

#12 The Trot

THE OFFICIAL FEI definition of the trot is a bit more complex than the walk definition, but the key point, once again, is rhythm and regularity:

“The trot is a two-beat pace of alternate diagonal legs separated by a moment of suspension. The trot should show free, active and regular steps. The quality of the trot is judged by general impression (i.e., the regularity and

elasticity of the steps, the cadence and impulsion in both collection and extension). This quality originates from a supple back and well-engaged hindquarters, and by the ability to maintain the same rhythm and natural balance with all variations of trot.”

The trot is the gait where we seem to spend most of our riding time. We trot in the arena, on the trail, when warming up,

cooling down, practicing ring figures, and so on. It’s a comfort zone for most riders and a place to work on position, aids, and the suppling of our horse.

The trot, as the walk, can be broken down into several different kinds, with detailed criteria for each: working trot, lengthening of stride, medium trot, collected trot, and extended trot.

▼ WORKING TROT



▼ MEDIUM TROT



▼ COLLECTED TROT



▼ EXTENDED TROT



Working Trot

THE WORKING TROT, which falls between the collected and the medium trots, is the most frequently utilized. It is a forward gait with even balance and rhythm, marked by elastic steps and good hock action. In the working trot, the horse's hind feet should at least cover the front hoofprints. A horse that is naturally active in the hindquarters will have an easy time getting the "engine" going (meaning the powerful energy source of the hind end).

A common misperception is that a horse moves with the energy of the front end and the back end simply follows along. In nature, that's actually quite often how a horse is moving. As soon as we impose ourselves on a horse's back, however, we are changing the entire equation. Because the horse wasn't really designed to carry weight on its back, part of the rider's job is to turn the natural gaits into educated gaits.

This change, which comes through correct training, will give the horse what he needs, physically speaking, to carry us along. An educated gait teaches the horse to move with lifting, thrusting power (energy) from the hind end. The result is a back that comes up so that we sit on supple muscles as he pushes through his body toward the bridle.

Fixing Mistakes in the Working Trot

Of the many errors that are made in the working trot, the most common is a lack of energy. Without energy, a horse just shuffles along, looking as though he's hardly moving. In fact, you might even call this trot a jog, which is fine for Western riding, but not what we're looking for here.

A good trot must be *forward*, which is a shorthand way of

saying the horse must have energy, bigger strides, and a prompt reaction to the rider's leg aids.

Then there's the horse who is moving along all right, but shows no activity of the hind legs, which are strung out and sort of dragging behind him. As a consequence, this horse is what's called "on the forehand," meaning he's falling forward and using only front-end energy to move. The fix for this problem is a generous use of half halts (see page 124).

The hurried trot is another common error. Here, the horse is racing along, but his strides are short and choppy. The horse is running rather than stretching out his strides with his hind legs moving well under him and rounding up through his back. Again, half halts are the needed fix.

▼ At a good working trot, you can see the horse's hind legs coming well underneath him. His back is rounded up and he is reaching into the bridle with energy.



▼ Here, in contrast, he is all strung out, with his hind legs trailing, his back hollow, and his nose stuck out in front of him.



Lengthening Strides

As a horse develops athletically, he needs to learn to push off more through his hindquarters (see “Fundamental #23: Impulsion,” page 102). As his ability increases, the trot strides cover more ground and actually get longer. This lengthening, as it’s called, is the building block to the medium trot and eventually to the extended trot.

When you start to train for lengthening of strides, by default you also start to train for collecting strides, because you must give half halts to contain the horse’s energy before asking for the lengthening, and again after the lengthening to return to a working trot.

Fixing Mistakes in Lengthening

Mistakes at this point in the riding program abound.

Lengthening needs to be understood as allowing contained energy to expand forward. Commonly, riders wrongly approach a lengthening as a chance to drive their horses to move faster, but speed, in the sense of a faster tempo, has nothing to do with lengthening.

What a rider wants is to cover more ground with each stride. The consequence of the horse making longer strides is that you move from point A to point B (or in the case of a dressage arena from F to X to H) more quickly.

Think of two soldiers, one with short legs and the other with long legs, marching in a parade. Their feet hit the ground at the same moment, but the shorter soldier has to lengthen his stride to match the distances traveled. Once again, half halts are the key to a fix, since they push the

horse to use his haunches for the source of the energy.

Running onto the Forehand

Riders may also let their horses “run onto the forehand,” meaning that he is using his front legs to pull himself along rather than propelling himself with his hindquarters. These trots often look as though the horse is running downhill, as his center of gravity tips forward.

At this stage, riders will mistakenly use the hand to bring the horse back to a working trot instead of applying half halts with seat, leg, and then hand. Using too much hand results in a horse who braces and resists before returning to a working trot.

▼ Lengthening is about covering more ground with each stride, not moving faster. Notice the moment of suspension shown here, with all four feet off the ground.



▼ A horse that lengthens incorrectly will run onto his forehand, meaning that he is not using his hindquarters to propel himself. Notice how this horse looks as though he is moving downhill.



Medium Trot

A medium trot is the natural progression after lengthening stride in the trot. In this variation of the gait, the horse's steps are very clearly lengthened without giving the impression that he is hurrying. The rider allows the horse to carry his head a little more in front of the vertical, and the horse lowers his neck and head slightly. The medium trot is a true sign of the development of impulsion.

To develop a medium trot you need to develop the *elasticity* of the horse's topline. The topline refers to the side-on view of the horse's arch from poll to tail. The horse lengthens his topline by stretching and arching his neck as well as by rounding his back.

This is a demonstration of longitudinal suppleness, showing how easy it is for your horse to expand and contract his body from back to front, and from front to back. If you're watching from the ground, you'll actually

see the horse get longer and shorter along his spine; the change is enough to be visible to a careful observer.

Fixing Medium Trot Mistakes

Until you've properly developed your horse's ability to lengthen his stride, you are not going to have a correct medium trot. Horses at this stage of training often exhibit characteristic mistakes that mirror errors made in basic training.

High on the list of mistakes is the horse who moves with his nose behind the vertical. This is caused by too much hand on the part of the rider; it can be fixed with a more relaxed and giving hand and elbow.

All Strung Out

Horses may also move with the nose above the bit, with hollow

backs and front legs doing all the work, or some combination. These mistakes indicate a horse who's been allowed to "run" forward, as opposed to working through the back and producing energy from the increased use of his hocks and haunches. This horse is "strung out," meaning he's lost the elasticity of the topline and has lost the connection to both the rider's hand and his own back end.

This problem can be fixed by schooling with short intervals of the medium trot mixed with a return to the working or collected trot, which encourages the horse to stretch and contract his topline as he varies the trot.

A great thought to remember when working on this area of your riding: medium trots are developed, not discovered.

▼ A good medium trot comes from developing the elasticity of the horse's topline.



▼ With his hollow back and dragging hind legs, this horse cannot produce the energy he needs for a correct medium trot.



Collected Trot



▲ At a correct collected trot, the horse should look as though he is moving slightly uphill.



▲ Using too much hand and not enough driving aids often results in a hollow back and shortened strides rather than a correct collected trot.

In the classical definition, the criteria for a horse moving at a collected trot includes remaining “on the bit” while moving forward, with the neck raised and arched and with the hocks flexed, engaged, and moving well under the body. When the horse engages his hind end and flexes his hocks, his croup lowers and his forehead comes up. This makes the horse appear to be more upright. The horse’s strides are shorter than in the other trots; the impulsion, elasticity, and cadence remain consistent.

Fixing Collected Trot Mistakes

It’s easy to spot a horse who is not in a good collected trot. The croup is not lowered, and the forehead appears flat or maybe even lower than the haunches. The back is braced and hollow, and the hind legs are left out behind the horse. Once again, this is usually a problem of too much hand.

Without a tactful and appropriate use of the right mix of driving aids and restraining aids, the horse will be unable to shorten his strides without losing the swing through his hind legs, and he’ll lose the ability to take more weight on his haunches.

The driving aids need to be more prominent in the mix; you know you have it right when the back end stays active and you can move directly out of the collected trot into any of the other trot variations.

Extended Trot

When we finally reach the stage of extended trots, we need to understand that the only difference between a collected trot and an extended trot is distance of ground covered. In the extensions, the horse is being asked to cover as much ground as possible, but in a well-balanced way.

This is the ultimate expressive show of impulsion, as the horse surges forward from the hindquarters. By classical dressage standards, the front feet should touch the ground on the spot where they are pointing and the movement of the front legs and the hind legs should reach equally forward. (See page 106 for a discussion of the current debate over “show” trots versus classical training.)



▲ The lines show the equal angle of the legs as they step forward.

Fixing Extended Trot Mistakes

The mistakes in the extended trot are essentially the same as in the medium trot, just exaggerated by the movement. The horse's back becomes even more hollow. His front legs may fling out dramatically, but the back end is doing almost nothing. As with the medium trot, training in intervals mixed with other types of trot is very helpful.

► Mistakes such as a hollow back and dragging hindquarters are exaggerated at the extended trot.

