



The well-gaited Fox Trotter stallion, PRINCE MOONBEAM, (owned by Lazy K Bar Ranch, Seguin, TX) showing his flowing, extended trot at liberty. The stretching of the shoulders seen in this gait carries over to his fox trot under saddle.

By Lee Ziegler

TO TROT, OR NOT?

Most people

“go gaited”

because they don’t

want to ride a trot.

THOSE “BONESHAKERS” OF THE NON-GAITED BREEDS come by that name honestly and no one who has felt the smooth glide of a gaited horse could be blamed for never wanting to post or sit a trot again!

Besides, many gaited horses don’t ever offer to trot under saddle, and some old-timers say that if gaited horses that do trot are ridden in that gait, their easy gaits will be ruined. This can present a dilemma for riders who are accustomed to using trot work as a very beneficial tool for the physical development of the horse and the improvement of the other gaits in non-gaited horses. Given that we don’t particularly want to ride the gait, and that some of our horses won’t do it, is there any role for the trot in training the easy gaited horse?

Will the trot “ruin” your horse’s easy gaits?

THE IDEA THAT THE TROT IS SOMEHOW POISONOUS TO THE EASY GAITS of a horse seems a bit odd, since most gaited horses will trot free in a pasture, whether they do it under saddle or not, and these individ-

uals usually have perfectly acceptable soft gaits when asked for them. There are also some gaited breeds that are required to exhibit a trot under saddle in shows or gait trials, in addition to their easy gaits, and they seem to do quite well in their gaits despite this fact.

In my experience, **the only way trotting a gaited horse can interfere with his easy gait is if he has a strong preference for a trot or other diagonal gait in the first place.** If you spend time reinforcing this diagonal tendency under saddle, the horse will become more and more conditioned to it, and will indeed have trouble moving his body in one of the more lateral or even gaits.

If you have a Walking Horse that tends to prefer to fox trot or hard trot, it makes sense to avoid using those gaits if you want him to do a running walk. If you have a Fox Trotter who wants to hard trot most of the time, allowing or encouraging that gait won't help him learn to fox trot. If you have a Paso Fino who seems to like to "go trocha," hard trotting him will only make this problem worse. If you have a Peruvian Paso that prefers a pasi-trote and hesitates to work in llano or sobreandando, working in a trot will not help his gait problem at all. In these cases, avoiding the trot is a good idea.

However, if your horse is too lateral in his gait, wants to pace instead of doing a nice running walk, fox trot or one of the rack family of gaits, spending time in the trot can be helpful for his body and his gait development. For those horses, the trot will actually improve the easy gait, not ruin it. For horses such as Icelandics that are expected to trot, work in the gait will often improve performance in the other gaits.

The trot as physical therapy

HORSES THAT HAVE BEEN WORKING for long periods of time with a higher head and neck carriage in a pace, stepping pace or in some of the racking gaits tend to develop somewhat slack or less-toned back muscles, which can in turn cause their spines to sag downward under weight. Over time, this can lead to back pain, neurological /stumbling problems in the hindquarters, and uncomfortable, if not unsound horses.

Working these horses in a trot stretches the back muscles, contributes to their overall strength and tone, and helps raise and separate the spines of the backbone.

It is possible to reclaim a horse from an acquired sway back, and to prevent one from becoming that



Even though he is working here with a low head and some push through his back, Tonka's timing is very lateral (stepping pace) in this photo. It took trot work to convert this gait into the fox trot.

way by using the trot in an exercise program, whether the horse is ridden or not while he is doing the gait. If you have a horse that is starting to get a little low in the back, you might want to teach him to trot with a long and low head and neck carriage, on the longe line if you don't want to ride the gait. The work will help his back recover tone and keep him more com-

fortable under saddle while he is in gait.

The enclosed pictures of Tonka show what a difference this kind of work can make in the body of a horse. He spent many years doing a either a hard pace or a stepping pace, developing a low back, and a very prominent "racker's bump" as a result of the way he used (or didn't use) his body in those gaits. With consistent work in a trot, his back has remolded itself.

The number one "problem gait" in just about all gaited breeds is not the trot, it is the pace or slightly broken pace.

The trot as gait therapy

THE NUMBER ONE "PROBLEM GAIT" in just about all gaited breeds is not the trot, it is the pace or slightly broken pace. Whether this gait is an acquired habit, the result of poor breeding practices, or the fault of some "bad wiring" in the horse's body, it interferes with the performance of the more desirable easy gaits.

To deal with this problem, one of the best methods is to break the gait up into something more acceptable by trotting a horse over a series of poles or cavalletti, set about five feet apart. This exercise will condition the horse's muscles and improve his coordination so that he can get away from the pace habit, and may work to "re-wire" his neurological synapses so that he can use his legs independently. After a few sessions learning to trot over poles, horses frequently continue on in an easy gait after they have trotted over the last pole, neither continuing to trot nor returning to the pace. For those that do continue to trot after the pole lessons, it usually takes little work to convert that trot to a fox trot, and then, eventu-



To the left: Tonka's back before trotting exercise. Note the prominent "racker's bump" and lack of tone in the loin.

To the right: Tonka's back after steady trot work over three months during the winter. Note the lessening of the racker's bump and filling in the loin.



ally, to a running walk or one of the racking gaits.

Tonka is a good example of this. During his retraining, he first mastered the trot on the longe, then under saddle. He would pop back into a pace from it for awhile,

***Trot: Won't ruin easy gaits if used properly
Will help develop a healthier, stronger back***

until his back had remodeled itself and he was physically able to "come back" into a fox trot from the hard trot. Now his fox trot is solid, as is his running walk, and the pace is becoming a very dim memory.

Using the trot to improve easy gaits

HORSES THAT ARE EXPECTED TO have a lot of reach in their easy gaits can benefit from some time in the trot as well, even though their gaits may be solid with no pace to them.

In an extended trot, a horse

reaches strongly forward with each set of legs, stretching the shoulders and hips and working the haunches. That stretching can carry over to the easy gaits, if it is not done to the point of setting the horse in the trot instead of the easy gait. Work in a fast, reaching, hard trot is especially beneficial to very short-strided Fox Trotters, because it can loosen the shoulders and help them reach when they are returned to their easy gait. Some work over poles on the longe or under saddle in the trot, alternated with longer periods of gait work, will enhance the gait without making it too diagonal. Work up hill, down slight inclines, and on the flat in the trot will also improve push and step length, if it is not overdone. This same sort of trot work can also help the reach of a horse that performs one of the faster saddle racks.

The trot as "gaitway" to the canter

FOR GAITED HORSES THAT are expected to canter, it is sometimes easier to teach this gait from the trot, rather than to try to hustle into it from a fast walk. If the horse can do a nice, rhythmic, semi-collected trot, he can use that gait and the balance it provides, to launch himself into the canter with fewer problems of disunited legs, or mixed gaits. If you work him on a long line or in a round pen, and teach him to take the canter from the trot on verbal cue, training a horse to canter can be much easier and less physically taxing for him than following some other methods of cantering initially from a walk under saddle.

The trot for endurance or competitive trail

ALTHOUGH GAITED HORSES ARE more and more accepted in these venues, sometimes it is still possible to run into judges who do not understand the gaits. It can be a good idea to teach a gaited horse to trot on the longe for soundness inspections for those occasions.

The trot is also useful in other ways for long distance riders. By teaching the horse to trot in addition to his easy gait, you gain a different set of muscles to use in addi-



While for some horses trot work on the longe may require poles or cavalletti, others can trot without them. If you don't want to ride a trot, longe line work at the gait is a good option.



After work at the trot on the longe to improve his timing and body use, Tonka is able to fox trot freely with his happy rider.

tion to the ones he uses when he gaits. This can extend his endurance because it allows him to rest one set while using the other. Having that little bit extra can be part of a winning strategy for a rider on a gaited horse in distance competitions.

Use the trot, but keep the gait

IF YOU ARE GOING TO TROT your horse under saddle, be sure to establish some very clear cues for the gait, so that he will not be confused when asked to return to his easy gait. If possible, establish a verbal cue for the gait on the longe line or in the round pen before you ask for it under saddle and use that cue when doing ridden work.

When you do trot from the horse's back, always lower your hands and yield them somewhat forward when you cue the trot. Encourage the horse to reach forward and down with his head and neck when he trots; do not try to "collect" his head and neck position when you do the gait. Adopt either a two-point seat or post the motion, do not sit it unless you are

All photos courtesy Kit Darrow, owner and rider of Tonka, a 13-year-old, registered Fox Trotter who "found" his fox trot gait in the past year through trot work.

trying to bring the gait back down to a fox trot or other easy gait. When you return to an easy gait from the trot, re-assume a straight position in the saddle, and allow your hands to rise to a more neutral position. These changes in position will help the horse understand when he is allowed to trot, and when he is not, so his gait will stay with him through the trot work.

But, my gaited horse won't trot!

MOST GAITED HORSES CAN BE MADE to trot, if worked over poles or cavalletti with any regularity. However, if your horse gaits well, has a good back, and doesn't offer to trot at liberty or under saddle, don't worry about it. The trot is an extra gear that can be of some use for training or conditioning, but it

is certainly not a requirement for a good gaited horse. If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it.

To trot or not?

WHETHER OR NOT YOU USE THE trot as a tool in training and conditioning your gaited horse is up to you. It can be useful for teaching and improving gait, but it is not for every horse, and it will not work to improve every gait. However, if you are careful in the way you use it, it won't ruin your horse's easy gaits, and it might just make them more pleasant to ride.

About the Author:

Lee Ziegler is a respected clinician, gaited horse show judge and author, and luckily for us a frequent contributor to TGH. Visit her website at www.leeziegler.com for more information on her training techniques and philosophies: Gaits Without Gimmicks.

