

Collection vs. Headset in Gaited Horses



Gaited horse owners often hear the advice to "*set his head and collect 'im up!*" Not knowing any better, far too many are willing to follow this instruction. After all, isn't that what the "bit" was designed to do? But what is collection, and what role should it play with my horse's gaits? What does headset actually do for him and why?

Headset and framed-in hyperflexion of gaited horses is being routinely used to break up the lateral two-beat pace into a not-quite-so-lateral four beat stepping pace or rack in both pleasure and show horses. While it may break up the pace it by no means makes the horse evenly 4 beat. The perpetrators of this totally mechanical manipulation use it to encourage a racky lift and fold in the front legs, increasing the arc of those feet to delay

their placement which allows the back feet to plant ahead of the fore, thereby "breaking up" the pace to smooth the ride. But as far as the horse's posture and biomechanics, he's STILL PACING! A further side effect of this framing is a snappier fold and knee lift for the show ring. Wow, a two-fer! But is this truly collection? I've often wondered if they just don't know any better, or are attempting to somehow legitimize their riding technique by calling it collection, but nothing could actually be further from reality. Call it what it is "Headset"... In my opinion, a four letter word! It is uncomfortable for the horse, distorts his balance and ability to move in fluid release, compromises his athleticism and ability to recover balance after a stumble or maneuver. It further causes the rider to brace against the bit and sit chair-seat to offset that pressure. He, like the horse becomes less responsive and able to counterbalance athletic movement. In

the gaited horse it also interferes with his ability to utilize his fore and hind in a coordinated manner. It "cuts the horse in half" which is why so many cannot even back up properly in this posture. Their fore and hind are disconnected.

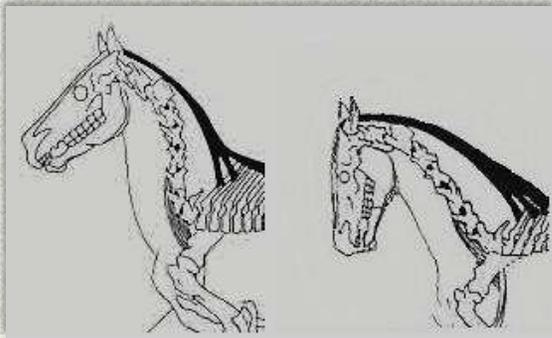
Collection is either real or not; and if it is real, where on the scale of "light" to "high" collection does it fall? True collection is not a product of pulling in the headset, or "framing" up a horse, but comes from *self-carriage, balance and posture*. It is a gathering of the horse's body starting from the hocks, through the croup, spine and finally the neck, all the way to the nose. He must *pull himself in* to offer the rider energy balanced over all four hooves, preparing for movement. It's something that is *given* by the horse when "asked" for, not forced or held in by the rider. The neck should be gracefully arched from the *wither all the way through the poll in a continuous sweeping line*.

To grasp what true collection is I use the analogy of a little league baseball player. The first time a young child tries to swing a bat in T-ball, his coach must help him position his body to make a proper swing at the ball. As he gains experience, the child learns not to simply stand there on flat feet holding up the bat. He learns to flex his knees, roll up on the balls of his feet, shift his weight onto his back foot and leans his upper torso forward in anticipation. He "gathers" and coils himself to add power, smoothness, speed and accuracy to his forward swing. This is similar to what your horse should do when collecting to engage with impulsion and energy. Collection in an equine is defined as a rounding, gathering or shortening of the body. A horse must gather himself starting at his croup... his sacral/caudal arch of the spine behind the lumbar/sacral joint. Basically he must first tuck his hind, or coil his loins... whatever terminology you prefer to use. This aligns the hind legs more beneath the body nearer the midline. But this is only the beginning of collection, a.k.a. light collection or rear engagement. There are two more areas of collection: the core (thoraco-lumbar arch) and the base of the neckline (cervical arch). With each of these



designating an additional level of collection so that any single arch quantifies light collection, two arches is moderate collection and all three arches create high collection. Each level of collection enables greater balance; meaning the horse self carries his, and the rider's weight between all four legs more equally than when standing quietly. Indeed, in high collection for brief moments he is able to shift his weight greater on the hind.

A little league coach can instruct a batter to position his body all day and still get a lifeless, unbalanced swing without much power. Something similar to this happens when a horse travels while being framed into *false* collection with an inverted and hollow core and an overly flexed high neck at the poll. This inversion causing the hind to be abducted out behind means he not only has difficulty in finding a correctly even four-beat gait, but sacrifices balanced impulsion as well. Usually the rider *believes* he is collecting the horse by pulling his nose into "headset", after all that's what we've always been told by people who have owned, bred and ridden these horses for generations. We constantly see riders forcing headset using serious leverage from curb bits in an effort to frame a vertical face. These riders are unknowingly jamming the horse into the bit and actually restricting his ability to lift the base of his neck with the hyperflexion of the first 4 vertebrae. Pulling the head up in this manner actually causes the spine to invert and hollow out, which in turn *encourages* that more lateral two-beat pace. It becomes a catch-22 with the rider jamming the horse more and more firmly until finally the horse begins jogging his front feet in a higher, racking manor breaking it into a stepping pace to finally smooth the ride. This then seems to confirm in the rider's mind that he must be doing things correctly. It becomes a complete picture for those that recognize the story it tells: weak, flat neckline just in front of the withers; over-flexion just behind the poll with resistance muscles bulging along the front of the neck while the head is held overly high for the horse's conformation; producing the infamous "U" neck that in reality indicates that a horse is locked from jaw throughout their shoulders and sternum. These horses are trying vainly to find relief from the severe curb action by holding their mouth behind the bit. What we need to look for is a horse's neck showing a nicely engaged arch from lifted withers to the nose indicating good self-carriage and allowing a natural rolling motion in the shoulders extending forward reach, not upward knee brake and rack.



Then there is the concern of how much collection do we want and need for our gaited horses? *Any horse moves around all the time in a four-beat walk with absolutely no collection.* So you need to understand that collection isn't *necessary* for a trail walk or flatwalk, and even a moderate speed runwalk, but as speed increases more collection allows the horse to maintain correctness. For any of the walking gaits, engagement of the hindquarters is essential. As speed

increases, it becomes more important to gain lightness of the fore which is aided by rounding of the croup and the lifting of the base of the neck/sternum area. Without this lightness a horse will tend to throw their center mass forward, making hind engagement more and more difficult. Most will get strung out behind as they tilt onto the fore. Without direction from the rider they will then tend to counterbalance by lifting the head and fall further into inverted ventroflexion and pace. Maintaining level neckline with softened poll enables the lift at the neck base that will promote balanced self carriage and enable greater speed of a four-beat easy gait. The running walk and even a correctly even rack is aided by a lightness of the base of the neck. In fact any substantial speed at four beat gait maintains better form with this lightness. Important NOTE: this is a lift that cannot be forced or framed by the rider, but must be offered by a properly balanced horse! To summarize, light to moderate collection is best for our easy gaited horses; lighter at slower speeds and more moderate as speed increases.

We do not require our gaited horses to achieve high or total collection, because most any horse will end up trotting in complete collection with the rounding of their core, thoraco-lumbar arch. High collection occurs with significant "rounding up" in all three arches of the spine, and the pulling in of the back feet, croup and neck. High collection is what the dressage horses are drilled to work in. But most of us don't want our gaited horses moving in a trot. One exception to this rule is for a controlled and deliberate 3 beat canter... greater collection at the canter departure is very helpful. This is one reason so many of our gaited riders have difficulty in achieving this gait with their horse; they do not realize they are not really collected and hence their horse has tremendous difficulty in correct canter departure. They usually end up with a lateral,

four beat pace-lope or gallop rather than the true collected, rocking chair canter their gaited horse is capable of.

The gaited horse needs to learn to carry the walking gait first to develop the muscle memory for evenly four-beat coordination. He can then be asked to add light collection while maintaining this correct gait. The horse should keep a neutral core for the evenly timed leg sequencing; neither hollowed nor rounded, but should be encouraged to tuck the croup to maintain backend engagement. He should learn to arch the neck in a graceful and continuous line that opens the base of the neck for easy lifting that is critical to lightness of the fore. This neck carriage will release those muscles directly in front of the withers for proper development as the head nod works from the rolling and reaching shoulders. Overall this is as much true collection as I recommend for most gaited horses until they are reaching advanced speeds. When a horse uses his core in either a hollowed or rounded carriage he more solidly connects his front feet with his back feet to push his gait toward either a trot or a pace.

My primary point being that forcing false collection is the absolute last thing to do to *cure* the pace and get a properly balanced gaited horse. False collection creates more problems than it resolves, never mind the fact that the horse is off-gaited, stiff, heavy on the fore and uncomfortable to boot. The first thing I do with any horse entering into training is put a snaffle bit and ask for a lower head so the poll becomes level with the withers... neutral, relaxed. The next step is ask for softening of the poll, or vertical flexion... again, I ask for this never force or frame it. When the horse gifts me with correct posture I immediately release all pressure to make this a positive reinforcement and encourage the horse to maintain the posture. From this posture a horse can more easily learn to find and keep a neutral core and I should feel the tension release and feel the stride go to even timing as the head begins to nod productively as the energy flows from hindquarters forward. It often takes months to develop the muscle memory for this gait to be automatic and consistent. The length of time is directly dependent on how habituated the off-gait stiffness has become and for how long a horse has been moving incorrectly. It is up to the rider to learn to ride with release, using productive aids to ask the horse for appropriate posture, not force or frame. The horse will eventually be able to lift its head up higher into a more natural carriage as the correct muscles develop and the movement becomes cemented into muscle memory.

True, moderate collection can be a good thing for gait when it's given by the horse. I hope I've illustrated that the false collection of inverted core and "U" neck is a flag for incorrect movement and uncomfortable posture. Successfully asking and releasing your horse into his authentic gaits will produce not only correct carriage but muscle definition that indicates our gaited horses are using themselves correctly. The old "*collect 'im up*" attitude with the infamous gaited horse bits has done quite a disservice to these breeds and riders as a whole. We need to move this bit of "sage old wisdom" into the myth-and-misinformation category as we embrace a softer, more athletic and balanced gaited horse that is suited for so much more than going in a straight line around an arena.

For even greater detail and understanding of the biomechanics of collection I want to encourage you to stop in and read *THE BEST ARTICLE* out there on TRUE COLLECTION written by Dr. Deb Bennett. Go to her web page <http://www.equinestudies.org/> to follow the navigation bars.