

Flat Foot Walk

WHAT IS AND WHAT ISN'T A FLAT WALK

By Lee Ziegler, 1997

Just what is a flat foot walk? According to the MFTHBA rule book the definition of the flat walk is supposed to be a "four beat gait performed in a square and straight manner." In addition, it is to be done with style, animation and over-reach of the front track. No mention is made of preferred speed for the gait. Our Walking Horse cousins, who are the only others to use the flat walk, define it as a square, even, four beat walk with each foot hitting the ground at separate, even intervals. They expect it to be noticeably slower than the running walk, which is expected to be about 8-10 mph. Nice definitions. Now, in the real world, what exactly is this mysterious gait, and how can you tell it from some other that may be masquerading under the name in the show ring?

The Ordinary Walk:

The flat walk is a speeded-up version of the ordinary walk done by all horses. Before you can understand it, you need to know just how a horse moves in the slow, ordinary or dog walk. Not many people, if asked to describe how a horse walks, would be able to come up with much more than the vague statement that the horse moves his legs and sets his hooves down separately. If you really look at a horse walking, you will see that the legs follow a definite foot-fall sequence. Starting with the right hind, the sequence of the walk is: right hind, right fore, left hind, left fore. This sequence is only part of the story. The foot-falls of a horse in a walk are also evenly timed, that is, the interval of time between the set down of the right hind and right fore, is equal to the time between the set down of the right fore and left hind. This timing is very important, because uneven spacing between the set down of hooves will produce a gait that is not a walk. For example, the stepping pace gait has the same sequence as the walk, but the interval between the set down of the right hind and right fore is shorter than that between the right fore and left hind.

In addition to sequence and timing, the ordinary walk has a definite support sequence that makes it different from other gaits that may have the same set-down sequence. A normal horse, one that is not lame or inhibited in his motion, supports his weight in the walk as follows: Both hind hooves on ground, left fore also on ground (tripod support); followed by a period of diagonal support, when the left fore and right hind remain on the ground after the left hind lifts; followed by another period of tripod support, this time with both front on the ground as the right front sets down and the right hind remains on the ground; followed by a period of lateral support, as the right hind and right fore stay on the ground and the left fore is lifted; followed again by tripod support as the left hind sets down. This three foot, two foot, three foot support sequence, when added to the foot-fall sequence and the even timing define the walk. Horse will usually over-stride their front track at the walk, by a distance ranging from a few inches to a foot or so.

Horses normally do this walk at about 3-4 mph. The U.S. Cavalry, which had very practical ideas about speed and endurance, expected that a troop on the march would go at about 4 mph at the walk. Probably the only horses to travel much more slowly than that are modern "pleasure" Quarter horses which sometimes barely go at 2 mph. How it feels and looks:

In an ordinary walk, there is a distinct feel of front to back sway as the horse moves forward. The horse nods his head as part of the natural undulation of his body, his head and neck moving upward as he reaches forward with a front leg, allowing free use of his shoulder and a more effortless movement in his back and hindquarters. His head and neck lower as his front foot hits the ground, only to rise again as the other front leg reaches forward. You feel each foot hit the ground at even intervals.

The Flat Walk:

The flat walk has exactly the same foot-fall sequence, timing and support sequence as the ordinary walk. It differs, however, in speed. A normal, square, flat walk is done at about 5 to 6 mph. A very fast one can be above 7 mph., although horses that can go that fast and stay in a true flat walk are rare. This increased speed comes from an increase in over stride and a more rapid repetition of the steps.

How it feels and looks:

In the flat walk, the front to back sway of the ordinary walk is reduced. You feel each evenly timed step with no sway or bounce in any direction. The head nod of the ordinary walk is exaggerated in the flat walk, due to the speed of the steps. However, it is possible for a very stiff horse to flat walk without showing much nodding action. The nod, although it does not define the gait, is usually part of it, as is a level, smooth motion in the croup.

Deviations in the Flat Walk:

There are several gaits that show up as deviations of the flat walk in the show ring. They can be confusing because they are all done at about the same speed as the flat walk.

The Broken Pace:

This gait goes by several names — stepping pace, pace walk, amble. Although the foot-fall sequence is the same in this gait as the walk, and the support sequence is usually the same as well, it is easy to identify because in it the timing of the foot-falls is no longer even. In it, the interval between the set down of lateral hooves (right hind, right fore) is shorter than that between diagonal hooves (right fore, left hind). With a good ear you can hear the different beat of this gait, a 1-2--3-4 instead of the 1-2-3-4 of the true flat walk. Another sign of this gait is the side to side swinging of the head and neck in place of the up and down nod of the walk. The croup shifts from side to side, swaying with the action of

the gait.

The Fox Walk:

This gait is becoming very common in the show ring. Again, although the foot-fall sequence and support sequence are the same in this gait as in the walk, the timing is no longer even. This time the interval between the set down of the diagonal hooves (right fore, left hind) is shorter than that between the lateral ones (right hind, right fore). The sound is the same as the broken pace, a 1-2--3-4 beat, this time with the beats closest together coming from the diagonal hooves. There is a distinct up and down nod, just as in the flat walk, but it is accompanied by a slight up and down motion in the croup and tail. The fox walk is really just a slow fox trot, without the obvious "breaking" in the hocks of the faster gait.

The Running Walk:

Some horses are pushed for so much speed in the flat walk that it disappears and becomes a running walk. This gait has the same foot fall sequence and timing as the flat walk, but the support sequence changes as a result of speed. There is no longer a three foot, two foot progression. In the running walk, there is no point at which both front hooves are in contact with the ground, although there is still a point when both hind carry weight at the same time. The support is: both hind, right front; right front, left hind; left hind alone; left hind, right hind, left front. There is noticeable head nod at this gait, and the croup stays level. The most obvious difference between this gait and the flat walk is speed. Any horse that is going faster than 7 mph in a "flat walk" is no longer flat walking but is instead doing a running walk.

The "Stepping Rack":

This is not a commonly used gait name, but it is descriptive of the kind of motion some horses do in place of the flat walk. The gait retains the foot-fall sequence and timing of the flat walk, but the support sequence changes again, so that now there is no point when both hind or both front are weight bearing in contact with the ground. There is up and down motion to the croup but no true head nod in this way of going. Again, this gait is faster than a true flat walk.

No Horse is Perfect:

Horses are individuals and there will be differences in the way they perform the flat walk. Some will stride longer, some will nod more, some will not reach or nod very much at all. As long as they are doing a square, even, four beat walk, with the three foot, two foot support sequence, some animation, and some speed beyond a dog walk, they are correct in the gait. As soon as a horse loses these things, changing the timing and the support, he is no longer in gait, no matter how fast he moves or how he nods his head. The phrase "form must never be sacrificed to speed" pretty much sums up the situation. What gait is your horse doing when they call for a flat walk?

Editors Note: Lee Ziegler is recognized throughout the country for her many articles she has contributed to numerous gaited horse publications over the years. Three such publications are Gait Way Magazine, The Gaited Horse Magazine, and the book Fox Trot Trackings by Nadine I Moeller.

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