

Sue Harris's Presentation on Gaits and Movement **By Lynn Acton**

I could not do justice to Sue's explanations or her wit, even if I had her marvelous pictures, but I will try to share some of the highlights.

Correct movement depends on how your horse is built to move.

- Long and low is an efficient ground-covering stride, typical of Thoroughbreds, Standardbreds, and Appendix Quarter Horses.
- Short and low fits old style, very agile, Quarter Horses.
- Medium has the reach of the long and low stride with more suspension and elevation. Typical of Arabs and some Morgans.
- High action, as in Park Horses, should have hock action that matches that of the knees. Lots of knee action with trailing hind legs means the gait has been artificially produced at the horse's expense.
- Round is an up and forward action, more likely with older style Morgans, and very versatile.
- Baroque, similar to round, has lots of natural collection, as in Iberian horses such as Luisitano, Andalusian, or the Spanish PRE.

The purpose of good movement is to help horses use their bodies well, so they are more comfortable, and stay sound longer. We need to help them because nature didn't design them to carry riders. Some even need help learning to canter which, unlike the gallop, does not come easily to some horses, especially when trying to balance a rider or manage turns.

There are no shortcuts to good movement. The horse has a "circle of muscles" that must all work together, and be developed with patient, correct work. The power starts at the rear with hind legs reaching underneath. The back must be raised and strengthened to support the rider, and the head must be free for balance, the reason we let reins slip through our fingers when a horse trips.

Equipment such as draw reins or tie-downs can be detrimental because they artificially alter a horse's natural head movement and fail to build the hind end muscles, often resulting in a horse whose hind legs trail behind instead of reaching underneath and pushing. They also encourage horses to hollow their backs, creating tension and causing a host of physical problems.

"Correct" movement as defined by what wins ribbons in shows is not necessarily the best balanced or the healthiest for the horse. It is not unusual to see dressage horses ridden overbent (faces behind the vertical), with hollow backs and hind ends poorly engaged. Many win ribbons, even at the highest levels. Western pleasure horses forced to artificially lower

their heads and slow their gaits, are actually less balanced and more prone to painful orthopedic problems.

If we want a horse to move in a certain way, we need to choose a horse with the right conformation and natural movement. If we show in a discipline that judges movement, such as western pleasure, hunters, or dressage, we need to either pick a horse with the movement that is favored in that discipline, or forget about ribbons.

All gaited horse gaits have the same footfall sequence as an ordinary flat-footed walk: left hind, left front, right hind, right front. The gait may be called running walk, singlefoot, amble, rack, foxtrot, tolt, paso fino, paso corto, paso largo, or something else, but the only difference is in the speed, knee (and hock) action, and length of stride. Researchers have identified a specific gene, called the “pacing gene”, that is found in horses who gait naturally. Ancient pictures suggest these gaits have been around at least since Roman times, and we can only imagine how greatly a gaited horse would have been appreciated in the days before saddles and stirrups!

Good movement in gaited horses requires patient and correct work to develop the right muscles and balance, just as in any other horse.

Sue's website www.anatomyinmotion.com has photos of a horse with muscles and bones painted on, and clips from her DVDs that show the actions of muscles and skeleton as horses move. Interesting to see even if you caught her great presentation!