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Dianne Little is a native Calgarian who was introduced to gaited horses in 1981. She has been a director for the Alberta Walking Horse Assoc and the Canadian Registry of the Tennessee Walking Horse, and is Vice-President of Friends of Sound Horses, a leader in the promotion of natural, sound, gaited horses. Dianne is also Director of Judges for the Independent Judges Association, a training and licensing body for sound, natural and ethical judging of all gaited breeds.

I stumbled upon gaited horses by accident. After my first lesson as an adult, actually my first riding lesson ever, I was sold. There was no doubt that I would own a horse and since the facility offering the lessons bred Tennessee Walking Horses, that was the breed I chose. As well, (and I think I may be a minority in this), I started out in horses with no expectations other than I wanted to ride. I came with no knowledge of any horses, never mind gaited horses, and I was guided by those I encountered. I realize now that you are only as good as the people who teach you. I was fortunate that I was taught by the best and the most ethical in the TWH community in Canada.

My journey with Tennessee Walking Horses has been one of pleasure, frustration, learning and thinking outside the box. And along the way, I have learned a fair bit about horses in general, and gaited horses in particular. As part of the learning process, I attended an introduction to judging horse organized by the Alberta Horse Industry Branch in 1988 I believe. Bob Coleman was one of the instructors, helped me realize that I had an eye for movement and encouraged me to work toward attaining a Judges' License. There was no opportunity to become a gaited horse judge in Canada and as a result, I decided to become a CEF (now Equine Canada) General Performance judge. I had no expectation of being hired— I wanted to prove I could satisfy the conditions. I was hired and 5 years ago, I was invited to join the Independent Judges Association as Director of Judges. I now educate gaited horse judges to judge according to the established standard and recognize sound and natural gaited horses. The IJA operates as an umbrella group for gaited breeds who look for sound and natural horses. One of the most important things I have learned is that we are all on a journey with horses, but the only difference is the speed and distance than we each travel. Today, I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned about gaited horses.

Introducing Gaited Horses

Gaited horses exist in most parts of North America. Your neighbor may own some and you may never know. Standing or running in the pasture they look no different than any other horse. It is only when they move under saddle that you notice something different.

I am certain you have heard of some of these breeds - Mountain Pleasure Horses, Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horses, Rocky Mountain Horses, Kentucky Natural Gaited Horses, Tennessee Walking Horses, Missouri Fox Trotters, Spotted Saddle Horses, Paso Fino Horses, Peruvian Paso Horses, American Paso Largo Horses, McCurdy Plantation Horses, Mangalarga Marchador Horses, American Curly Horses, Icelandic Horses, Tiger Horses, Walkaloosa Horses, Tiger Horses, Gaited Morgans, Spanish Mustang Horses, Spanish Gaited Ponies, Montana Travlers, American Saddlebred Horses. Throughout this presentation you will see pictures of gaited horses. They are courtesy of Barbara Weatherwax and were used in her book "The Fabulous Floating Horses". You will also see video depicting a variety of gaits and styles.

People associated with each of the gaited breeds tend to report the interesting, the unusual and the special about their breed of choice, but they seldom relate their breed to all gaited breeds or to horses in general. So what do these "gaited" breeds have in common? They are all gaited horses. They all have a variety of "soft-gaits."

Despite the number of gaited breeds and their growing popularity, there is no doubt that gaited horses and gaited horse owners are a minority in the horse industry in Alberta, and throughout much of North America. We "gaited horse people" are sometimes seen as not being part of the horse world. That is not true - we are just different. In order to be part of the majority I would have to move to such places as Tennessee, Kentucky, Peru, Columbia, or Puerto Rico. I have no desire to do that, so I will remain part of the minority, celebrate the uniqueness of gaited horses and show you why a journey with gaited horses may be in your future.

What is a Gaited Horse?

This is a challenging question to answer. The Webster dictionary defines gait as "any of the various foot movements of a horse, as a walk, single-foot, rack, amble, trot, pace, canter or gallop" and as "a style of foot movement said of horses." In everyday speech, however, I think we all know that the term "gaited horses" is not used to describe all horses. The more common definition (and the one I will use) is that gaited horses are a subset of horses of various breeds where the intermediate gait is a gait without suspension – the intermediate gait is not the trot. Gaited horses are frequently referred to as "soft-gaited".

There are at least 30 breeds of gaited horses in North America. Some of these horses (developed in a particular location and the name reflects the historical home. Some of them developed as a sudden discovery of gaited horses within an established breed. Few of them developed as the result of outcrossing.

Soft-gaited horses exist because they can transport people in comfort. As long as there has been recorded history of horses, there have been records of gaited horses. In fact, historically, the term “saddle horse” referred to a gaited horse. After all, if the horse was the only mode of transportation, does it not make sense to have one that was as comfortable as possible? Today, people still appreciate the soft gaits of these horses.

What Makes Gaited Horses Unique?

A 4 Beat Gait

The simple answer to the question of what makes gaited horses unique is their gait - there is no suspension in the middle gait of soft-gaited horses. They do not trot or pace. But this defining characteristic is both simple and complex, because when the trot and pace are eliminated, there are still almost as many “gaits” as there are gaited breeds of horses. Each breed has a name and description of their distinct gaits and while most breed supporters would not admit it, some breeds use different names for the same general gait.

All gaits may be described as lateral (side to side) or diagonal (diagonal pairs of legs move together). The pace and trot (intermediate gaits) are 2 beat gaits with suspension. The pace is a lateral gait, and the trot is a diagonal one. The suspension in both of these gaits tends to cause riders to feel as though they are being bounced. This is why two beat gaits are not desirable in gaited horses; it is a 4 beat gait without suspension that yields a smooth ride. There are four main categories of 4 beat intermediate gaits:

- Lateral 4 beat gaits – Andadura Imperfecta, stepping pace, slick pace, broken pace, sobreandando
- Square 4 beat gaits – walk, running walk, fino, corto, largo, rack, tolt, paso llano, single foot, even gait, square gait, saddle, picada, amble
- Diagonal 4 beat gaits – troche, batida, broken trot, fox trot

Temperament

Due to the extensive breeding over the centuries to develop “saddle” horses, temperament was an important characteristic for gaited horses. These horses were bred to be docile and devoted companions, and these characteristics continue to be found in most gaited horses today. Soft-gaited horses are usually cooperative, gentle, and willing. They tend to have a kindly disposition, and they often possess a high pain tolerance.

Conformation

The conformation of soft-gaited horses encompasses all three body types:

- Mesomorph – a muscular horse
- Ectomorph – a narrow angular horse
- Endomorph – a round, plump, stocky horse

Because of this, in many instances it is not possible to determine whether a horse is gaited when it is standing still. Movement is necessary to tell if a horse is gaited.

Movement

Several different styles of movement are associated with gaited horses, but they all yield an efficient and comfortable to ride gait. All styles can be summarized as:

- the convex or dorsal flex is roundly collected - the neck is arched, the body is rounded and the head is carried in a vertical position. Found most often in the Missouri Fox Trotter, Mountain Horse or Paso Fino
- the concave or ventral flex is strung out – travels with a hollow back and a neck that is not overly flexed. The hind end on this animal tends to be behind the horse. To facilitate the pace and the stepping pace.
- the combination of the convex and concave allows the horse to travel with characteristics of both types.
- a level back – middle or square gaits as the paso llano and the running walk.

The most important thing to remember is that gaiting requires participation of the horse's whole body. The combination of conformation, brain, nervous system and muscles impacts movement.

Other Characteristics

Soft-gaited horses come in all colors and sizes. There are some colors not found in walk-trot horses, like the chocolate body with white mane and tail found in Rocky Mountain Horses, the burgundy-colored Marchadors from Brazil, and the champagne-colored Tennessee Walking Horses. Gaited horses come in sizes as small as 11 hands and as big as 17 plus hands. Over the centuries, the gait of individual breeds has been developed for different topographies. The Paso Finos and the Mountain Horses excel in rough mountainous regions. The Peruvian Pasos excel on flat terrain and the TWH can travel at a fast clip over narrow flat paths.

Myths about Gaited Horses

Myth #1: Smooth Gaits are Artificial

The ability to perform the soft-gaits is in the genes – this ability is natural and inborn. These are not man-made gaits. It is nigh impossible to teach these gaits to a horse that does not possess the soft-gaited gene. Soft-gaited horses can walk, canter and gallop like “regular” horses. The key difference between gaited horses and “regular” horses is that instead of trotting, gaited horses perform various soft gaits for the “second gear”.

It is possible for a gaited horse to execute many gaits – walk, trot, pace, fox trot, amble, corto, largo, marchado, paso llano, sobreandando, stepping pace, rack, single foot, canter, gallop etc. Some of these gaits are particular to a breed, but many of them transcend breeds. The defining characteristic of the intermediate gait in every gaited breed is that there is at least one foot on the ground at all times. This produces a way of going that may or may not be animated, but is always dramatic. Most importantly each of these gaits is smooth and comfortable for the rider.

Although they perform the “gaits” naturally, it must be recognized that the horse’s balance is affected when carrying the weight of the rider. Many gaited horses are “wired” to perform many gaits and when the balance of the load is changed, the horse changes the gait. While it is wonderful to praise the athleticism of the gaited horse, changing gaits with every shift in the riders balance is not necessarily fun, but it is challenging and intriguing. It is up to the rider to determine which gait he or she wants and to work with the horse to achieve that gait. The Gait is inherited, but degree of training affects the natural or inherited ability. This fact is true of all horses.

Myth #2: Gaited Horses Require Special Tack

Tradition is important in all breeds, but in particular the ones from South and Central America. While traditional saddles and tack are used on some horse in the show ring, these horses may be ridden in any saddle or bridle that you or I may choose for a “regular” horse. The main thing to keep in mind is that many gaited horses have long sloping shoulders and shorter backs (but this is true of many breeds). The key with gaited horses, as with all other breeds, is to ensure that the saddle allows the shoulder to move forward freely and that the saddle does not interfere with the hip.

Myth #3: Gaited Horse Require Special Shoeing

Once again a gaited horse is a horse first. Some gaited horse breeders expand the mystique that special farriers and special shoes and angles are necessary “to get the gait” or “to hit a lick.” Such statements disregard the fact that every horse is an individual and should be trimmed and shod in accordance with their conformation. Many gaited horses are even shown barefoot.

Myth #4: Gaited Horses Stumble

Gaited genetics were treasured most in the roughest areas of the world such as Iceland, Mongolia, the Andes, the Ozarks, and the Rocky Mountains. Why would they be prize possessions if they tended to stumble? No intelligent person would ride a horse that “stumbled” in any type of terrain. Some gaited horses may stumble if they are allowed to become “strung out.” This is a characteristic of many horses who are lazy, who are not paying attention or who are being ridden poorly.

Myth #5: Gaited Horses Can't Canter or Gallop

Gaited horses are bred for their soft gaits and in many cases that is what they are trained to do. If you watch gaited foals, you will see that they canter and gallop. Some owners are satisfied with the soft-gait and do not want the horse to canter under saddle. This is a choice by the owner and not determined by the physical ability of the horse. Some gaited breeders, particularly breeders of Tennessee Walking Horses, have bred their horses to pace so that the gait can be altered. These horses sometimes find it difficult to canter under saddle. That said, most gaited horses can also canter, and some breeds, like the Tennessee Walking Horse, is actually known for its “rocking chair canter.”

Myth #6: Gaited Horses are not Suitable for Cattle Work.

Most South American cow-horse breeds are gaited. Mongolians herd camels on their small, athletic gaited horses. In fact, some of the first horses used in the west were gaited horses. To cowboys on the northern plains before highways and horse trailers, smooth-gaited horses were not novel – they were standard fare. These “single-foot” horses (horses that would be said today to perform an amble) were the automatic and unquestioned choice for a long ride. Theodore Roosevelt marveled at the toughness and ground-covering ability of the Western cow ponies he found on his trips to Wyoming and southern Canada. These ponies had one trait in common; they were smooth-gaited. In *The Wilderness Hunter*, Roosevelt is careful to point out the gaits the cow ponies performed: “sometimes we racked, or hacked along at the fox trot which is the cow-pony’s ordinary gait.” Later, Roosevelt tells of riding with his ranch foreman at a “rack, pace, single-foot, or slow lope” and goes on to assert that the trot is disliked by “all peoples who have to do much of their life-work in the saddle.”

Myth #7: Gaited Horse are only for the Elderly or for Inexperienced Riders

It is a compliment that gaited horses work for people who are elderly, handicapped or inexperienced riders. However, you need not be frail or incompetent to be attracted to gaited horses. There is nothing wrong with liking a smooth comfortable ride on a sensible and good tempered horse.

Myth #8: Gaited Horses are Easy to Ride

This is the biggest myth of all. Gaited horses are not “Easy to Ride” -- they are “Easy on the Rider.”

There are several reasons for this important distinction. The fact is that most gaited horses are comfortable to ride, especially at their smooth intermediate gait. Smooth is a distinctive feeling whether it's a Paso Llano or a Flat Walk. Once you recognize smooth, you won't be happy with anything else. However, with this smooth ride come some challenges.

Walk-trot horses perform 3 gaits. Many soft-gaited horses, by contrast, are capable of performing seven or eight gaits. Most of these gaits are comfortable to ride, but they may not be the signature gait of the breed. Thus, riders of gaited horse need to decide whether a smooth and comfortable gait is more important than a gait that is “absolutely correct” according to the breed description. Right from the start, owners have a choice to make. What they choose will depend on what they want to do with their gaited horses, of course.

Whatever owners and riders decide, they are still responsible for optimal and correct gaiting. Horses are lazy by nature and gaited horses are no different. They can be sloppy in their gaits and if the rider is not paying attention smooth and correct can easily become smooth and incorrect or slow. It is not the fault of the horse if the rider is not paying attention to gait.

At the same time, because many soft-gaited horses are multi gaited, if their rider shifts weight or the terrain changes, these athletic and talented horses tend to adapt to the condition and in doing so change their gait. This is sometimes frustrating, but also fascinating. It appeals to those of us who want to improve our riding abilities and enrich our riding experience. When we reach the point where we can get the horse to shift to another soft-gait at our conscious direction, then we have arrived at the epitome of horsemanship.

What We Can Learn from Gaited Horses

I can sing the praise of the gaited breeds in hopes that you will experience them and learn to appreciate their unique abilities. However, the most important thing to be learned from gaited horses is what not to do, and/or what not to allow to happen in your breed or discipline.

As modern gaited horse breeders and owners worked to achieve the “smooth and distinctive gaits” of their breed, they were not content with what the horse could do naturally. They thought the natural gaits of their horses would not compare with the animated and high-stepping action

of some other horses. They wanted a flashier gait with more animation and action. In other words, they wanted exaggeration, because it would bring them money, power and praise. This desire for exaggeration led to questionable practices, genetic weakness in some breedlines, and soring. Gait can not be developed if it is not in the genes, but what is in the genes can be enhanced by man through artificial means, devices and practices. When man tries to change the form, he changes the function and things become complicated.

Unfortunately, money, power and ego are precursors to abuse, and one unfortunate by product of the gaited horse industry is the abuse to which some breeds are subjected. The most blatant abuse is suffered by the Tennessee Walking Horse, my breed of choice. The Horse Protection Act (HPA) was passed to stop the abuse of all horses in the show ring, but the only horses named specifically in the act are Tennessee Walking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horses and Racking Horses. These were and continue to be the worst-abused animals. The abuse to which they are exposed spans the gamut from chemical soring to pressure shoeing and everything in between. Under the HPA, the legs of horses from these breeds must not have evidence of any foreign substances on them, they must not have scars on their pasterns, and they must not be sore. They must be examined for soundness prior to showing. Examination of these horses now includes the same Sniffers that are used for National Security. This tests for any chemicals used on the legs. Starting this year, thermography will be used to detect inflammation from pressure shoeing. This sounds very scientific and positive, but there are never enough funds to enforce the rules at every show. Although it is a Federal offense to contravene the Horse Protection Act, few charges are laid. While the abuse of the TWH is the most evident, all breeds of horse are subjected to abuse.

In response to this abuse, Friends of Sound Horse was formed in 1997. FOSH is a national leader in the promotion of natural, sound gaited horses and in the fight against the abuse and soring of Tennessee Walking Horses. FOSH has three main areas of focus:

- teaching sound training principals for gaited horses,
- sanctioning sound gaited horse shows and events
- working to end soring.

Our mission is to promote “sound,” not sored, naturally-gaited horses. The group works to educate people about the humane care, training and treatment of all gaited horses.

One last thing: I notice you end on the HPA. Which, of course, you HAVE to talk about, sadly. But you leave it there. I am wondering if it would make sense to add a final paragraph to tie it all together, to focus on the journey and tie it back to you being taught by ethical people and that though it is a factor, it isn't necessarily a deterrent to getting into gaited horses?

My journey with gaited horse started by accident, but my decision to continue was a conscious one. And it has been an amazing experience. I began the journey with guides who had a horse background before they became involved with gaited horses. They were knowledgeable and ethical and showed me that “saving” the natural gait was important. They recognized and ensured that abuses from other places would not be acceptable or allowed in Canada. They made my journey possible, and I am grateful to them. The journey has never been boring, and throughout I have had the privilege of riding kind horses that are smooth and comfortable.