

Convert That Trot

by Lee Ziegler

It doesn't happen very often, but sometimes a gaited horse isn't as 'gaited' as he should be. Some of them just seem to prefer to hard trot most or even all of the time. These horses are not as difficult to deal with as their pacing cousins, but they can be frustrating, especially for riders who have bought gaited horses in the hopes of never having to deal with a hard trot again.

Horses trot for the same reasons they do any other gait – their conformation, body position, muscle use and neurological “wiring” incline them to do the gait. For a gaited bred horse that trots, in addition to these factors, there may also be a lack of rhythm that causes the horse to miss out on the special harmony that should produce his easy gait.

Conformation that inclines to a trot:

Horses with functional backs that are shorter than the average for their breed will often trot. Horses with relatively short lumbar spans (the vertebrae between the last rib and the lumbo-sacral junction) will also be more inclined to trot. Low headed horses that stretch easily forward will also be more inclined to trot than higher headed types. Horses with hind and front legs that are about the same length, elbow to ground and stifle to ground, may be inclined to trot.

Body/muscle use that inclines to a trot:

Horses with slightly rounded backs, and stretched topline will be inclined to trot.

Horses that easily tip their pelvises downward and flex downward from the lumbo-sacral junction will be inclined to trot. Horses that have, either through training or through natural proportions, learned to travel with the root of their neck raised, head and neck lowered, and an elastic back will be inclined to trot.

Depending on which gait you want to end up with, there are a couple of strategies that will help a trotty horse develop more of an easy gait. First, help him develop more rhythm in the gaits he does offer, and second, help him learn to carry his body in a different way that will foster the easy gaits you want.

THE TROTTY WALKING HORSE

Work the walk: Most Walking Horses that insist on trotting do not have very well-developed walks or flat walks. To help these horses develop rhythm and the ability to work with more speed in an even four beat gait, start at the slowest of the walks. Riding in a snaffle bit or a bitless rig such as a sidepull, walk at a slow ordinary walk or “dog walk”, up and down slight grades if you can, asking the horse to use his body and stretch out his neck, relaxing his neck and back muscles. To do this, keep your hands low, on either side of his withers, and sit straight on his back, with no tension in your torso or legs. Follow the flow of his gait with your seat, but do not “belly dance” as you do it, just stay relaxed and quiet in the saddle. Try to keep his speed even, not speeding up or slowing down as the terrain changes. Gradually work on lengthening his stride or steps in the dog walk, first pushing with your seat (shove down slightly with your seatbones as he moves) and then squeezing with your legs at every other step as each hind hoof hits the ground. This will work to help the horse push off with his hind hooves, and increase the energy he puts into forward motion. Be sure not to allow him to speed up or hurry his step as you do this. Be ready to check him if he tries to rush, with a light squeeze/release on the reins with your hands. With practice, he will start to develop an even, rhythmic ordinary walk, with increased head nod that goes through his body as his spine undulates slightly in the gait.

Step two, the flat walk: Once the ordinary or dog walk is rhythmic and even, speed the horse up into a flat walk – a faster but more collected walk, in which he starts to push more strongly with his hindquarters and develops a more elastic but solid feel in his back. Push his flat walk as you did the ordinary walk, squeezing and releasing with your legs at every other step, while at the same time taking light but consistent contact with his mouth (or nose) with about the same amount of weight in your hands as you would have if you held a small plum or large strawberry. Practice this gait until he will go easily in it at a speed of between 5-6 mph, both up and down slight inclines, as well as on the flat. This will take time!

Step three – flat walk to running walk. Sometimes with a trotty horse, all it takes is a lot of work in the flat walk, developing rhythm, for the running walk to develop. Try riding at the flat walk for 60 to 90 rides, then gradually ask for more speed and stride length in that gait, using the same method you used to improve the ordinary walk. (the leg squeezes at every other step) Try this on a slight downhill incline, keeping the horse's head (and your hands) at a moderate height, just above the withers, with even contact on the bit, horse's nose tucked slightly toward vertical, but not pulled back. Sit straight, but keep a little more of your weight to the rear of the saddle, with your pelvis tucked under slightly, in a slightly deeper seat than you use for the flat walk. The running walk may just be there for the asking!

The fox trot: With many trotty walking horses, the next stage up from a flat walk before the hard trot will be a fox trot, however. This is not a bad gait to encourage, since it is at least an easy gait and has more of the correct rhythm than a hard trot. It can be a doorway gait that eventually leads to the desired running walk.

To develop a fox trot, push the horse in his flat walk until he breaks into the next gear (probably a trot at this point) and then immediately check him in his speed, while sitting deeper in the saddle (tilting your pelvis so that your buttocks are tucked a little under you) and bringing the horse's nose in just a bit toward vertical. Push the horse forward for more energy with leg pressure if he falls back into the flat walk, but check him with light rein pressure just before he starts to go into the hard trot. When he finds the "sweet spot" of the fox trot in the middle, relax rein and leg pressure, breathe out to relax your lower back and reward him, and let him stay in that gait. Allow him to work in the fox trot until he is comfortable doing it, perhaps with a lower (more vertical) forehead than he had in the flat walk. It may take several weeks or even months for him to become set in the fox trot rather than the hard trot when asked for speed from the flat walk. Take the time to let him find his comfort zone in the gait before going on to the next phase.

Breaking up the fox trot into the running walk: This next process is tricky, and for some horses may not be successful. If your Walking Horse is very trotty to begin with, he may not be able to go much beyond the fox trot in his gait, so do not be too disappointed if he does not have the talent for a running walk. His conformation and wiring may work against his ability to do the gait. Training and body shaping can only go so far! However, it is still worth a try with even the trottiest horse to see if the running walk is there waiting to be teased out of hiding.

Riding at the fox trot, preferably on a slight downhill incline, raise your hands just a bit above your normal position, then very gently begin to see-saw the reins, working the horse so that he swings his neck from side to side very slightly as he moves. At the same time, gently sway your own upper body from side to side on his back, working to throw his balance slightly off. This will generally result in him going "off stride" in the fox trot, and changing from a diagonal gait to a more lateral one. If you time this just right, you can catch him just as he goes "square" from the fox trot and before he starts to go into a lateral stepping pace. You must be very aware of what gait the horse is doing for this method to work. If you are not careful, you may make a pacer out of your horse instead of catching him at the running walk. Remember to go at this slowly, and not to expect a full speed running walk at first. With time and

practice, the speed should increase as the horse becomes more used to the gait.

Another method that may work for some horses, is to ride at the fox trot, then using strong rein pressure, bring the horse's nose to vertical, while very slightly tipping your pelvis so that you are sitting slightly more on your pubic bone than on your seat bones. Do not lean your upper body forward, but just shift your weight slightly toward the front of the saddle. This, combined with the more vertical forehead and tension in the reins, may be enough to change the timing of the hooves so that the horse stops doing the diagonal fox trot and starts doing the square running walk. Don't be afraid to experiment! Try this seat, and if it does not work, then try more of a chair seat, sitting more on your buttocks, to see if that will encourage the running walk from the fox trot. Try asking for the gait with the horse's head lower or higher than normal position. With horses one size and one method does not necessarily fit all!

THE TROTTY FOX TROTTER

The steps for converting a trot into a fox trot similar for a Fox Trotting horse as they are for a Walking Horse.

Work the walk: Practice the flat walk until the horse has a good, solid flat walk with some speed. Practice slowing and speeding him in the gait, building his responsiveness to the bit or bitless headgear. Sit deep and to the back of the saddle then check and release with your fingers on the reins (by squeezing and releasing pressure on them)to ask for a slower speed. When he understands the important lesson of "rating" his speed in response to your weight and rein aids, you can then go on to the next step in the process of developing a consistent fox trot. Ride at a good speed in the flat walk, then push the horse in that walk, checking his speed just before he breaks into a hard trot. This is a constant game of give and take, with only a few steps of the fox trot between the walk and trot at first. Remember to help the horse find the gait you want with the your seat, legs and hands. Sit deep, with a slight arch in your back, squeeze and release your hands to slow him, or squeeze and release your legs to speed him up, never squeezing with your legs and hands at the same time.

Take it easy: To find the fox trot at first, keep the horse relatively slow. Don't try for a fast gait right away, or he will simply continue to hard trot. If he does hard trot, sit down to it, and bring the horse back to the slower speed of the fox trot. Avoid posting the hard trot when it happens, sit it instead, and bring the horse back down to the fox trot with your seat and rein aids while sitting. Do not sit a forward seat at any time. Do not let the horse lean forward on the bit, lugging onto his shoulders. Instead, sit straight, keep his head slightly elevated, bring his nose in just a little toward vertical, and ride with light, even contact on his mouth through the reins. You can do this in either a snaffle or a sidepull, or in a curb if the horse is trained to work in one. The gait is not in the bit, it is in what you as a rider ask the horse to do with the bit. You can tuck his nose and ask him to raise his head just as effectively with a snaffle bit as you can with a curb, if you carry your hands at a moderate position, just over the withers, and open or close your fingers to ask him to relax his jaw.

Find, then stretch, his comfort zone: With practice, you will discover the speed your horse finds most comfortable for fox trotting. Ride him at that speed, in that gait, as much of the time as you can. When he appears to be really set in the gait (you can ride him in it without constant reminders to stay in gear, on a mostly slack rein) you can begin to ask him for a little bit more speed in the fox trot. Again, this is tricky, and you will have to be careful not to "ride through" the fox trot back into the hard trot again. When you start working on speed, try to do so on a slight downhill incline, (not steep, but not level ground) and as you ask, keep your weight back just a bit farther than usual in the saddle. Sit down on your tailbone, rolling your buttocks under you, and perhaps, at first, lean back just a little, with your shoulders behind the normal straight over your hips position. At the same time, bring the horse's head in just a little more toward vertical as you ask for more speed. If you are very careful and do not allow

him to go behind the bit (behind vertical forehead) the combination of restriction of the front legs and more weight on the hind will usually keep him in the fox trot as he speeds up. Do this for only a few steps at first, then gradually build on them until he can maintain speed and continue to work in the fox trot as he does so. At the first sign of the hard trot, slow back down to his comfort zone and start over.

THE TROTTY RACKING/SADDLING HORSE

People have been teaching trotting horses to do a rack or saddle rack for a long time. The basic method has generally been to break up the rhythm of the trot by causing the horse to go off stride, and at the same time lifting his head and neck, putting the “essential tension” at the base of the neck that is necessary for the racking gaits. The conversion can be approached either from the walk or from the trot.

Starting from the walk: (Both of these methods work best if they are done on a slight downhill incline) Work the horse in a fast flat walk. Raise your hands to a slightly higher than normal position (about to waist height) and gradually increase tension on the reins, so that the horse’s head rises and is pulled just a little back from the normal posture the horse uses in at a walk or trot. This will put some of the essential tension at the base of the horse’s neck that is essential to the racking gaits. At the same time, sit more deeply in the saddle, with some weight shifted toward the cantle, buttocks tucked under. Some riders find it easiest to adopt this position by putting their feet a bit forward in the stirrups, adopting a “chair seat” by bracing a little on the stirrups treads. This seat should not be permanent. It is a starting position to help the horse learn the body position for the gait, and the rider can return to a more normal posture once the horse has learned the cues and body carriage necessary for the gait.

With the essential tension in the neck, and some weight slightly behind the natural center of balance of the horse, the horse’s back will become slightly hollow. This position is part of what is necessary for producing the racking gaits. Once the horse begins to carry himself this way, push him on in the walk with strong leg pressure, asking for a burst of speed. Maintain his head in the higher position, and if necessary slightly shift your weight from side to side in the saddle to encourage the more lateral rack instead of the diagonal trot. You should get a couple of steps of a slow saddle rack. If not, return to the walk, and start over, this time asking for more energy as you speed up from the walk. You may also need to slightly see-saw the reins to move the horse’s head and neck from side to side as you push him for speed, to encourage the lateral motion of the racking gait. Build on whatever few steps the horse offers at the rack, rewarding him, and gradually asking for more.

Starting from the trot: Allow the horse to move into an relatively energetic trot, again sitting the gait. (Do not post. You will need seat contact with the saddle to convert the gait.) Again, using the chair seat, on the slight downhill, raise the horse’s head, take definite contact with the reins, see-saw them just out of phase with shifting your weight from side to side in the saddle. To do this, shift your weight to the left seatbone, while slightly tightening the right rein, then shift your weight to the right seatbone while slightly tightening the left rein. It may be easier to do this with a curb bit on some horses, but it can also be accomplished in a snaffle. Build on the few racking steps he takes, adding a step at a time to the number, until he can keep the gait up for a fair distance. As soon as the horse begins to take several steps in a row in the rack, discontinue shifting weight in the saddle and see-sawing the reins. Breathe and sit normally so that the horse understands that he is being rewarded for doing the right thing.

This method of teaching a trotty horse to rack is described in “Suzanne’s Famous Saddle Horses” an early (rare) text on training American Saddle Horses published in the 1800’s, long before hoof length and weight manipulation became the norm for training horses to rack. It works as well today as it did then, but it also requires good timing and the ability to know when to ask and when to back off and let the horse alone to do his work.

It takes time and practice for a horse to develop the strength to rack or saddle rack for long distances. The special use of his back and neck that combine to produce the gait take a lot of muscle tone and energy. A horse that is out of condition will not be able to do one of these gaits easily or for very long. If you give the horse time to build his strength slowly, not asking for much work in the gait, he will be more likely to rack and not fall into a pace or some other undesirable gait in the training process.

About the seat: The beginning seat that is needed to get a horse into the body frame that produces the rack is neither esthetically pleasing nor easy on the rider (or horse). High hands and a chair seat, while habitually used by some riders on all horses, generally throw the rider out of balance with his horse. When a horse that prefers to trot is learning to carry his body in the position that is needed for a rack, this out of balance riding position is briefly valuable for helping him put a slight hollow in his otherwise more rounded back, and developing the tension in his neck that is otherwise more elastic and stretched than it must be for the racking gaits. Once the horse becomes accustomed to carrying his body in the new way that is needed for the rack, you can (and should) gradually resume the more normal straight position in the saddle, relaxing some of the tension on the reins, with a slightly lower hand. The same way you discontinue the side to side sway in the saddle and the see-saw on the reins once the horse starts to change his rhythm away from the trot, and return to those things only rarely as a reminder, you should return to a more normal seat and only hint at the chair seat once in a while as a reminder if the horse falls out of the rack and back into a hard trot.

Most gaited horses tend to trot because they are balanced a little too much forward (strung out) in their way of going, and because they have not developed the elastic use of their backs that help produce the easy gaits. To work in a gait, they need to first develop rhythm and strength in the walk, then shift their balance and back position. They either need to adjust their balance a little to the rear, while still maintaining a neutral back position, (running walk or fox trot) or develop the essential tension at the root of their necks and the slight hollow in their backs that will produce the racking gaits (corto, largo, saddle, rocky mountain gait, rack, tolt) . To help the horse do these things, as a rider, you need to keep your weight slightly back in the saddle, either in a deep regular seat, or for a time in a slight chair seat and keep even, light contact with the horse's mouth or nose, helping him to raise his head and either bring his forehead toward vertical or bring the base of his neck into "essential tension". Remember that it takes time to build speed and consistency in any gait, and work slowly to encourage the one you want. Working on speed too soon is a sure method to fail to develop the easy gait you want, and a good way to keep a trotty horse stuck in his hard trot.

The methods explained here work even on non-gaited horses to produce easy gaits. Think how much easier it is to convert a trot to an easy gait with a horse that actually is bred to be gaited!

© Lee Ziegler, 2002

[Back to Article Index](#)