin to trot, therefore in order to compensate, breeders began producing offspring by the thousands, of pacing horses. Ask anyone who knows a true 4-beat flatwalk how hard it is to find one when shopping for a horse in middle Tennessee!

Another side effect of the performance breeding was a gradual decline in the loose rolling shoulder, and naturally stepping horse. Because of the artificial action devices

(and quite often "soring" practices) used to enhance the front step, it quickly became less of a concern to breeders of performance horses to preserve this trait. Additionally, rigid line-breeding to reproduce performance "champions" have produced deterioration in the nature and temperaments of many of these horses. I've seen horses that are downright vicious, used for stud. It became secondary to the show gait.

Bottom line is: can you expect a performance horse WGC, whose gait has been seriously altered through artificial means to pass on natural talent to his get? Serious breeders, looking to actually improve the breed MUST analyze a horse's gait and temperament in a natural state to have the least clue to what he might pass on. But the performance horses are being bred by the thousands each year from sires crowned champions when artificially manipulated. The most promising are culled from the pack for intensive "training" for show and the rest are often tried on "packages" as early as 16-18 mos. old, then dropped down to flat shoes and sold off as "pleasure" horses to an unsuspecting buying public. These are commonly referred to as "barn rejects", and often haven't had a lot of affection and understanding shown to them by their human caregivers, making it very difficult for them to be loving and good natured. In my opinion, however, these are the lucky ones from those barns.

By the 1960's the performance horse had become the "money machine" driving the entire industry, and a generation of breeders, away from producing naturally gaited and even-tempered horses. I won't go into some of the many horror stories of the abusive practices these horses were, and still are, subjected to. Let's just say "it ain't a pretty picture", and now, over 50 years down the line, we have a breed that is much different. It has evolved much pacier and weaker of shoulder than the original foundation stock. The trainers have replaced a natural from-the-shoulder headshake with a mechanically forced and exaggerated high front step and an obscenely twisting and grinding rear "walk". The truly sad thing about all of this is the fact that we have an entire generation of breeders, trainers, riders and judges that not only do not understand how a natural walking horse is supposed to move, but have no clue how to recognize and help develop the truly natural gait in those horses within the breed that still have that foundation talent.

Hope still remains, away from the performance horse "puppy mills", small breeding operations that are dedicated to producing show and pleasure horses for families and the trail riding public that remain true to the authentic gaits of the foundation horses. There are many of us who realize the "barn rejects" from the performance barns constantly flooding the horse-buying market seldom have the characteristics of their foundation ancestors. While many of these horses can make wonderful pleasure mounts with enough love, care and understanding, most do not have the conformations needed for breeding to re-establish the true walking gaits almost lost in recent decades.

But there has begun quite a resurgence of the natural "walking" horse, thanks in much part to groups of individuals, utterly offended by the abuse and politics of the "big-lick" show circuits, that have begun "sound" horse organizations dedicated to promoting and sanctioning horse shows that reward naturally gaited, walking horses. These groups also fight against the abusive practices in the political arena as well; bringing to light the knowledge of "big-lick" barn soring practices, lobbying and supporting USDA efforts to enforce the Horse Protection Act, which came into being in 1970 specifically to protect these horses from soring. Thanks as well to the breeders who are dedicated to seeking out those traits almost lost in decades past, and the few knowledgeable trainers that are trying to get the word out there again on how to develop correct gait. People who raise and train these horses in understanding and loving environments, allowing them to NATURALLY be the best they can.

We are fortunate to be witnesses to a RENAISSANCE of this very special breed. I salute, and seek to join efforts with those individuals striving to preserve a horse very much worth getting back to and worth protecting. A horse with a wonderfully sweet-natured attitude, a big "trying" heart and the most wonderful ride of your life: The Tennessee Walking Horse.

By Anita Howe, owner/trainer