

Thoughts About the Walk

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Over the years there have been a number of changes in the walk requirements of our dressage tests—trying to produce a clear understanding of what we are looking for in the various paces of the walk and how to deal with the often confusing definitions. Training through Second Level tests have two paces at the walk: Free and Medium.

The Free Walk

"The free walk is a pace of relaxation in which the horse is allowed complete freedom to lower and stretch out his head and neck." (AHSA Rule Book definition)

On the test sheet it says that the free walk may be performed on either a long or loose rein. The Judges' Directives say that this walk will be judged on straightness, quality of walk, and transitions.

Therefore the walk is judged on regularity (pureness), freedom, evenness, and levelness. Freedom entails range of motion—including overstep. However, there are certain factors to be taken into consideration when assessing overstep.

1. Are the strides balanced—as much reach from the shoulders as the hindlegs? A horse built high behind may have a big stride from the hindlegs, but very short from the shoulders and as a result shows a big overstep for the wrong reasons.
2. Does the horse have a very balanced and active walk, but a long back, which makes it impossible to show a clear overstep?
3. Too big an overstep can be a disadvantage when collected walk is introduced. If the biomechanics of the

walk are not carefully monitored, a pacing walk can result.

Other modifiers to the score may be lack of straightness, lack of stretch over the topline, momentary losses of rhythm or variable tempo.

The Medium Walk

"A free, regular and unconstrained walk of moderate lengthening. The horse, *remaining on the bit*, walks energetically but calmly with even and determined steps, the hind feet touching the ground in front of the footprints of the forefeet. The rider maintains a *light*, soft and steady contact with the mouth." (AHSA Rule Book definition)

One of the biggest problems with this walk is that the definition—"remaining on the bit"—is at odds with AHSA Article 1903.3 which states "it is at the pace of the walk that the imperfections of dressage are most evident. This is also the reason why a horse should not be asked to walk on the bit at the early stages of the training."

The German Manual, *The Principles of Riding* further states: "The walk is the one pace in which rhythm and freedom of movement can be most easily spoiled by bad riding. Many riders spoil the rhythm and freedom of the walk by using rest periods (in walk) to shape their horse's outline with the reins."

"Another way in which the natural walk is interfered with and the rhythm damaged is if the rider does not follow the movement with his hands, but keeps them still, impairing the natural nodding movement, and therefore the natural balance of the walk."



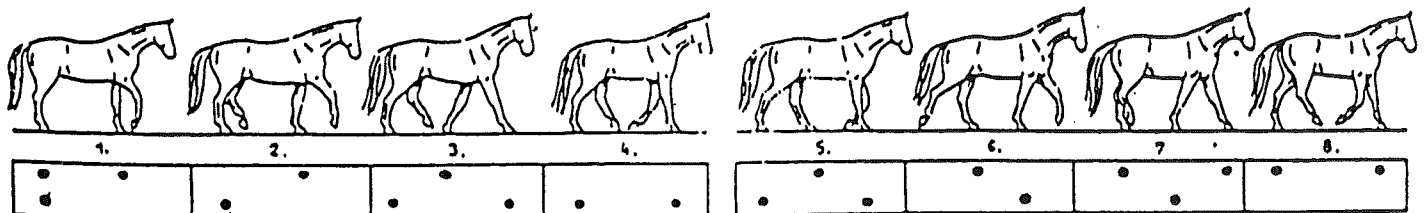
Elizabeth Searle

"On the bit" seems to be the most important issue to many competitors and trainers, resulting in restriction of the medium walk and thereby resulting in poor scores. The rider does not accommodate the oscillation of the neck, but rides with fixed hands. Not only does this affect the medium walk score, but the rider score as well.

The Extended Walk

"The horse covers as much ground as possible without haste and without losing the regularity of his steps, the hind feet touching the ground *clearly in front of the footprints of the forefeet*. The rider allows the horse to stretch out his head and neck without, however, losing contact with the mouth." (AHSA Rule Book definition)

The extended walk takes the place of the free walk at Third Level and above. It will be noted that "contact with the mouth", is the criterion, *not* "on the bit." However, too often the restricting damage has already been done in the lower levels and many horses not only



THE WALK continued

do not stretch over the topline, but have lost reach from the shoulders.

The Collected Walk

"The horse, remaining "on the bit", moves resolutely forward, with his neck raised and arched, and showing clear self-carriage. The head approached the vertical position, the light contact with the mouth being maintained. The hindlegs are engaged with good hock action. The pace should remain marching and vigorous, the feet being placed in regular sequence. Each step covers less ground and is higher than the medium walk, because all joints bend more markedly. In order not to become hurried or irregular the collected walk is shorter than the medium walk, although showing greater activity." (AHSA Rule Book definition)

The Judges' Directives are "the shortening and energy of the steps, the carriage and regularity of the walk."

The collected walk first appears in Fourth Level. It is in this pace of the walk that one most frequently sees lateral tendencies or pacing steps, especially when rigidity throughout replaces throughness.

Keeping these pointers in mind should help you improve your horse's walk, and also allow you to earn higher scores for the walk movements. ○