

THE CENTAUR

The Purity of the Gaits

by Kathryn King Johnson, M.Ed.

Rhythm and *tempo* dictate the purity of the gaits. Rhythm is to dressage as it is to music. In dressage it is the arrangement of the horse's footfalls; in music it is the arrangement of notes. Tempo is the speed of the footfalls, or the speed of the notes.

In some of the gaits, we also have a moment of suspension, when none of the horse's legs are on the ground. Suspension is similar to a rest in music.

We all know the correct rhythm of the gaits: the walk has four beats, the trot has two beats, and the canter has three beats.

But what happens when things go wrong?

The Walk

The correct rhythm of the walk is: 1,2,3,4. The sequence of legs in motion is: 1. left hind 2. left front 3. right hind 4. right front.

Deviations in the walk can happen when the walk is pushed too fast, or when precipitous collection occurs. The walk can become lateral as the rhythm changes. A lateral walk begins to feel side to side, and the count changes, becoming 1-2, pause, 3-4, pause. The sequence of the legs remains the same, but the rhythm changes.

If a lateral walk is pushed harder and the horse allowed to hollow, it can become a pace, a gait usually seen in gaited horses and camels. The count of the pace is 1,2,1,2. The

sequence of legs is: 1. left hind/left front 2. right hind/right front.

Because there is no moment of suspension in the walk and usually not enough impulsion in the walk, it is the easiest gait to destroy and the hardest gait to fix.

The Trot



The correct rhythm of the trot is: 1, suspension 2, suspension. The sequence of the legs is: 1. diagonal pair right hind/left front, suspension, 2. diagonal pair left hind/right front, suspension.

A trot can become flat, a jog, when it loses its moment of suspension. The count becomes 1,2,1,2. While this is not

technically impure, it is not correct for dressage.

The trot, technically two beat, can become a four beat gait. Deviations in the trot are being studied on stop action video and are sometimes discussed as "positive diagonal advanced placement" and "negative diagonal advanced placement." For our purposes, we will use the classical terms when discussing the deviations.

The trot can become four beat in two different ways.

In the first scenario, the horse falls on his forehead, and his front foot touches the ground before its diagonal hind leg partner.

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In "The Complete Training of Horse and Rider," Podhajsky says, "one of the most common faults in the trot is the hurried steps of the forelegs in which they reach the ground before the diagonal hind leg, so that two separate hoof beats are heard instead of one. These horses carry a greater proportion of their weight and that of their rider on their shoulders." This type of four beat trot is often seen when Western pleasure horses are slowed too much, with their heads lowered too much.

In the second scenario, often seen in modern extended trots in the show ring, the horse becomes "hasty behind" or "dwells in front."

continued on pg. 2

Get fit for Spring! Optimizing your saddle for better performance

With show season on the way, we wanted to discuss the importance of a well-fit saddle, particularly in regard to competing.

Saddle fitter Jennifer drew up a set of common questions and answered them in hopes that, you, the reader, would know the basics of finding and fitting the right saddle for your horse.

How do you check for a properly fitting saddle?

My first priorities are placement and bal-

ance. A correct saddle should have a natural resting point on the horse's back. That placement should give clearance for the horse's shoulder, be away from his lumbar back, and the billets should line up with the girth line. The balance of every saddle is unique, however most agree that the pommel should be lower than the cantle and the lowest point of the seat should be in the approximate center of the saddle. If your saddle doesn't meet these criteria then you should get a second opinion.

What are some common saddle fit problems?

The most common problems I see are narrow saddles. I fit many Quarter horses, Morgans, and draft crosses. They all tend to have low, broad withers and short backs. Unfortunately, saddles tend to block their shoulders and transfer pressure into their lumbar back. I see some pretty suprising pad solutions too.

What is the most unusual saddle fit problem you've encountered?

During my last training in Virginia we worked with a lovely Grand Prix show *continued on page 11*

Purity of Gaits, cont. from pg. 1

The hind leg touches the ground before its diagonal front partner.

Podhajsky says, "if the hind leg is put down before the diagonal foreleg and again two hoof beats are heard, it is known as a hasty hind leg.... In terms of riding the horse promises more in front than he can show with his hindquarters."

The Canter

The rhythm of a pure canter is: 1,2,3, suspension. The sequence of the legs on the left lead is: 1. right hind 2. left hind (leading)/right front 3. left front (leading leg), suspension.

When the canter is slowed too much, or collected incorrectly, it can become four beat. In the same way the trot becomes four beat in several ways, so can the canter. The first happens when the horse is slowed, but not collected, and the head pulled in too much, putting him on the forehand. The second beat of the canter breaks down. The diagonal pair does not strike together; rather the front foot touches first, then the hind partner. The beat of suspension disappears. The sequence of a four beat left lead canter is: 1. right hind 2. right front 3. left hind (leading) 4. left front (leading).

The canter can also become four beat

when it is collected too strongly. This often happens in the pirouette canter or school canter, and when the horse is in a pirouette. The second beat of the canter breaks down again, but this time the hind leg touches down first, then the diagonal front partner. Slow motion studies of Olympic horses show that many modern pirouettes are four beats, rather than three. The sequence of a four beat left lead pirouette canter is: 1. right hind. 2. left hind (leading). 3. right front. 4. left front (leading).

The purity of the canter can be compromised when the horse is slowed so much he is trotting behind. In this form of four beat canter, too often seen in Western pleasure horses, the horse appears to be on the correct lead in front, but not taking any lead behind. The hind legs are symmetrically trotting. The sequence of the left lead is: 1. right hind 2. left hind (neither hind leg leads). 3. right front. 4. left front (leading). There is no moment of suspension.

The canter can appear lateral, almost two beat, when it becomes too flat and loses its jump. The beat of suspension disappears. The horse appears to be pacing, with the legs on one side hitting almost at the same time. There will still appear to be a lead, as both legs on the inside go further forward than the legs on the outside. This canter is sometimes seen on gaited horses and on dressage horses

when they tire. The sequence of a lateral left lead canter appears: 1. right hind/right front 2. left hind/left front (leading).

Yet another way the purity of the canter suffers is when the horse becomes disunited, taking one lead behind and the other lead in front. This is also called cross cantering or cross firing. It happens when a flying lead change is late behind, but sometimes happens when a horse is not strong enough behind and loses the back lead when turning. Although the disunited canter is awkward and uncomfortable for horse and rider, it is still three beats. The sequence of the disunited canter, left lead, is: 1. left hind 2. right hind (leading)/right front 3. left front (leading)

The rider should always keep in mind the purity of the gaits, especially when trying to amplify the gaits. A showy, big gait is not always correct. Because impurities in the gaits reflect incorrect training, they will be penalized heavily in the show ring.

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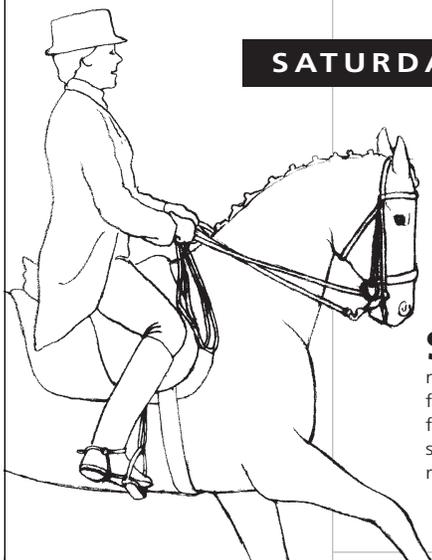
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