

Is it a Walk or is it a Rack?

I've watched many, many walking horses on the rails as well as out on the trails. I know many folks who are very adamant that their walkers must be able to rack, because they want that extra boost of speed at times on the trail that the running walk simply doesn't provide. I think it's great that they realize that it is a rack they want, but also that the rack is a speedier, but still very smooth, pleasure gait. But it has troubled me for some time that there are far too many walking horses maintaining a racky carriage while in the ring where they are supposed to be judged on their correct performance of the signature walking horse gaits. Even more disturbing are the number of judges willing to tie those same horses in the ribbons.

I'll be the first to admit that I'm a purist when it comes to the gaits of the walking horse. So much so that I personally do not feel there is a single padded horse out there who is executing a correct gait. Unfortunately, due to the vast influence of these performance horses this racky carriage has become completely acceptable in most show rings throughout the country. To the extent that anyone not seeking to analyze the history of the breed and their signature gaits, probably won't realize these thousands of horses labeled as "show horses" aren't actually runwalking, but doing a variation of a rack. While many of us have noticed on the subtle changes in style of gaiting throughout the last 60 years, I haven't heard anyone actually quantify or identify exactly what these gaits have "morphed" into.

- Probably the single most obvious alteration is dramatically reduced headshake: stiff carriage, where the spine is locking the head to the back.
- Another very dramatic (but less commented on) change is the move to the much more lateral pickup and placement in footfall, along with the more hollow spine.
- Today's walking horse is expected to snap it's front feet higher, in a more bicycling motion, foregoing forward reach in search of lift.
- You hear how the walking horse is supposed to carry it's head held high...and if it isn't, you're told to pull it up using the ever-popular walking horse bit. You're told it's to encourage your horse to move back on its rear and get light on the front.

Well let me quantify and define for you exactly what each and every one of these changes reflect. The vast majority of our modern day walkers are now racking instead of run-walking. All of the above characteristics are very defining of the rack, or single-foot gait. You must realize of course there are many varied executions of a rack: from the Saddlebreds to the Rocky Mountain horses, the Spotted Saddle horses, the Icelandics and even the McCurdy Plantation horses. Most gaited breeds can, and in fact often do, perform some variation of a rack. But the most telltale characteristic within each of these is that single-foot suspension during the footfall rotation. Couple that with the slightly hollow spine, the high "motionless" head carriage and the lift and fold of the bicycling front feet and the conclusion is inescapable.

What has always troubled me, from my very first reading of the gait descriptions in both show rules (even NHSC show rules) as well as histories on this breed, is that they've always describe a head-shake originating from the shoulder as well as that the rolling and reaching of the front feet should be "like a person climbing a ladder". It bothered me tremendously that what I would see in the show rings never seemed to coincide with those descriptions. I saw horses that had just a hint of a head shake, but it always appeared that their neck and spine stayed in alignment with each other at all times. So I went to the video, both of modern day "show horses" as well as that from old film of the foundation bred horses in the 30's and 40's. I watched in slow motion, and then using freeze frame I found the culprit.

The "slight" head shake we so commonly see in the show rings is more often a result of a front feet jogging (suspending) so that the up and down momentum of the jog is carried right through those locked up shoulders into the head and neck. Sometimes you will see some additional downward motion of the head and neck from the impact of that jog; you actually do get some slight shoulder flexion from that motion, but it's mostly the downward momentum of the head/neck weight carrying through (more reaction to the jog than purposeful utilization of the counter-balance). But what struck me even more than the incorrect use of the carriage in these walking horses was that very same front end "jog" needed to be executed with a stiff (and usually hollow) spine in order to suspend the weight of the horse during the "jog". *Then* the final indictment of this off-gait became apparent with the freeze-frame realization that during that suspension in the front, there is a moment when both feet are suspended off of the ground and the rear feet are somewhere in mid-stride. It gives the horse a single-foot suspension, with all

it's weight being supported by one back foot. There it was, right before my eyes. These horses are racking. No other conclusion can be drawn, but that this is an off-gait for this breed. It becomes apparent why we have seen these many changes I've noted above.

So I began asking myself, how could this have happened to this breed. I am constantly finding (and realizing) new contributing factors to this "morphed" gait.

The overall desire for more front foot lift should carry the most blame: a bicycling racky front will almost always give more fold at the fetlock; more "break" with the feet. This jogging motion also results in front suspensions helping the hoof come off the ground higher. We all realize this is why the soring and padding of this breed came into being: to force the horse to pick it's foot up higher at all costs.

The artificial means used to train this lift may be why we have seen the evolution of the "walking horse bit" becoming more and more severe. The need to "frame up" a walking horse (it's really more of a cramming than a framing) to pull his front up and try and force more weight to the hind quarters. This attempt to manipulate head carriage higher and higher literally pulls the horses spine into the very hollowness that creates the off-gaitedness. That's why despite the severe shanks and leverage on these bits, you still often see these horses traveling in a nosed-out frame.

The practice of starting these walking horses at such young ages is also significant in contributing to this evolution of gaits. When a young, undeveloped horse is asked to carry such extreme weight (both in shoes and pads on their feet as well as the adult riders on their backs) they haven't the muscles and strength to carry it without locking the spine for support. That locked spine not only loses the neutral walking frame but often creates the very hollowness that produces both the rack and the pace.

I would even go so far as to say that probably all of the multitude of abuses currently seen in this breed can be traced right back to the desire to manipulate a loose moving, ground covering, energy efficient, very smooth, intermediate gait into a flashier, higher stepping and speedier gait for the show ring.

But what they *just don't get* is that it is no longer a runwalk. They can call it whatever they want, but they've changed it into another variation of a gait performed by the large majority of other gaited breeds; the rack. They're losing the very uniqueness of this breed in an effort to compete for the horse show crowds, and it's been happening for so many decades that the huge majority of owners, exhibitors and even the trainers of today's walking horse world don't realize they are so far off the mark.

What makes the runwalk so unique?

- First and foremost it is *still a walk*. Study every four-legged animal out there and how they execute a walk...it's a one, two, three, four lift and placement of each foot individually. There are reasons for this.
- A walk is a relaxed method of forward propulsion: *no wasted effort* in using a stiff spine for upward suspension. This also makes it the most energy efficient method to move forward on four legs. So that a horse who can increase up to an intermediate speed while utilizing this efficient method of propulsion, will be able to maintain it longer and further than other gaits.
- This is the reason that an elephant will runwalk...it's the only way it can move its massive weight forward with much speed without suspension. This lack of suspension is characteristic and *essential* to this gait: a 2-foot, 3-foot, 2-foot, 3-foot support sequence.... *No single-foot suspension!*
- The walk of a walking horse is so unique to this breed because of the *length of stride*. Every breed of horse out there can walk, but a walking horse covers such huge amounts of ground with each rotation of their stride that other breeds have a very difficult time in keeping up on the trail. The others must move up into their intermediate gaits (usually the trot) to keep up with a walking horse at it's flatfoot walk.
- When executing a correct flatwalk and runwalk, the deep headshake of a walking horse is a direct result of the counter-balance use of weight to increase its huge stride. Go try to stride big yourself without pumping your arms as a counter balance: you *can* do it but it won't feel right or comfortable. The head and neck of the horse dips down as the back foot reaches and stretches up underneath the body, allowing a much bigger reach and stride. The head and neck then thrusts upward as that foot pulls backward, adding momentum, leverage and power to the thrust until that foot aligns with the opposite foot swinging forward. At which point the head moves down again (resets) with *that* foot's reach under the body. This then is how you can determine if a headshake is

resulting from correct use of the body. Careful observation will reveal to you if the head and neck are being used to counter-balance to the striding rear-end or incorrectly as a result of the impact from "jogging" front feet.

This is the "connectedness" of a correctly executed walk. That driving back stride utilizing the leverage and power of the rest of the body in order to increase the length of stride and reach. This is in direct opposition to a horse who is moving faster in a pace or rack, and where their body must lock up for suspension and support.

While other gaited breeds are smooth and many are faster in the shorter distances, the walking horse was bred to cover many miles in it's smooth gait. To go each day as far as needed without over tiring its self as well as wearing out its rider. It was bred to go for the long haul.

by Anita Howe, owner/trainer