

Snippet 18: How the Horses' Rhythm Affects Its Balance

At the Violet Hopkins/USDF Instructor Symposiums the presenter Major Anders Lindgren said “In the walk, the horse should stand clearly over each leg”

If you get to see a horse doing that, it is such an integrated look. Also, it tends to draw the rider into the picture so well that the two become one.

So how can you tell if what you think you are seeing is “IT.” First, Rhythm is the BEAT. It comes from the feet. That alliteration of words makes it easy to remember. And, in my view, the only adjective that can be put in front of “rhythm” is Clear.

If you want a way to count the beat to see if it is clear, your voice must be in a monotone. If you emphasize one beat it says the horse is lame, as uneven rhythm is a classic definition of “lame”.

While you are watching for “clear rhythm”, it does not matter how fast that particular horse is moving. Tempo Is Beats Per Minute or to quote the glossary of terms “tempo is the rate of repetition of the rhythm”. Each horse has it' own optimum tempo. For example, in a musical freestyle, the “music should *support* the gait.”

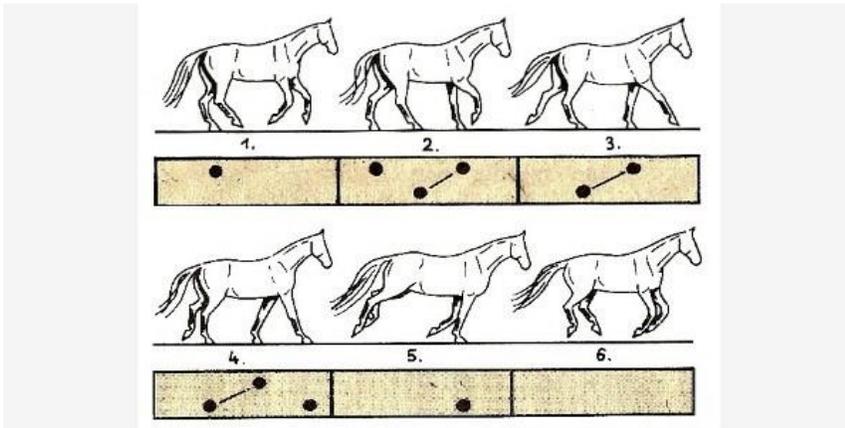
Lots to remember, so let's go back to our horse which is “walking while (momentarily) standing clearly over each leg”, you will see that each hoof meets the ground with confidence. That is a very subjective way to look and evaluate, but it can be seen if one slightly swings with that beat.

When the beat is so clear it produces relaxed and swinging limbs. The horse appears to be in a happy state of balance. And the tempo becomes just right for the body style of that animal. Optimum beat produces clear rhythm which produces optimum balance for each creature.

So far all of this has been about the walk. Trot and Canter can achieve this same optimum state of rhythm, balance and tempo. The trot has 2 or 4 beats. It just depends on how you count it. One diagonal pair moves and then the other and the horse is completely untethered to the ground in between those pairs. The airtime is a tiny moment of flight and feels like being suspended when one is in the saddle.

A teaching/training idea is that if a horse and rider are tending to trot too fast, they and the instructor can count one two one two. If the horse is too slow in tempo, the count can be one two three four and that encourages them to hurry a bit. Getting to that optimum tempo for a horse again devolves into the moments of touching the ground and the moments of airtime – suspension. When that moment comes, once again the horse and rider seem to become one and the effortless balance emerges. Hearing it probably is the best way to recognize and join into that balance. However, it is visible as well, if the watcher breathes with the beat/rhythm.

Canter is more complicated as it is an asymmetrical gait. The phases of feet on the ground are 1,3,2,3,1,0.



Even though the horse still has 4 legs, it is a 3 beat rhythm. When the limbs follow the phases, a listener can count one, two, three, or even one, one, one, because each stride/jump is a complete entity. Horses without enough balance and strength and muscular education scurry, run flat out or use their hind legs and front legs without unity. Some are born balanced and thus have that clarity of rhythm, but when a rider is added it's more difficult for all of them.

We need to help them find their balance by balancing ourselves and moving with them. How? Well our pelvis must roll under and under and under with each stride. Our elbows must follow the head movements, we must balance ourselves at our own centers of balance/gravity, and our bodies must remain in positive tension, so we hold ourselves up. This would be like carrying a child who is awake and holding herself and carrying one who is asleep with muscles more or less flaccid.

Sally Swift gives a meaningful visual. If a woman is walking along carrying a basket of rice on her head, who is balancing whom? Certainly not the basket!

I am tending to think that in the canter, the horses' balance must be developed before the rhythm can become clear. In trot especially I might be persuaded that the rhythm clarity comes before the balance develops. In walk the two seem more intertwined to me and either can be the prerequisite. Then the horse knows where the ground is, and each leg does equal work. This allows happy balance and a happy confidence.

But when a horse has a clear rhythm coming from that confident balance, the tempo is steady and the harmony between him and his rider is lovely to see.

I trust that the interrelationship between clarity of rhythm, balance and tempo are more clear. Take time to look at as many horses and riders as you can find. Maybe you can only believe that you know when they are going too fast or too slowly. That is a good place to start. And ask who is balancing whom? Or Not. Have fun having with what Violet Hopkins used to say, "Have a good eye". And enjoy the feelings.

Sue Hughes