

What Ever Happened to the Flat Foot Walk?

Recently, a number of pleasure walking horse judges were commenting on the most common mistakes they frequently saw exhibitors making in the ring. They all agreed that the wide variations and interpretations of the flatfoot walk (flatfoot walk) seem to be the single biggest area of confusion. While more exhibitors err to the side of too much speed, many also hold back to the point of dog walking around the ring. I, myself, have witnessed both of these mistakes, and feel that because the main 2 gaits for a walking horse are basically the same in form, it makes the judgment of where the flatfoot walk ends and the running walk begins a very subjective call. I'd like to analyze here what I personally interpret, understand and ask my horses for in the three *walking* gaits of the pleasure walking horse. I say three, because I do feel that the trail walk (dog walk) is a legitimate speed as well as a demonstration in training and willing compliance of the horse.

The Trail Walk: This is a slow walk on a loose rein, where the horse is demonstrating completely relaxed frame and a willingness to "wait for further instructions". It's what I think of as the "moseyin' down the trail" speed. It is still a 4 beat, evenly timed walk but the head is in a downward, relaxed carriage and there is little "energy" to the gait. The head nod is there but very subdued, because the stride is not stretching out.

The Flatfoot Walk: This is the next gear, so to speak, and we've all heard how it should be about 3-4 mph. The tempo of the walk picks up a little from the trail walk, but the "energy" and stride lengths increase substantially. The horse is using himself correctly in a lightly collected frame and *really reaching with each stride*. There is no doubt to anyone watching that it is *a gait with purpose* and not just "moseyin' along". The headnod becomes *most prominent* at this walk, because with the tempo still somewhat slower, it allows the horse to work the head and neck deeper in greater counter-balance to the dramatically increased stride. The headnod action aids the driving rear end thrust so the bigger that stride the deeper the corresponding headnod. In my mind I compare it to a person who's walking: you have the strolling along speed (the trail walk); then you have the pump-your-arms and stride big with energy speed (the flatfoot walk). When training my young horses I like to get them in sync with the tempo of my body and then ask them for more reach and stretch, *not* increased tempo. Often their natural inclination when I ask for "more" is to give me a faster tempo, but I keep asking them to slow down the tempo and give me bigger stride, more reach: "Bigger not faster". Also this is when a horse really strides out and engages his energy at this slower tempo will produce that thump-thump-thump-thump sound of the flatfoot walk. While giving us more energy at that slower speed is when we start hearing the resounding footfalls as each hoof lands flat; it's where the name came from! It's exciting, and you'll know your horse is really working the flatfoot walk well when you hear this.

The Running Walk: The running walk is built on the foundation of the flatfoot walk in that it is the same gait at a faster speed and tempo. A horse should already be giving you their greatest stretch and reach in their stride at the flatfoot walk; we then just ask them to increase tempo and speed *while maintaining that form*. The function and use of the body remain the same: the evenly timed, four-beat, headshaking stride becomes a quicker, intermediate gait. A horse learns the running walk from the flatfoot walk; in developing the muscles and coordination to carry it faster and faster. But keep in mind, the running walk is *not* a speed gait; it was bred into these horses to cover miles and miles in an energy efficient manner. It should average from 8 to 12 mph, depending on the muscle development *and size of the horse*. In surpassing this speed, a horse almost always loses the form. The foot support must remain 2 foot-3 foot-2 foot-3 foot as with the slower walks. There should never be suspension or jog to the weight transfer; all energy should be used for forward propulsion, and not lift.

So how did we seem to lose the flatfoot walk? Is it a result of wanting to get the "gait" too quickly: are we so eager to get a running walk that we just sort of slide right past the flatfoot walk? Maybe it's from the influence of performance horse training and competitions where young colts are pushed for speed in order to add pace and swing to their gait. Wherever we lost it, we must find it and bring it back. *The flatfoot walk is the foundation of the gaits for this breed*. In my opinion it is so essential that I believe all young horses should be flatfoot walked, almost exclusively, in their first year under saddle. Good muscle development at this gait will make the running walk even better and easier for the horse. The benefits are numerous:

- A well executed flatfoot walk, engaging the correct frame and carriage will be the most evenly timed gait. Once it's well established, this timing will naturally want to carry forward as the horse increases its speed and should help prevent the horse from breaking gait as it moves up in speed.
- Bigger stride and reach can be developed at the flatfoot walk better than at any other speed on a horse that doesn't really want to stride out for you. Most of us have seen those walking horses that want to shorten their stride as they increase their tempo to kick up into a running walk. We end up with a racky gait rather than the running walk we want. Remember to ask your horse for bigger, not faster.
- Working at the flatfoot walk is the single best natural horsemanship tool to correct off-gaited horses. If they naturally want to pace, trot or rack at first, a good flatfoot walk will teach, develop and cement the correct form and carriage for what will later become the running walk.
- It's an easy and pleasurable gait for the horse while still efficiently covering a lot of ground for the rider. We've all probably been trail riding with other breeds that just can't keep up with a walking horse at the walk, they just don't have the stride. This breed can just keep going and going.....

- A nice slower tempo at the flatfoot walk will then provide a more dramatic increase in speed when the running walk is asked for in the ring. Remember *to keep the energy, stride and headnod big*, when asking for that slower tempo.

I want to encourage everyone to focus on this gait and give it the importance that it deserves in developing their walking horses. I would like to someday see all show classes for young horses (3 and under) require only the trail walk and flatfoot walk, and save the speedier running walk for the Jr. Horse and older classes. It's that important. Everything else is built upon it and the coordination and muscles take time for many of these horses to develop. In order to do it faster they must first do it right!

by Anita Howe, owner/trainer