

How Long Should our Horses Hold Their Intermediate Gaits?

It's Not All day! It Takes Conditioning!

By Elizabeth Graves©

Many of us as Gaited horse owners or potential owners have at one time or another heard that the smooth gaits our horses do, can be held all day. This really is not realistic in the sense of what is good for the horse. Yes your horse may do so with very little resistance except for what we may observe as riders in their bodies, that could be sign's of stress. Our gaited horses are as any other horse, in that there is a limit to how long they can hold their gaits and, how much conditioning it is going to take for them to do so for given varying lengths of time. What gait or gaits if multi gaited, our horse does is going to have some bearing on how long they can hold a specific gait as well.

There are many factors that can influence and/or limit the maximum performance one can expect from our horse in their ability to maintain gait for a given length of time.

- Which gait is being executed
- A horses age and maturity
- Correctness of riders seat, leg & hand aids use
- Rider size in relation to horses size and strength
- Possible Body misalignments of the horse
- Poor fitting or improperly used equipment

A Look at the Varying Gaits

What gait your horse does or if a horse that can do multiple gaits we need to understand what the frame a horse must hold it's self in and a rider, to achieve a desired gait.

The gait Fox trot is a gait in which a horse can have a slight dosiflexed back to a level/ neutral one in carriage and should also have some element often described as looseness and relaxation. A well trained horse in the gait of Fox trot and the right structure can actually achieve an amount of collection in which the back is raised, the loin is rounded up, pelvis dropped with the hind legs working well underneath the horse with some telescoping of the neck. It is also a gait with an alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof support. In which all theses element make it rather easy for the horse to carry a good rider easily for a longer distance, efficiently with minimal amount of stress to the body if in good body condition.

The Gait of running walk and Paso Llano are gaits executed with a closer to level/ neutral back and are ones described as having a partial amount of collection. Again being ones with an alternating 2 hoof, 3 hoof support. The running walk should have an element of looseness and both gaits should also show a relaxation and ease in execution. These are both gaits in which the legs work independently in the lift off of the hoofs and the set down of the hoofs making for the spine of the horse to be straight in the gaits with no lateral swing to the spine. These are again both gaits that are rather easy on the horse when in good condition and can cover a good amount of distance with no or minimal amount of stress to the body for a longer length of time.

The gaits in the racking family are a bit different but serve the purpose of covering the same distance in a shorter amount of time.

In the Racking family of gaits there are the saddle rack, stepped rack, half rack etc. Terms can vary from breed to breed. Theses gaits are of a slight lateral pick up and of an even 4 beat set down in timing. They

have an alternating 2 hoof, 3hoof support sequence. The frame of gait held is most often of a somewhat elevated head creating varying amounts of ventroflexion in the functioning back of the horse. This also creates what is described as essential Tension at the joint of the cervical and thoracic vertebrae. The gaits in this family of the rack are not as easy on the horses as the dorsiflex and neutral backed gaits, hence the limits without undue stress on a horse. There is a bit more limitation, as the spine is bearing more load without the rounding effect of the muscles along each side of the spine for support. This is still a rather efficient gait with much less stress than the true rack.

The gait of rack is the other one that falls in the racking family of gaits. It is one that can achieve the highest amount of speed in all the smooth gaits. It is much more stressful to the body and should be intended to cover a limited, reasonable distance in a short amount of time. This gait is one of an alternating 1 hoof, 2 hoof support phase. In the 1 hoof support phase of this gait the horse will be bearing the total weight of it's self and the rider and is a gait in which a much higher use of energy must be expelled from the horse to achieve this gait. The gait of rack is one in which the horse will more often have a degree of more ventrofelxtion through the functioning back. It is more lateral for a longer time in the pick up of the legs yet the legs still break down independently creating that even 4 beat gait in set down of the legs.

The stepping pace is also a gait in which one should be aware of a more ventroflexion to a horses back. When a horse is executing this gait the muscles along each side of the spine are not working together, each side is working independently with the muscles on each side alternating in tightening and releasing. When watching a horse in the stepping pace from behind one can observe the sway of the abdomen swinging slightly to a lot form side to side. This in its self can create more work for the horse and stress to the spine.

This is a gait of lateral pick up and the legs on the same side also starting downward more together in set down but breaking to a broken 4 beats being 1-2-3-4.

The swing of the legs coming up more together and more down together can also create more stress to joints on each side of the horse bearing this swing in lift off and set down of the legs. The more strung out the stepping pace the harder it can be to the over all body while the more contained frame does give more support to the body if it is not overly contained through force.

Conditioning and Holding Gait for Time

It is through my experience in the last 25 years in the gaited breeds, in which I have compiled what I use for a basis for the holding of gaits with undue stress for the horses I work with.

When conditioning for gait I know the young horse under the age of 5 years is going to be much more limited in what they should be doing when working in their gaits. We know the spine of the horse is the last to fuse and this happens at the earliest around 5 ½ years. Many of theses younger horse will look fully matured when in fact they are not due this final fusing yet taking place. So with horses under the age of 5, I encourage a very limited amount of gait work, holding gait for no more than a few minutes of time and a good year of walking and teaching the 3 different walks before starting any gait work. This helps establish the walks well and also helps the conditioning process when they are ready to advance to working within their given gaits more to establish them while carrying a rider.

In horses 5 and older they at this time should have the completion structurally for the most part finished and most if not all their muscle development having taken place. This is when we can start working theses horse to achieve what is termed as true peek conditioning.

Again it will take time and lots of good walking with any upward graded land or hill work at the walks to have great benefit in conditioning the horses body for any gait.

It is my experience if one does all the correct walking and asking of the horse to start holding gait a few minutes at a time, working up to an hour a day, 5-6 days a week. In 9 weeks a horse should be in rather

good condition, to hold its gait for a given amount of time with little or no undue stress to the horse. If one is unable to put in this kind of time it is going to certainly take much longer to achieve good conditioning.

It is also very important to warm up your horse slowly at the walks to allow for the muscles to properly stretch and good circulation to occur prior to asking for the gaits.

Gaiting in Peak Condition

Fox Trot/ Running walk -7- 10 minutes at a time 3 times within an hour, walking in between

Saddles racks- 5-7 minutes at a time 3 times within an hour, walking in between

True Rack- 3-5 minutes at a time with in an hour walking in between

Stepping Pace-3-5 minutes at a time 3 times in an hour, walking in between.

The above is meant to be used as a guide only for holding gait

Theses times can certainly vary depending on the structural strength of ones horse, some horses can be heavier or of lighter bone as well as heavier or lighter in natural muscle. The width in the spring of a horse ribs along with the width of pelvis and width from point of shoulders will influence a horse natural ability to have, or lack amount of natural strength to build upon.

In asking for gait it is up to us as observant horseman to "listen with our eyes" to be aware if our horse is showing signs of going beyond good to over strenuous exercise when working the gaits. Remember, fatigue is an enemy and does not work in ones favor to create a happy horse, healthy willing to give us gait when asked.

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