

Module 5: The Walk



The walk is the most important, and most neglected, gait.

With our driving horses, we tend to always focus on the trot, as it's the "big money" gait in the showring (so to speak, of course there's no actual money involved lol) and because it's just fun to go zipping around behind a speedy trotting Miniature Horse.

But the walk is where we can find - and fix - issues with balance, and tension, and communication.

The walk is where we can build strength, warm up and cool down muscles and tendons, and refocus our horse mentally.

Focusing on helping your horse have the best walk they can will have positive repercussions throughout their entire driving career.

The walk uses more muscles than any other gait. One of my mentors, Centered Driving instructor Peggy Brown, says that the walk is for strength, the trot is for balance, and the canter is for wind, so while it's important to work in all three gaits, the walk is the one where you help your horse get stronger.

A Good Walk

In a good walk, you'll see a horse using their whole body:

- Balancing gestures of the head and neck
- Hind legs overtracking – falling ahead of the print of the forefoot
- Swinging through back – visible through a "bum wiggle"
- Strong, marching rhythm 1-2-3-4

While the benefits of a good walk and time spent improving the gait will be felt throughout whatever sort of driving you do with your horse, if you're in any sort of dressage test, the walk is scored double: whatever score you get counts twice, so a good walk can make or break your overall score.

Developing a Good Walk

First, walk.

So often we jump in and just go zooming off ... I know, I did it for the first two decades I drove Miniature Horses. I used to say that my best horse "didn't know how to walk" but it wasn't that at all. When I started driving him again, after having to learn a lot to drive less naturally talented horses in the 6 years he was off with injury, not only could he walk, he had a really nice walk, I'd just never asked him to or encouraged it.

Plan to walk for the first and last 10 minutes of your drive. Not only does this give you a chance to focus on and improve the walk, but it'll give your horse a change to warm up and stretch their muscles and ligaments, and then cool down at the end of the session as well, as stretching warm muscles is even more beneficial.

“But my horse doesn’t WANT to walk!”

Try It:

Give your horse responsibility for the walk. If you’ve previously only walked when necessary, you’re likely holding them to the walk. When we’re pulling on the reins to keep them at the walk, they’re not going to be able to use their head and neck to balance, so their whole walk will be short and stilted, without any of the benefits we’re looking for.

Ask your horse to walk, then allow them to go forward with soft contact, to allow for the balancing gestures. If they’re new to being asked to walk forward, they’re going to break to a trot. That’s okay, just calmly ask them to walk again, with regular voice and rein cues, as though you were asking from a planned trot – no sudden grabbing, jerking or any sort of rebuke for breaking – they don’t know yet, so we can’t get after them, just ask them again. Be consistent and patient, they’ll figure it out!

Once your horse is walking consistently, start watching for those markers of a good walk. Once you start focusing on it, the walk will almost improve itself!

One of the most easily quantifiable ways to determine if your walk is improving is to watch where the hind limb falls in relation to the print from the forelimb. You can see this from the side if you look to the side slightly. See where you are as a starting point – it will vary a great deal from one horse to the next depending on their conformation and natural ability to walk, but every single horse can improve their walk.

Try It:

Get your horse moving at a nice, forward walk with good balancing gestures of the head and neck, and a nice bum wiggle to show they are swinging through the back. See where the hind foot falls compared to the trace of the forefoot. Is it a few inches behind? Touching or overlapping? Ahead?

Having trouble telling? Try walking over a freshly groomed area in the arena, or anywhere that will leave a print in the dirt you can examine later.

Try this exercise when you first start driving your horse, and then again at the end of the session when their muscles are warm. Do you see an improvement?

Check in on this exercise regularly to watch as your walk continues to improve. How much of any overtrack can you get with your horse? The more they overtrack, the more they’re using their hind end and the stronger and more balanced they’re becoming.

Gaits Within The Walk

In the showring, they’ll just ask you to walk, but in other forms of driving you’ll find different gaits.

Working Walk: A nice forward, marching walk on a light elastic contact. This is the walk you’ll want to utilize when asked to walk in the show ring, or in a dressage test (unless otherwise specified).

Lengthened Walk: The same rhythm as their working walk, but with a lengthening of the strides and their whole body, without losing the elastic contact. Covering more ground without rushing.

Free Walk: A forward, stretching walk, where the horse takes as long a stride as possible (without rushing!) while stretching through their topline with their hind leg reaching well under their body with a significant overtrack and their head and neck reaching forward and down.

More on the Free Walk

The Free Walk is the most important gait you can teach your horse for their physical benefit, at least, in my opinion. 😊

As a stretch, it's invaluable. It stretches every muscle in the horse's topline, from the hind fetlock to the poll. The free walk is an excellent way to warm up body and mind, as well as stretch and cool out muscles following a workout. The movement of stretching the topline and lowering the head releases dopamine as well, so it can be used as a reward in conjunction with a walk break after they do something really well. A free walk can also "reset" them, giving you a way to work out physical and mental tension and return to work with a relaxed posture, rather than a tense one.

And a good free walk will score super high (and double, like all walk gaits!) on your dressage test!

Try It:

Teaching the free walk is actually easier with the horses who "didn't like to walk" and were being held to the walk with strong contact, but teaching it is the same technique regardless.

Start at a working walk with as much contact as you can have without interrupting the rhythm of the walk. Gradually relax the contact, asking the horse to take it up and follow your hands down into a stretch, while encouraging them to give a bigger walk.

It's a bit of a balancing act until they start to catch on, and if it isn't going well, don't spend a lot of time focusing on this – it will come as their other skills advance as well! Keep working at the walk, keep asking for a free walk, and it'll gradually get better and better.

A few steps at a time is all you need at first, and then build duration gradually.

The good news is that it feels really good to the horse – think about when you have a really good full body stretch, when you get out of the car after a long road trip – so it's self rewarding. Once they start to understand what you're asking, they'll give you more and more because it feels so good.

Lengthening instead of Rushing

When we start asking for a bigger walk, whether a free walk or a lengthened walk, we're likely to first get them rushing and breaking to a trot, both because we're encouraging too much and because they don't yet have the strength to maintain a lengthened gait more than a few steps at first.

It can be hard for us as well to get the feel of it – of keeping the rhythm the same but lengthening the stride. Here's one of my favourite exercises to start playing with stride length. One of the best things you can do for the strength and muscular health of your horse is to vary your gaits, rather than doing everything the very same all the time, and this is a great exercise to help make sure you're using - and expanding - your horse's entire range of motion.

Try It:

Set up two cones about 10 to 20 feet apart, or choose two fenceposts or other markers. Doesn't matter what or how far, we just need a start and end point.

Walk from the start to finish and count every time your horse's left hind leg hits the ground (or right hind if you'd rather 😊). How many steps did you get?

Now try the smallest, tiniest walk you can manage? How many steps can you squeeze into the space? Did you get a bigger number than with your regular working walk? If not, then you may have slowed the rhythm, but not shorted the strides.

Next (you guessed it!) try the biggest walk! How few steps can you take between the pylons? On your first attempt, did you get the same number of steps or maybe even more than you did on your working walk? That's pretty common, as we end up rushing and their steps get faster, but shorter.

This is a great one to play with! Try faster and slower, then longer steps vs shorter, and see how that feels different to you.