

Beginner / Amateur Guide to Sound Walking/Racking Horse Shows © 2003



By

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Preface

This pamphlet can serve as a guide to help explain, describe, and answer questions about walking horse shows (also referred to as pleasure horse or gaited horse shows). In particular, the book is written for the *beginner, amateur, or youth riders* preparing for their first horse show so they can understand a little bit about what is expected. It is also a resource for the *spectator* that comes to watch. Finally, it may be helpful to *4-H* and other gaited horse clubs.

Although prepared in a concise pamphlet format for appeal to the beginning exhibitor, this guidebook is reasonably comprehensive in its scope. The author hopes that the book will help prepare the reader for an enjoyable season as an exhibitor or spectator, and also increase appreciation of gaited horse versatility.

Note that it is the author's intent to keep the text as simple as possible. In this regard, this book is not written to describe horse shows where "padded" horseshoe classes are permissible, nor is it written to describe dressage classes or special versatility classes such as pole bending, etc., that walking horse shows sometimes have.

Other Resources - Internet Links, Etc.

Primary Resource: The NWA Rule Book (please join the *National Walking Horse Association*)

Rule Books, Amateur Riding Cards, or Show Schedules can be found, accessed, or obtained from web sites such as:

- National Walking Horse Association (NWA) - nwaha.com
- Gaited Horse Site - gaitedHorses.net
- Yahoo – groups.yahoo.com/group/gaitedhorse
- Spotted Saddle Horse Breeders & Exhibitors Association - (SSHBEA) - sshbea.org
- The Racking Review - therackingreview.com
- Plantation Walking Horse Assoc. of Maryland - geocities.com/Petsburgh/Farm/1977/
- Baltimore Horse Country - bcpl.net/~gharris/assn.html

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1. Introduction

Let me begin by mentioning what walking horse shows are *not*. The shows do not center on horse racing and fence jumping. Instead, the show focus is all about the horse and the horse's natural abilities. If you saw the movie *The Horse Whisperer*, you may recall beautiful horses cantering across a Montana skyline in slow motion. Walking horse shows emphasize and draw attention to the *accentuating, enhancing, and refinement* of such natural movement, referred to as the horse's "gait".

There are also certain physical characteristics of the walking horse, often referred to as a gaited horse, that are associated with the angles of their shoulder and hindquarters. This is often referred to as the *conformation* aspect of the breed, but it is not the author's intent to discuss this in detail herein.

2. Breed Description

Walking horse shows are referred to as pleasure horse or gaited horse shows as often as they are called walking horse shows. Typical breeds of gaited horses include Tennessee Walking Horses (TWH), Registered Racking Horses (RH), Paso Finos (PASO), Spotted Saddle Horses (SSH), Rocky Mountain Horses (RM), Fox Trotters (FT), and Icelandic Horses (ICE).

There are other breeds of gaited horses like the American Saddlebred, but the seven breeds named above are most often seen at pleasure horse shows. In particular, with regard to the term "pleasure", I am referring to horses that can be ridden with little or no bounce in the saddle and that require no posting. TWH's in particular have a reputation for their very mild temperament and they tend to be very people-oriented. Indeed, some people call them gaited horses because they'll be the "first breed at the gate" when you arrive at the farm!

3. Horse Show Divisions and Classes

Shoe size, gait, and breed divide the pleasure horse show. Shoe size varies from no shoes at all on some breeds like the RMH, to those that wear light (spelled lite) shoes, heavier plantation class shoes, and padded shoes. At the typical pleasure horse show, these shoe variations may serve as the basis for show divisions known as the *lite-shod divisions, heavy shod or plantation divisions, and padded divisions*. For each of these divisions, there are several different types of classes those horse riders known as "exhibitors" can enter.

Although horse gait and breed plus shoe size are the primary factors dividing these classes, a review of a typical horse show brochure (that is often referred to as a "class list" or a "show bill") will show that the classes may be even further divided by whether English or Western saddle is worn. In fact, that there can be a lot of other terminology in show class descriptions. However, the most common class names are "*trail pleasure*" or "*2-gait*" or "*3-gait*" classes. Of these, the 2 gait classes are the most common, with both western and English tack utilized.

4. Description of Gaits

All vertebrates have gaits. A man can run, jog, and walk. A horse is essentially the same, but they have four legs! In any event, both man and horse can exhibit various manors of natural movement. In particular, a horse either tends to move on the same side (*laterally*) or it moves its opposed sets of legs in unison (*diagonally*). If the two legs on one side move in unison, this is known as a *pace* and it may be heard as a 1-2 sound, otherwise known as a "beat." Likewise if the diagonally opposed legs move at the same time, this 1-2 beat gait is known as a *trot*. Although natural, you should understand that neither of these gaits are what you want your horse to emphasize at a show. Rather, for most classes, *refining* the gait so there is

essentially only one foot moving at a time in an even, *four beat gait* that sounds like a 1-2-3-4 beat should be the goal. This “squaring up” or “breaking of the gait” makes for a good ride.

Watching a horse do a four beat movement can be very frustrating as it can be easy to lose track of the legs! But if you look close enough, you'll see that the order of foot movement is *left hind, left front, right hind, and then right front*. At a horse show, this correct movement for 2 gait classes may vary in its *speed or style* depending horse breed and other variables.

Rest assured that a judge can hear and count steps and the judge will look at the consistency of the beat. As stated above, most classes tend to center around 2-gait classes where the horse is asked to do a “flat walk” and then at a “running walk”. There are also horse show classes that ask for a *canter* that is known as a 3-gait class at walking horse shows. The canter is a gait that involves a change of *style* and involves a 3-beat movement with the 2 diagonal legs moving in unison while the other 2 move independently of one another.

In summary, walking horse shows generally encompass horses walking, run walking, and cantering. Some gaited breeds like the Icelandic horse have more than 3 gaits, but it is not the intent herein to expand on each horse or breed's capabilities.

5. Riding Apparel

Riding apparel at walking and racking shows for men and women include both western and English clothes. In actuality, English attire at these shows is better referred to as *saddleseat* apparel. But there are some dressage classes at the shows and it is that apparel that is best known as “English” attire.

For both a man and a woman, riding apparel generally includes the following: A day or riding coat, plus Jodhpur pants, with

white shirt, tie and Jodhpur boots. At night, a formal 3-piece saddle suit is appropriate. The lady's tie can be a flower or a man's tie or anything that sets off her outfit tastefully. For men, a 2 or 3 piece saddle or riding suit is appropriate day or night.

Regarding hats, ladies typically do not wear hats during day classes but they have the option. Instead, it is customary to wear them for evening classes. Ladies hats include Homburg, derby, or silk tops. Men's hats are simply called straw or felt hats. Although not customary, safety helmets are allowed.

Western apparel for both men and women include jeans, western shirt, cowboy hat, bolo, boots and belt. Chaps are optional but they can come in handy at shows where English and Western classes are “back to back.” Spurs are also optional in English and Western classes. There can be further adjustments in apparel for rainy weather conditions.

6. Horse Shoes and Tack

Horseshoe type is very critical but beyond the scope of this pamphlet. Please refer to a walking horse farrier or trainer about shoes. Otherwise, you should know that walking horse classes involve the use of a flat, English type saddle called a “saddleseat” or “cutback” saddle. There are also classes that require western saddles. In fact SSH classes typically mandate the use of western saddles (in contrast to TWH classes).

Western saddle pads are used with western saddles. However, the use of a pad under a saddleseat is not customary, as it is not encouraged for it to be seen. A breast strap with English saddle is optional and the girth used need not be of any certain type (although a white girth is typical and customary).

The next primary component of tack is the bridle. Show bridles vary in type, but the English show bridle often has a narrower

headstall than a working bridle, and western bridles tend to have conchos or other ornaments. Note that the basic difference in the English and western bridle is that a cavesson is used with the English bridle to keep the mouth closed. English bridles use typical English reins while western bridles allow for the choice between split or Roma™ style reins.

Although bridle and saddle packages compose what you need to ride in a horse show, you will of course need a lot of horse tack items including grooming agents and brushes, plus feed, water, and muck buckets, saddle stands, mane combs, etc. You'll probably find yourself ordering out of catalogs a lot in your first horse show season!!!

7. D.Q.P. Checks

Walking horse shows are required to have a designated qualified person (D.Q.P) to check a horse's walk and to inspect a horse's lower legs & feet for signs of "soring" especially in the pastern area. A horse can be rejected for being "sored," i.e., having scars, open sores, tenderness, flaking skin, and signs of foreign substance, to name a few.

Also, a horse may be rejected for being stiff-legged, lame, exhibiting a "bad image" or being otherwise "off" or "unsound" when doing a figure 8 around cones (or in the ring). This check is required before every class, and after every 1st place class.

8. Judge Criteria and Gait Consistency

Experienced walking horse judges are generally very good in "tying" (the word used for judging) a class. They do a superb job in choosing between a 1st and 2nd place horse, and so forth. They can count beats easily, can see gait consistency easily, and can evaluate overall performance of the horse.

As stated above, a lot of emphasis is put on consistency. Also, a good show ring entrance can be important. From a beginner's perspective, if your horse is reasonably steady and well behaved in performance, you stand a good chance of getting a ribbon. And make sure the horse backs up nicely in the line up!

Other factors include the extent of horse animation such as headshake, tail movement, consistency, overreach in step, and proper headset. Secondary items can include appearance of horse tack and how well your horse is groomed. Eye contact with the judge is also a good thing. However, don't be surprised if you only see the judge looking at the horse because it is the horse that is being judged, not you. Note that it is okay to ask the judge at the end of the show or when done with your last class, why the judge did or did not like your horse(s).

9. Specific Class Descriptions

For the most part, class descriptions at gaited horse shows are similar. They do vary sometimes when different breeds of horses are in the same class because horse society rules vary. For example, a walking horse in a TWH western class must be ridden with one hand holding the reins, yet a spotted horse can be ridden with two hands (as if English) in western SSH classes.

Like class descriptions, class names at gaited horse shows tend to be quite similar. Specific class names include *trail pleasure*, *western pleasure*, *country pleasure*, *plantation pleasure*, plus other classes known as *English or Western 2 and 3 gait*. These may be open to amateurs and professionals, or just limited to amateurs who own and train their horse(s).

In addition there are classes based on a horse's age such as a *yearling class*, classes for *2 to 4 year old horses*, *dressage*, *model horse classes*, and special versatility classes including *pole bending*, *barrel racing*, *jumping*, and *obstacle classes*.

It is important to understand as a beginner that you will likely need, and that you should seek the advice, of a horse show trainer to ensure you know which classes your horse can participate in. The following list of specific classes is typical for NHTA walking horse shows. They can be *very confusing* to anyone just beginning their horse show career experience.

Examples of gaited horse show classes include:

- Stick Horse (child's class)
- TWH Trail Pleasure Western Open - 2 Gait
- TWH Lite Shod Western Amateur - 2 Gait
- TWH Trail Pleasure Western AOT - 2 Gait
- TWH Lite Shod Western AOT - 3 Gait
- TWH Trail Pleasure English Open - 2 Gait
- TWH Trail Pleasure English Open - 3 Gait
- TWH Lite Shod English Open - 3 Gait
- TWH Trail Pleasure English Amateur - 2 Gait
- TWH Plantation Pleasure English Open - 2 Gait
- TWH Plantation English Open - 3 Gait
- TWH Country Pleasure Youth - 2 Gait
- TWH Country Pleasure - 3 Gait - Opt. Tack
- RH Country Pleasure Racking
- RH English Trail Pleasure
- RH Western Pleasure
- SSH Trail Pleasure - 2 Gait - Opt. Tack
- SSH Lite Shod - 3 Gait - Opt. Tack
- Model Mares
- Model Stallions/Geldings
- Adult Water Glass
- Pleasure Driving
- Basic Reining
- Barrels
- Pole Bending
- Adult Trail Obstacle
- Dressage First Level (Test 1)

(Note: Class name descriptions vary substantially from show to show.)

10. Class Awards and Ribbons

Most horse shows have qualifying classes & championship classes. To enter a championship class, your horse must show in a qualifying class, but the horse need not receive an award. Most horse shows give ribbons (various colors) as the awards for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th places. In championship classes, the same number of ribbons is given, but the ribbons are bigger and sometimes there are prizes such as a cup or a plaque.

In addition, many shows give cash paybacks. This money may be viewed as a refund of part of the entry fees.

11. Horse Show and Related Costs

Typical qualifying class entry fees range from \$10 to \$40 per class. You should enter your horse in at least 3 classes per day to make it more worthwhile and to help justify travel costs. Other show costs include stall rental fees that run \$20 to \$70 per show for each horse, a daily DQP inspection fee of \$4-10 per day, the cost of bedding and hay, RV hookup fee (\$10-\$50), and a hotel (\$40-\$90 per day) if you are not camping out at the show.

Regarding the cost of horse transportation (excluding yourself and tack and apparel) you can expect the cost of a trailer to be \$0.50 to over \$1.50 per *loaded* mile for one horse whether you haul, or have someone else haul for you. Of course total costs go up if you follow the trailer in your vehicle rather than pull!

Horse tack can cost well under a \$100 for a bridle, and \$250 to over \$1,000 for a saddle. Apparel such as 2 or 3 piece saddle suits generally cost around \$250 to \$400 out of a tack catalog and "Jodhpur" boots cost \$80 to \$200. Riding hat and gloves add another \$40 to \$80. Western apparel such as jeans and shirt are less expensive. However, cowboy boots and name brand hats can be expensive and good chaps will run \$90 to

nearly \$300. Of course, the cost of apparel may be less if you can find used clothes. The same can be said for horse tack. Emphasis should be placed on *good fitting* tack & clothes.

Finally, there may be the cost of a horse trainer if you've hired one to train and care for your horse(s); fees vary widely among trainers. The author recommends any beginner start his or her show experience with a professional, aka with a "training barn."

12. Horse Care

Horse care at shows does not differ much from horse care back at home or "the barn." You'll need to bring along feed and hay and remember to bring stall buckets for water plus manure fork and muck bucket. Your horse may get bathed often and it can sometimes be crucial to properly apply hoof polish, mane and forelock ribbons, and to use grooming aids like "sho-sheen."

The primary differences with horse care at the show versus care at home relates to the care that comes before and after classes. For example, you may want to tie your horse to a short lead in the stall before a class to avoid the horse messing up grooming and tie the horse up again after the class to ensure cooling out before drinking water. In this regard, it's okay to leave your grooming box and saddle rack outside your stall, but you may want to rent another stall to store tack and clothes.

Finally, a horse should be properly dressed for transportation with shipping boots or ankle wraps, plus wear a tail bag. It is a good idea to arrive at a horse show long before classes begin to both walk out your horse and to show the horse the arena and/or ring. This also gives the opportunity to acquaint the horse with the new surroundings and to experience the horse's gait, which can vary *substantially* with arena soil conditions.

13. Amateur Versus Professional Status

It should be understood that a substantial number of horses brought to horse shows are *not* ridden by their owners at the shows. Rather, horse trainers or professional riders, on behalf of the owners, ride them. In fact, walking horse show audiences tend to be a very small group because a lot of the horse's owners do not attend the shows to watch their horse(s).

A professional cannot ride in an amateur class. However, a professional can ride along with amateurs in the "open" classes, and indeed most classes are in fact open to both amateurs and professionals. Some other classes are further named "AOT" classes which means *amateur owned and trained*. For these classes, an amateur cannot have had professional training provided to the horse within 90 days of the show.

Professional riders at horse shows are typically *excellent* riders. You can expect to see them get a lot of blue ribbons. Indeed, the various professionals known as show or training barns are very competitive and their livelihood depends on placing well in the ribbons. Notwithstanding, judges will often favor amateurs.

However, even if you don't get a ribbon, you will find major paybacks from exhibiting at a walking horse show because competing with good riders and having a judge monitoring your horse's gait facilitates your understanding of what makes "a good ride." It also improves your riding skills and positively enhances your horse's behavior and consistency; this is the real payback at horse shows!

14. Gait Test - Advanced (See Next Page)

15. Class Prep Checklist (Back Cover for Your Convenience)

16. Travel Prep Checklist (Back Cover for Your Convenience)

14. TENNESSEE WALKING HORSE GAIT QUIZ

(THIS MAY BE CONSIDERED AN ADVANCED TEST FOR THOSE EXPERIENCED WITH THE TWH HORSE GAIT. THE ANSWERS ARE NOT IN THIS BOOK!)

1. This is the purest diagonal gait in which the diagonal legs move forward together and the feet strike the ground in total unison (two beats with a moment of suspension)?

- Pace
- Trot
- Tolt
- Amble

2. The _____ is a lateral gait in which the hind leg strikes the ground an instant before the front leg and the front leg either stays on the ground until the opposite hind leg has been set down or is picked up a split second before. There is no suspension in this gait. It can also be describe as an uneven, four-beat pace.

- Stepping Pace
- Foxtrot
- Rack
- Canter

3. This is a broken diagonal gait. The front foots on the ground just prior to the diagonally opposed hind foot, creating an uneven, diagonal, four-beat gait. There is no suspension. This gait has been described as two beats with two staccato notes.

Source: Plantation Walking Horse of Maryland, Inc.

- Running Walk
- Rack
- Gallop
- Fox Trot

4. The _____ is the purest lateral gait. The same-side fore and hind legs move forward together and land in total unison. This is a two-beat gait with a moment of suspension.

- Rack
- Trot
- Running Walk
- Pace

5. This gait is a slow, four-beat, square gait of which all intermediate gaits (those gaits that fall between the pace and the trot) are a variation.

- Rack
- Walk
- Running Walk
- Pace

6. This gait is similar to the walk. The horse is supported by 2 and 3 legs alternately at all times throughout the stride. The horse's hind legs reach deeply underneath himself with every stride. The horse will glide over the track left by the front foot with this hind foot. Head nodding usually accompanies this gait.

- Stepping Pace
- Tolt
- Running Walk
- Canter

GAIT TEST CONTINUED:

7. In this gait, two diagonal sets of legs move in unison while the other two corner legs move independently of one another. This is a three-beat gait that is neither diagonal nor lateral.

- Gallop
- Running Walk
- Canter
- Pace

8. This gait is a square, four-beat gait in which each leg moves quickly forward and sets down independently. Timing is faster than the walk and it can be animated with a moment of suspension between each foot fall. Only 1 or 2 legs support between the horse at a time. The stride is not lengthened and there is no head nodding.

- Foxtrot
- Stepping pace
- Canter
- Rack

9. This gait is always done at high speed, similar to the canter, but with four beats.

- Single-foot
- Gallop
- Foxtrot
- Rack

******* ANSWER KEY *******

(1) Trot (2) Stepping pace (3) Foxtrot (4) Pace (5) Walk
(6) Running Walk (7) Canter (8) Rack (9) Gallop

15. Class Preparation Checklist

The following checklist may be helpful to prepare for a horse show class after you arrive at a show.

- Groom and wash horse.
- Braid forelock for English classes and unbraid for western classes.
- For English classes, put ribbons in mane & forelock
- Put hoof polish on feet.
- Place horse's number card on your back! If showing more than one horse, check for correct number!
- Saddle and bridle your horse.
- Loosen curb chain and caveson for DQP (also raise irons up for DQP).
- Warm up horse and check girth before/after warmup
- Have someone dust your shoes and fix your pants. strap after mounting (ask them to check your outfit).
- Don't forget to put a pad under your western saddle.
- Remove tail and mane braids before showing.
- Put on gloves (optional) for English classes.

16. Travel Preparation Checklist

The following may be a helpful list prior to travel to a show:

- Get horse "*health (check) certificate*" from your vet.
- Take the *Coggins* certificate to all venues.
- Take horse show class list.
- Take bottled water plus some energy snacks.
- Get good directions to the show grounds.
- Feed little or no grain to your horse(s) before travel.
- Allow time for delays in horse loading and putting on shipping boots or bandage wrappings!
- Take feed and hay, horse tack and clothes.
- Consider taking along some water that the horse is used to drinking at the horse's own barn.
- If you have a horse trailer, check lights, brakes, tires, spare tire, and trailer floor, and clean trailer floor.

