

Module 6: The Trot



When it comes to driving horses, the trot is the gait you'll likely spend the most time using.

In the show ring, during a driving event, on the trail – the trot is where your horse is spending his time working, so it's where repetitive strain injuries and poor muscling is going to be caused ... or hopefully, prevented!

The Gaits Within The Trot

In the showring, the trot gait names vary depending on the class, but in general you'll have a more collected trot and an extended trot, or in some cases, 3 different trots.

In dressage, the basic trot is called a Working Trot. This is the trot where your horse is working at their ideal rhythm (again, will vary depending on the horse, but remember that Miniature Horses tend to rush), with good balance and posture. I'm going to use Working Trot to mean this for this course – your nice solid, ground covering, rhythmic trot. In the breed show ring this would be called a "pleasure trot" in most cases, but working trot is more descriptive of what we're asking so that's the term I'm going to use.

From there, you can begin working on a Lengthened Trot, lengthening the horse's stride without changing the rhythm, and an Extended Trot, where the horse is working to his utmost, still in a balanced frame with long, powerful strides.

From the Working Trot you can also begin working on a Collected Trot, where the horse's stride length shortens and he carries more weight on his hindquarters, elevating the front end.

Improving The Trot

While the walk and canter can be improved in every horse, the trot is the gait that is most able to be influenced by correct, methodical exercise to build strength and suppleness.

No matter what sort of mover your horse is, we need to start by working in a relaxed posture. By encouraging good rhythm and relaxation, with the hind end working well underneath them, the back raised, the base of the neck relaxed, we can ensure they're building the correct muscles to continue to improve for their entire career, which will be a long and healthy one as their bodies won't be as likely break down due to injury.

Try It:

Watch for signs of good movement in the trot.

- **Rhythm – what rhythm seems to work best for your horse, letting them sustain seemingly effortlessly the metronome 1-2-1-2 pace?**
- **Hind End – are their hind legs tracking up to near the forelimb? We won't have an overtrack at the working trot (talented and well conditioned horses at a big extended trot will!) but we do want to**

ensure that their hind end is working underneath them, making full use of those big, powerful muscles. Is there a large gap between your horse's front and hind limbs or are they tracking up?

- **Back** – Is it tense and hollow? Or lifted and swinging? Watch for how close their back is to the backstrap on the harness as a guideline and compare to their head position – when their head comes up, watch as the back gets further from the backstrap. A long topline and short underline is ideal for a strong posture – just like a bridge.
- **Head and Neck** – Is their neck upside down and braced, or relaxed and round? Watch for the bulging muscle on the bottom of their neck – a sure sign they are braced and building the wrong muscles. The base of the neck should be elevated, and the muscles that are working should be along the crest, not the underside. While in early stages we don't care where the head is, if the nose is stuck straight out that's a good visual marker of tension throughout the body.

Horses naturally carry 60% of their weight on their forehand. In order to have them move most efficiently while pulling a vehicle, we need to start strengthening their hind end so they're making use of those big strong muscles and carrying more weight, elevating their forelimbs and allowing for more expressive movement.

Don't care about fancy movement? Concentrating on good balance and use of the hind end will also reduce the potential for injury and improve the longevity of your driving horse.

Rushing

It's going to be a lot more likely to struggle with rushing at the trot. Start with straight lines and gradual turns to help the horse balance and minimize their need to rush until they begin building strength. (We're going to talk a lot about the tools to do this in the next two modules on transitions and bending!)

It's also hard for us, as the driver, to get the feel for the difference between light, floating long strides, and quick, short, rushing strides.

Try It:

The same exercise we did at the walk is going to help a lot to give you the feeling of rushing vs lengthening.

Count the steps between two markers at your usual working trot so you have a baseline. Remember, just choose one hind leg – whichever seems easiest for you to track, or have a helper count for you – and count every time that leg hits the ground.

Next, try to put as few steps as possible between the markers – that means your strides need to be as long as possible.

Then, try to put as many steps as possible – your horse's strides as short as possible.

What did you learn? What can you change to improve the next attempt? Go back and forth between long and short a few times, and see if you can improve your numbers. If not, it's not a big deal ... it'll get better and better as your horse gets stronger using the exercises in the next few modules!

Contact

At the trot, your horse doesn't need to move his head and neck like he does at the walk, so you can – and should – have a more consistent contact. That contact is most importantly communication, allowing you to clearly show your horse where you'd like him to go, and giving you information about how he's feeling about what you're asking, but it's also a way to help your horse balance.

Strong contact, where you feel like you're holding the horse up or pulling his nose in, isn't going to do him any favours. There will be times during his training where he'll be heavier in your hands than others, but if your hands are sore after a drive then you are doing too much to help balance your horse, and need to focus on giving him the tools to hold himself up.

A horse that is strong and balanced and moving well in his own body will be very light in your hands, but still with a strong connection for communication.

One of the times we often lose our contact is when we're asking the horse to go go go, but when we throw our contact away entirely, we're going to throw our horse off balance. We also don't want to restrict their forward movement with TOO much contact, so it's a balancing act.

Try It:

Play with contact while doing the exercise above, so that you have a more quantifiable outcome in number of steps.

Try to get long strides/few steps with little to no contact, just sending your horse forward. What happened to your step count? In most cases, you'll find they fall on the forehand, shorten their strides and rush to keep their balance. This tells you they need a little more contact to help them to lengthen. In a rare case, you might find they do lengthen better – it could be you're using too much contact.

Experiment with more and less contact and see what happens with the stride length. It's all information, and every horse and driver is different, so you're learning what works best for you and your horse.