

The Running Walk

The running walk is a gait that was bred into the walking horse and avidly trained for as the breed developed in the late 1800's and early 1900's and became the most desired choice for traveling salesmen, plantation owners, itinerant doctors and preachers who needed to cover many miles each day. These people realized the benefits of a smooth, ground covering and energy efficient gait on a horse that could continue almost tirelessly in a relaxed, mile-eating stride. The breed developed from crossing long-striding pacers with sturdy trotter breeds to have a horse that was multi-faceted, loose moving as well as calm natured.

In recent decades however, much of the breeding practices have evolved toward the performance show horse whose gait have been artificially enhanced for the show ring. Unfortunately, the characteristics that made this horse such a prize for both work and pleasure in the past were seen less and less, along with those trainers who understood how to develop the horses for their natural gaiting abilities. So much so, in fact, that there is tremendous confusion today, even among those who own and breed these horses about exactly how a walking horse should be gaiting! Many owners are not certain that their horses are performing this gait correctly.

Some claim that the running walk is a lateral gait, while others will say that it is more toward the diagonal. The reality is that it is *neither*. It is an evenly timed, square, four cornered gait; that with *slight* collection of a *neutral* frame allows the horse to use its head and shoulders in counter-balance to drive the backend with a "pump-handle" headshaking motion. You should hear an even "thump-thump-thump-thump" as it strides along, each foot lifting and hitting in *even and independent timing*. When the horse is correctly executing a flatfoot walk the sound is often so bold and pronounced that it's hard to believe that the horse is simply walking as each footfall hits flat with a resounding "thump". The head-shake is most prominent during the flatfoot walk as the slower tempo allows a deeper motion while the horse extends in its mighty stride. The running walk then carries that same form and speeds up the tempo. As that happens the head-shake must become more shallow at the faster tempo, but should still be evident and always from the shoulder, never from the poll. It is the neutral spine carriage and the even timing of the footfalls that allow the horse to work its head in such a pronounced, bold rhythm. The neutral spine plus the *relaxed and rolling* hips and shoulders allow the head and neck weight to counterbalance and drive the rear "power engine" of the back legs. If the horse gets tense; locks the spine, the hips or the shoulders, then the gait changes. Even if it remains even in timing it will become more racky as the horse will begin to suspend its weight from hoof to hoof rather than have the relaxed and energy efficient weight transfer of a true walk. This tension will immediately cause the head to cease it's headnod, it's power will no longer be driving



the backend. This is why the old saying is still as true today as ever *"If he ain't noddin', he ain't walkin'!"*

The over-all picture of a correctly executed running walk becomes one of smooth, effortless and rolling forward motion. It is evident that it is pleasurable for both the horse and the rider. The neutral carriage allows the horse to remain relaxed with no wasted energy on suspension. In this manner dozens of miles can be covered with much less tiring than other breeds and other gaits.

The running walk should never be considered a speed gait. It is the most energy efficient manner that a horse can propel himself over great distances when alternating with the flatfoot walk for recovery. The weight transfer from foot to foot is smooth and without any suspension (jog) as a walk should be. The horse wastes no effort in moving his weight up, only forward. The body support during the hoof rotation in a correctly executed flatfoot walk and running walk is 2 feet--3 feet--2 feet--3 feet. While the flatfoot walk is usually considered to be about 3 - 4 mph, a running walk should be slightly more than double that speed, staying at about 8-10 mph depending on the size, conformation and development of the horse, but *should never losing form*. To surpass those speeds the horse would need to lock up his spine and suspend himself (jog) to cover more ground more quickly. This locked frame not only often creates a hollow carriage and alter the gait into a pace, a rack or a trot, but that locked frame and upward suspension results in wasted energy! It is with horses moving in this incorrect manner that many trainers of today will attempt to modify the gait using weighted shoes, abnormal hoof angles as well as severe biting in effort to create more front lift and "break up" the lateral pace to create a smooth ride. They *cannot create a correct running walk through artificial manipulation*. You must retrain the horse to correctly carry himself. Most trainers do not have the knowledge needed to do this and will instead attempt to "fix" the horse using these artificial means.

To the naked eye at speed, a correct running walk will often appear slightly to the diagonal in timing, but in reality it is solidly even (square). Once you know what to look for it is easy to spot a horse in correct timing, even from a simple photo. Correct timing will always have the front and rear strides working evenly and independently. When a rear foot touches down, meaning they are at their point of "weight transfer", the front feet should be precisely in mid-stride. The front, weight bearing hoof will be directly beneath the point of the shoulder as well as the non-weight bearing hoof being exactly mid-stride (again directly beneath the shoulder) coming forward. Correspondingly, the rear hoof should be exactly in mid-stride beneath the point of the hip, when the front hooves are at their "weight transfer" point: this is the "3 feet on the ground" moment.

We've found that these horses can gait easier with naturally short toes, either barefoot or keg shod, and using snaffle bits and mild curbs. We believe that too many people actually *inhibit* their horse's ability to correctly running walk with the use of long-shank curb bits, weighted shoes at unnatural angles, poorly fit saddles, as well as poorly balanced riding habits.

At Howe They Walk Farm, we have dedicated ourselves to reclaiming the signature pleasure gaits of this breed, as well as to educating people in what to look for and expect from their own horses. We stress that it is the horse who must learn to carry himself in a balanced and lightly collected posture to perform a correct flatfoot walk, and rocking chair canter in the relaxed and energy efficient manner that was always the foundation of this breed. If a trainer is using restrictive tack to "bind the horse into his frame" or feels the need to use weighted shoes, unsound hoof angles and severe bits to "help" a horse gait correctly, they are greatly missing the mark, and you should look elsewhere for advice.

Don't despair! Each of these horses has the ability to perform these gaits within their conformational limits. Some will do it quicker and with less training; some will do it bigger, stride further and with more animation, and some may take some patience on your part to find it, having developed all the wrong muscles for many years, but they *can all do it!* Unfortunately, much of the present day breeding practices wrongly focus on the pacing horse, in hopes improving prospects for the performance show horse: to the extent that many of the walking horses of today are becoming less and less *easily* trained to gait naturally or in correct form; and at such a time when the trainers who understand exactly how these horses need to move, are seriously few. The number of walking horses incorrectly pacing, step-pacing or racking is vast and increasing with each breeding season. They *can* be taught and retrained with patience. Take the time to learn first what your horse should be doing, then how to go about helping him understand and do it.

We also are dedicating our breeding program at Howe They Walk Farm to producing horses that gait naturally, with *inherited* ease; requiring less and less "training". We are backtracking to the breeding goals of the early 1900's, where big, loose, naturally square stride as well as gentle temperament and intelligent disposition are the characteristics of choice. We encourage anyone considering breeding walking horses to look first and foremost to natural gaiting ability, for the sake of the horses.

Good luck on your journey to learn and let us help if we can. Feel free to contact us with your questions.

by Anita Howe, Owner/trainer

(See videos for examples of correct running walk)