

# trailBLAZER

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DOES YOUR  
HORSE HAVE A  
**REVERSE?**

**12 BURNING  
QUESTIONS:**  
EXPERTS ANSWER  
READER QUESTIONS  
ABOUT **HORSE TRAILERS**

**PLUS...**

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how to **SIGNAL** for help in the backcountry

from colic surgery to the president's cup:

**THE STORY OF HANK & JONNI**

CELEBRATING 32 YEARS SERVING THE  
RECREATIONAL & COMPETITION TRAIL RIDER

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Dating through the snow on a glorious winter day.  
Photo by Eugeny Goltsov

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getting into the

HOW TO  
IMPROVE YOUR  
GAITED HORSE'S  
NATURALLY  
GIVEN WAY OF  
GOING

A

BY RHONDA HART

Gaited horses come as naturally to their gaits as nongaited horses come to theirs. That is not nearly as simplistic as it sounds. Consider a high school level dressage horse and all the variances he must perform at the trot. Some are looser than others, some need more work to bring out extension or to round up to collection. So it is with the gaited horse; they are born to a paso llano, rack or fox trot, etc. only to improve or decline with training, intentionally or otherwise.

**Editor's Note:** In the October 2009 issue, we looked at the five basic gaits of gaited horses: running walk, fox trot, stepping pace, saddle rack and tree rack. This month we continue by examining ways in which the rider can help the horse bring out the best in his gaits.

Easy gaits were considered undesirable in Morgans for so long that they were routinely trained out of individuals that offered them. Also, collection diminishes the horse's physical ability to perform certain lateral gaits because the horse's back needs to hollow and his head and shoulders rise. While a horse's head can be crammed into a false headset at virtually any gait, the quality of gait suffers if he is not allowed to use his body as he naturally would.

Recognizing that some horses just move better than others, how then does one help improve a horse's naturally given gaits? (Note: many horses can perform multiple easy gaits.)

#### CONDITIONING IS KEY

Aside from choosing a horse with the proper breeding and conformation to perform the gait you want in the first place, conditioning is key. Miles at the walk are the best, especially for a young or inexperienced horse. Walking is the "mother gait" of all easy gaits, as the footfall sequence is identical in a walk—conventionally stated as right hind, right front, left hind, left front—to all other easy gaits. So the more he practices those footfalls the more "locked in" they will become.

The two most common complaints are of horses tending to be trotty or pacy, i.e. either too diagonal or too lateral.

continued next page



The Paso Fino Incognito de la Isla (ridden here by Joel Conde) is 2009 National Champion 3 year old Pleasure Gelding, and the 2009 4th Grand National Champion Pleasure Gelding. His owners Andy Ackerman & Amy Rubenstein love to take him out trail riding as often as possible!  
PHOTO BY ANDY ACKERMAN



Kentucky's native gaited Mountain Horses have become favorites across the country for their beauty, athleticism, and smooth, four-beat gait. ST Tipton and his dog Duke, take their Kentucky Mountain horse Blue on Black out for a fall river ride. PHOTO BY VERA PATTERSON

Sometimes the result is just fine to ride, but often it feels disjointed and rough. While everything from saddles and restraints to weighted shoes has been used to manipulate gait, the best way is to help the horse carry himself in a way that makes choosing the gait you want the most comfortable thing for him to do. Remember a horse will try whatever's easiest first, and if you reward him for it—instantly praise him and give him a break—he'll try it again and again. You can gradually build up how long he maintains the gait you want.

To get a neutral to rounder gait, such as a running walk or a fox trot, encourage a little rounding of the back. Be sure the horse can stretch and use his body. Don't let him raise his head high, because that drops his back and forces him into a lateral/pacey gait. Pacey horses can be ridden through deep footing or over freshly plowed fields or worked up inclines to encourage them to square up their gait. A trotting horse will often square up into a fox trot or running walk when asked for speed going downhill. It just feels more stable to him.

## CHOOSE YOUR GAITING PLAN

That brings us to choosing gaits. Like the difference between the gearing in a sports car and a farm truck, you'll want to use the "gear" most suitable for the way you ride. If you are in a big hurry to get down the trail as fast as possible, then the thrill of a speed rack is for you. Just be sure you ride on predominantly level, groomed trails. At speed and in a hollow frame, the horse has a more difficult time seeing what's directly in front of him and will have a tough time negotiating any obstacles that suddenly loom up.

If you like a little less speed or just have more time to tarry, consider a horse that does a rack, stepping pace or fox trot. These gaits are all far smoother than a trot, but be aware that the more lateral the gait, the more stressful it is to his body. Limit stretches of gaiting in a rack or stepping

pace—on a well-conditioned horse—to no more than 15 minutes at a time with walking, or if possible trotting, breaks in between to help relieve muscle tension.

The saddle rack and running-walk are the smoothest gaits for the rider, and since they each have two or three feet on the ground at all times, are the most stable of the easy gaits. They are appropriate for slightly more irregular ground, but still should not be overused, especially in challenging terrain. And as common sense has probably already told you, if you are riding in tough terrain, on steep trails or in uncertain footing, the best gait of all is that glorious, ordinary, flat-footed walk.

## CONFORMATION COUNTS

Gaited horses are a great boon to those of us who don't recover as quickly from a jarring trot as we used to, or who just prefer the smooth ride, but know this—there are trade-offs.

Like all horses, gaited breeds have their issues, and it pays to do your homework. One common frustration is that extreme conformational flaws are passed off as "necessary to gait." Bunk! A horse no more needs sickle-hocks, cow-hocks, ewe-neck, a long back or long, weak pasterns to gait than you need physical deformities to dance. And certainly none of these faults will make him any stronger or safer as a trail horse.

Two conformational exceptions are the position of the lumbo-sacral (L5) junction (where the last lumbar vertebra meets the sacrum) and the depth/angle of the hind-quarters. The farther back the lumbo-sacral junction in relation to the point of the hip, the longer the lumbar span (loins) and easier it is for the horse to hollow his back in order to perform lateral gaits. This is usually



The Mangalarga Marchador horses are known for setting the Guinness Book of World Records endurance ride of 8,694 miles in 1994. A perfect trail horse, they also excel in other disciplines that require agility, stamina, speed and a sound mind. John Kelley riding his Marchador, Artemis in Colorado.  
PHOTO BY LYNN KELLEY

paired with a slightly shorter, steeper hip, with the hip socket placed towards the back of the pelvis. Again, extremes are counter-productive; you don't want a long back, just a slightly longer lumbar span.

While shopping for a gaited horse should certainly begin with investigating the various breeds, be aware that breed by no means guarantees gait. Years ago, so many Tennessee Walking Horses preferred to rack that the Racking Horse Breeders' Association of America was formed to nurture and take advantage of that gait.

If breed is important to you, decide which attributes of the breed mean the most, because the gait comes with the individual horse, not the papers. You can find lovely Morgans that rack or fox trot, Quarter Horses that do a passable stepping pace, members of the various Mountain Horse breeds that can do a multitude of gaits and just about any other unexpected combination you can think of.

So the next time you hear some outrageous claim that such-and-such breed does a gait that no other horse does, remember, no matter where it originated, no matter what fancy add-ons it has, or what they call it, there are only five basic gaits between a trot and a hard pace.



Rhonda Hart is the author of *Trail Riding: Train, Prepare, Pack Up & Hit the Trail* and for seven years was Editor of *The Gaited Horse* magazine. She lives in Washington state, where she enjoys gardening, riding and writing.



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