



## Gaits

Gaits can be roughly categorized into two groups: natural gaits that nearly every horse will use without special training, and several other gaits that may appear naturally in some individuals but which usually require special training and/or special breeding to enable the rider to obtain them by communicating with the horse.

The ordinary gaits

The ordinary gaits are walk, trot, canter, and gallop (in increasing order of speed). Some people count these as three gaits by considering the gallop a variation of the canter. Others count them as four separate gaits. All four gaits are seen in wild horse populations.

### The Walk

The walk is a 4-beat gait that averages about 4 mph. When walking, a



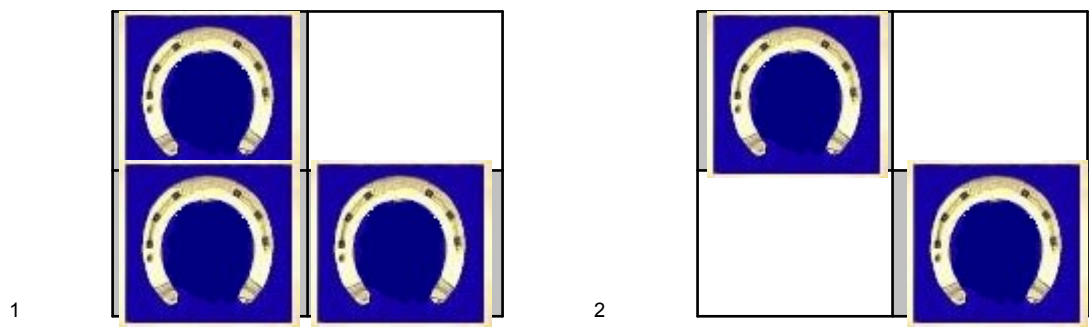
horse's legs follow this sequence: left hind leg, right front leg, right hind leg, left front leg, in a regular 1-2-3-4 beat. At the walk, the horse will always have one foot raised and the other three feet on the ground, save for a brief moment when weight is being transferred from one foot to another. A horse moves its head and neck in a slight up and down motion that helps maintain balance.

Ideally, the advancing rear hoof oversteps the spot where the previously advancing front hoof touched the ground. The more the rear hoof oversteps, the smoother and more comfortable walk. Individual horses and different breeds vary in the smoothness of their walk.

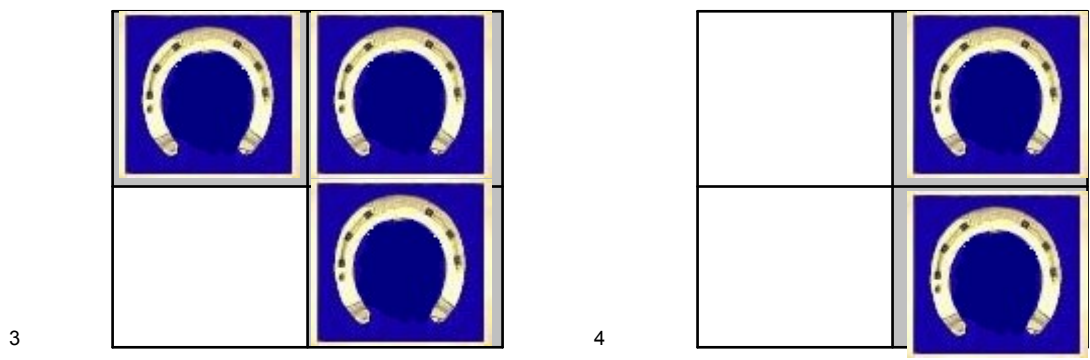
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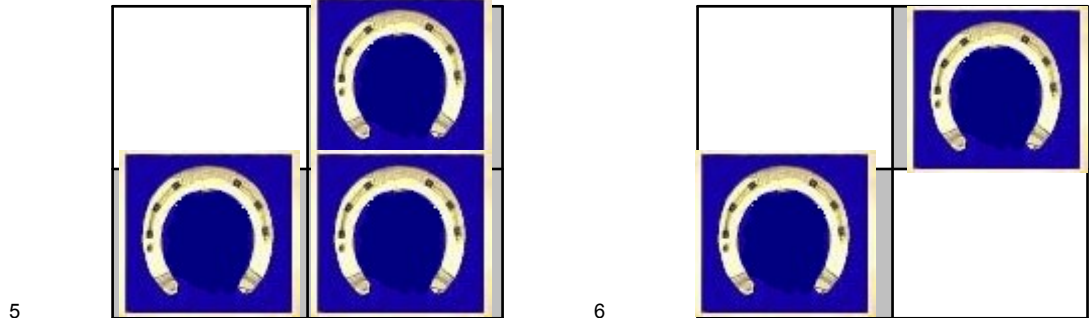
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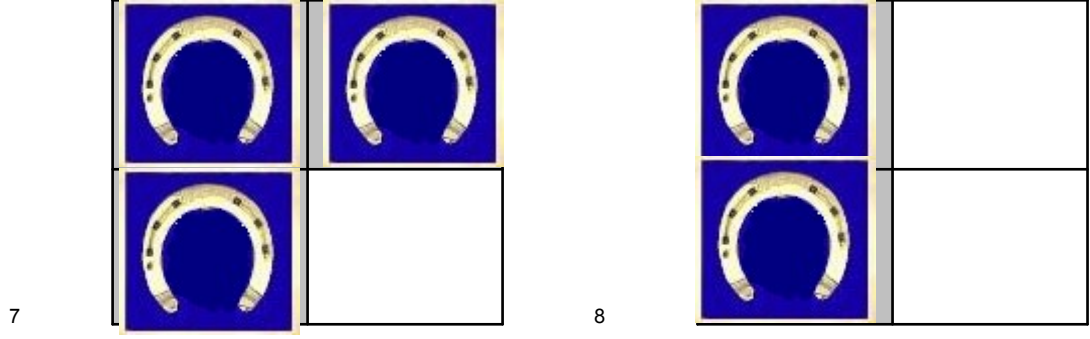
**Footfalls in the walk**



**From a standstill lifting the right front, then**



**lifting the right front, lifting the left front, adding the left hind, adding the right**



**hind, adding the left front, lifting the right front**

**The Trot**

The trot is a natural gait of the horse where the diagonal pairs of legs move forwards at the same time, a diagonal gait. There is a moment of suspension between each beat.

From the standpoint of the balance of the horse, the trot is a very stable gait,



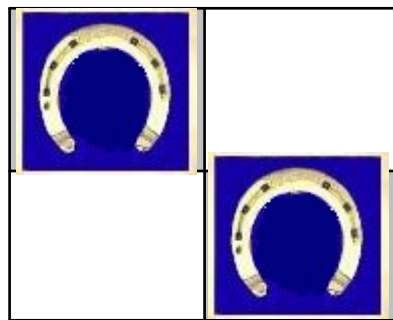
and the horse need not make major balancing motions with its head and neck. This is a common gait that the horse is worked in for dressage, due to its many variations. It is also the working pace for the horse, often preferred over the canter and gallop for long distances.

### Footfalls in the Trot

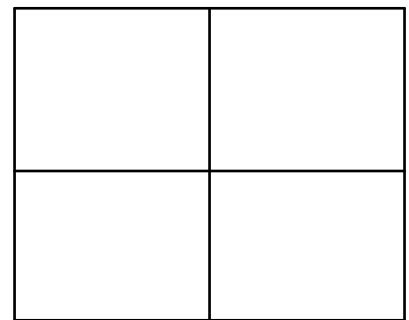
#### The Canter

The canter, is a controlled, three-beat gait performed by a horse. It is a natural gait possessed by all horses, faster than most horse's trot but slower than the gallop, and is used by all riders. The speed of the canter varies between

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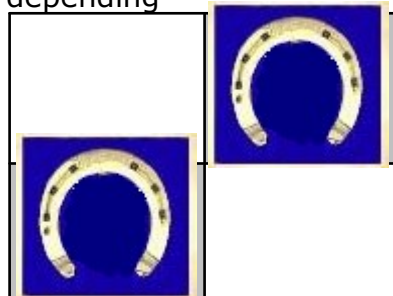


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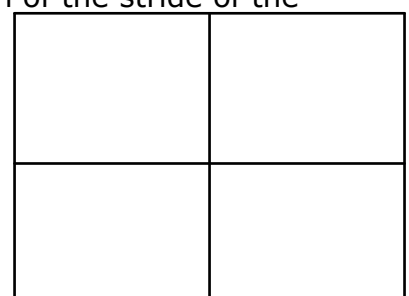


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10-17 mph, depending on the length of the stride of the



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horse.



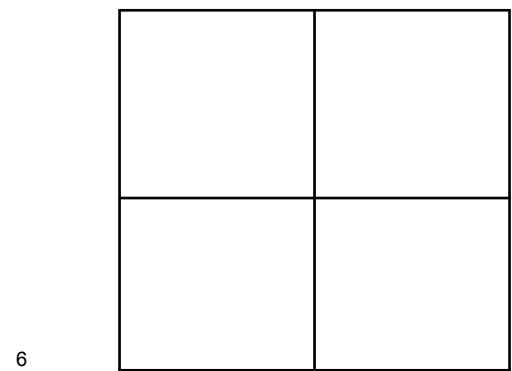
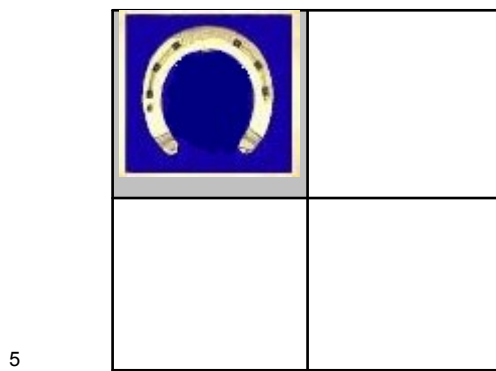
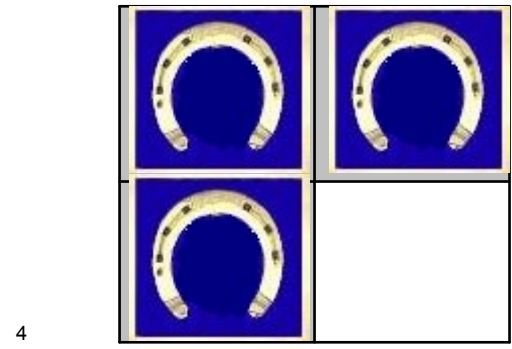
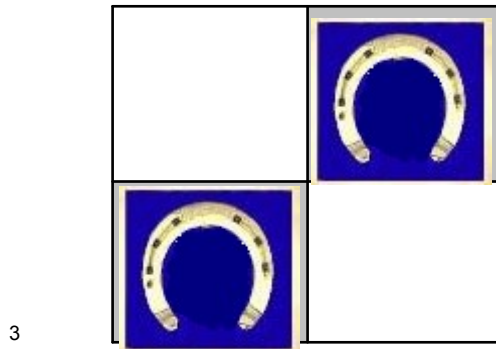
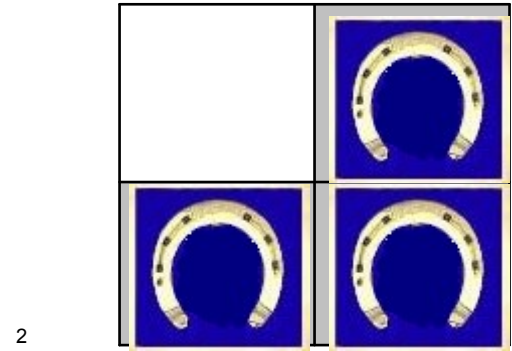
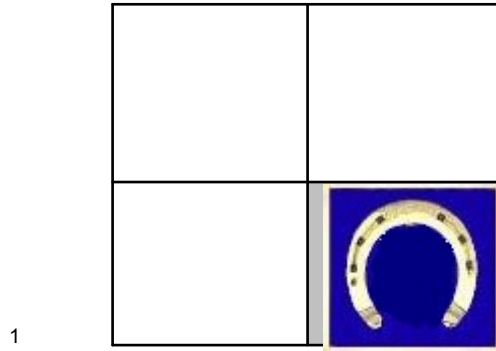
A variation of the canter, seen in western riding, is called a **lope**, and generally is quite slow, no more than 8-12 mph.

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**Left lead canter: 1.) Starting with the right hind weight bearing, adding the diagonal pair of legs, lifting the right hind, adding the left front, lifting the diagonal pair of legs, leaving only the left front, lifting the left front for a moment of suspension, starting over with the next stride on the right hind. For right lead canter start the sequence with the left hind.**



## Additional Gaits

### Pace

The Pace is a two-beat gait where the two legs on the same side of the horse move together. As in the trot, two feet are always off the ground, but in the trot, the two legs diagonally opposite from each other move together. The trot is more common, but some breeds of horses prefer to pace. Pacers are also faster than trotters on the average.

Horses can be raced at a trot or pace, usually in harness, pulling a sulkey. Among standardbreds, to whom almost all such races are restricted, pacers breed truer than trotters – that is, trotting sires have a higher proportion of pacers among their get than pacing sires do of trotters.

The true two beat pace is rather uncomfortable for riding, as not only is the rider going up and down, as in trotting, but also side to side, like riding a camel. A rider cannot post to a pacing horse. A stepping pace, one of the smooth "gaits" of gaited horses, may have been the gait sometimes used for transport of wounded.

The majority of Icelandic Horses can pace (most of those can also tölt, and are thus called "five-gaited". The five gaits are walk, trot, canter, tölt, pace). Good pacers are held in high regard in this breed, but for a pacer to stand



out he has to be able to perform the pace at a high speed. Slow pacing in Icelandic horses is considered a major flaw. A horse that goes at a slow pace, or "piggy-pace," is called *lullari*.

### Slow Gait

This gait follows the same general sequence of movement as the walk, in that lateral pairs of legs move forward in sequence, but the rhythm and collection of the movements are different. The slow gait was developed from the pace. The length of the pace is kept long, but the stride breaks in such a manner as to produce a slight gap between the foot falls. The result is a gait that will be intermediate in speed between the walk and the pace, but very smooth. A version of this gait, called the stepping pace, is said to have been used at times to transport wounded soldiers from battlefields.

### Rack

"Racking" is a gait that is also known historically as the "Virginia Single-foot Gait," with many breeds of horses capable of producing this gait, but most commonly associated with the Five-Gaited American Saddlebred. In the rack, the speed is increased to be approximately that of the pace, but instead of being a two-beat gait like the trot and the pace, it is a four-beat gait with equal intervals between each beat.

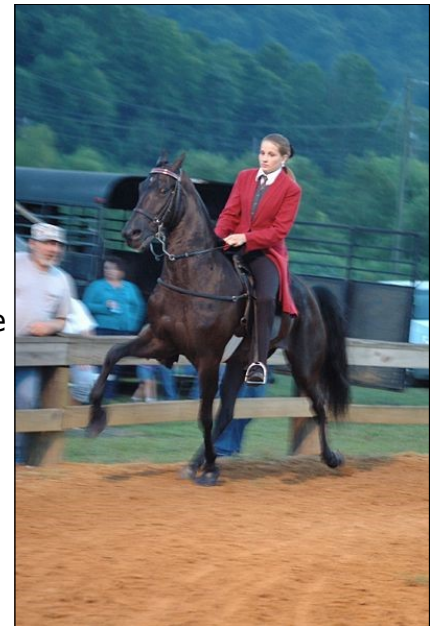
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Riding the rack is like riding on a comfortable chair that slightly sways your hips gently from side to side. To achieve this gait the horse must be in a "hollow position". This means that, instead of a rounded back as seen in dressage horses and those that work off their hind quarters, the spine is curved downward. The downside of this is that this position weakens the back and makes the horse less able to carry the weight of the rider without strain. This puts the racking horse in the best position to rack without breaking into another gait. If the rider sits back or leans slightly back this will cause the back to hollow or curve downward. This allows the legs to trail and makes the rack easier for the horse.

A speed racker can achieve speeds of a fast canter. The ride is smooth, and the rider appears to remain motionless as the horse racks. The horse itself maintains a fairly still head and most of the action is in the legs.

The rack is a genetic trait in a breed called the "racking horse". A racking horse can rack as easily as other horses trot or canter. Some people debate if the "Racking Horse" is a stand-alone breed, but it was given that designation by the USDA in 1978, and the breed has its own organization today. The Racking Association's goal is to preserve the Racking Horse in a natural state



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with little or no artificial devices that enhance gait. The horse's tail is naturally raised without nicking. Some classes allow special shoes that enhance the gait but chains and other devices are not allowed. (One banned practice is the application of caustic chemicals just above the hoof, known as "soring," so-called because a horse alters its gait due to discomfort or sore feet. This is a federal offense within the United State of America under the provisions of the Horse Protection Act.)

### **Fox Trot**

The fox trot is most often associated with the Missouri Foxtrotter breed, but is also seen under different names in other gaited breeds. The foxtrot is a four-beat diagonal gait in which the front foot of the diagonal pair lands before the hind, eliminating the moment of suspension and giving a "no bounce" ride. The foxtrot is a comfortable gait for trail-riding.

### **Tölt**

Tölt is a gait that is often described as being unique to the Icelandic Horse. In its pure form, the footfalls are the same as in rack, but the Icelandic horse is bred for more freedom and liquidity of movement. The most prized horses have a very long stride and high lift with their forelegs. Icelandic Riders will demonstrate the smoothness of a tölt by going at the speed of a gallop without spilling a drink they hold. However, some of the breed have a tölt that is considered imperfect, and may be described as a "trotty tölt" or a "pacey tölt".

### **Further information on gaits**

There are several specialized breeds of horses with special genetic inheritance which facilitates the spontaneous or trained appearance of other gaits such as the pace (in which the legs move in lateral pairs rather than diagonal pairs), the slow gait, the rack, etc. The American Saddlebred has been selectively bred to easily learn the walk, trot, canter, slow gait, and rack. The Peruvian Paso and Paso Fino are two breeds which have a smooth, innate gait. The Paso Fino has slow and fast versions called the paso corto, paso largo, and paso fino. Another breed famous for its distinctive mode of locomotion is the Tennessee Walking Horse, with its running walk.

Other names for intermediate gaits, some smoother, some less so, are singlefooting, amble, Indian shuffle, stepping pace.

**Here is an excellent website with animations for every gait: <http://eidfaxi.is/Fraedsla/Gangtegundir/>**

**When you hold the mouse over the picture, you can make it slower, so you can see better.**



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