

The Northwest

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**RECREATIONAL
RIDING:
GOING GAITED**

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Recreational Riding ...Going Gaited

There has been a secret in the equine community for many years that is now out in the open for all to enjoy. That secret is the diversity and versatility of the gaited breeds, combined with the smooth, comfortable ride they offer. Gaited horses are quickly becoming preferred breeds for field trails, trail riding, endurance riding and driving. For some it is the desire for an easy going temperament and a smooth ride to cover long distances. Others feel more secure and confident by feeling minimal movement in the saddle at speeds faster than a walk. Some gaited horses can actually travel at speeds greater than 20 miles per hour in gait! That is a lot of ground that is being covered while the rider is enjoying a quiet ride in the saddle.

The rise in popularity of gaited horses coincides with the changing face of the equine industry. Along with the aging of the baby boomer generation, the average age of horse owners has migrated upwards with the median age near 46. The smooth ride has become more appealing, and for many, a necessity. Physical limitations from aging, a disability, injury or mild back pain do not interfere with the rider's ability to use and enjoy the gaited breeds. In addition, more mature first time riders are more secure on the gaited horses, allowing them to build their skills more easily. Regardless of the reasons for their rising popularity, many horse owners are choosing to go gaited.



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How do the gaits differ from non-gaited breeds?

The term gait is used in describing all forms of forward motion in all horses. The gaits of non-gaited breeds consist of a walk, trot, canter, and gallop. The gaited horse has an additional smooth gait that is different from the non-gaited breeds. Gaits performed by various breeds run the gamut of a four beat lateral gait to a four beat diagonal pattern, but they all have one thing in common, a smooth, comfortable ride. The predisposition to gait is genetically inherited, and basically a horse that is strongly gaited has had the gait strengthened by generations of knowledgeable breeding. Eventually the tendency to trot has been replaced by a more lateral movement resulting in an intermediate gait with a natural four beat rhythm and the smooth ride.

The human body adjusts to the movement of a gaited horse more readily than to the movement of the trot. Most gaits of the gaited breeds are derived from the natural equine walk. As the horse is walking, the movement in the rider's hips is similar to when a person is walking, a slight lift and a forward arc. The trot, on the other hand, has a moment of suspension, then impact. This is not a natural movement for the rider's hips in a seated position, consequently adding to rider discomfort.

Are different skills and tack required to ride a gaited horse?

Since gaited horses move differently, they do require a slightly different approach to riding under saddle. The main thing to remember is that gaited horses are "rear wheel drive" and their shoulders need to be free of restrictive pressure. It is important to make sure the saddle doesn't sit on their shoulder blades or prevent them from rolling their shoulders in gait. This can be extremely uncomfortable for the horse, and at times, very painful if the saddle pinches their shoulders. Ultimately, it will interfere with their gait.

A majority of gaited horses have a shorter back than non-gaited horses. Saddles that have a longer skirt can interfere with their hips, causing discomfort. There is an increasing number of saddles on the market now

designed specifically for gaited horses. Even though they allow for shoulder and hip movement, don't assume that it will fit you and your horse perfectly. Every horse and rider is unique and needs to be evaluated for correct saddle fit individually. Be leery of "one size fits all" or "corrects all" type of tack.

The headset of a gaited horse may also be different. A gaited horse will elevate its head and neck when transitioning upwards from a walk to a gait. If the rider encourages a low (peanut rolling) type head set, this could interfere with the gait causing them to be too heavy on their forehand. That would encourage a "front wheel drive" horse, working against the way they naturally move.

As you begin riding a gaited horse, it is natural to want to lean forward when starting an upward transition to a gait. That is natural if you are anticipating a trot. Remember to keep a deep seat and sit back in the saddle. This will help your horse free up his forehand and encourage him to drive with his hind legs.

There is some work involved in learning to feel which gait your horse is performing and giving correct aids when asking for a particular gait. Every horse moves differently, even within one breed. It is important to learn how to see, feel, and hear the gait they are performing. Generally speaking, the smoother the horse's gait, the better. Some horses are very good at pacing and still feeling somewhat smooth to ride. So it is helpful to get lessons from a knowledgeable natural gaited horse instructor. This will help to ensure you aren't riding your horse through its gait towards a pace or a trot. Lessons will also help to teach you how to use your body appropriately and give correct aids to your horse. Ground work training is done exactly the same as a non-gaited horse. Natural horse techniques by one of your favorite clinicians or trainers provide excellent resources for developing respect on the ground. This in turn will help you even more under saddle.

Tips for buying the right gaited horse

1. There are many gaited breeds to choose from in the Northwest. Some of the more popular breeds are Icelandics,

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON GAITED HORSES...

Gaited Horse Associations:

Icelandics: www.icelandics.org

Tennessee Walkers:
www.twhbea.com

Rocky Mountain Horses:
www.rmhorse.com

Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horses:
www.kmsaha.com

Peruvian Pasos: www.pphrna.org

Missouri Foxtrotters:
www.mfthba.com

Paso Finos: www.pfha.org

Northwest Gaited Horse Assoc:
www.nwgaithorse.com

See pictures and descriptions of a pace, stepping pace, rack, trot, and an animated pace here:
www.brightonridge.com/about_gaits.html

See animated foxtrot and description: www.mofox Trot.com/foxtrot1.htm

The Northwest Gaited Horse Club 3rd Annual Evergreen Gaited Horse Classic Show Western Washington Fairgrounds in Puyallup, WA July 24-25, 2004

- Classes for: Icelandics, Mountain Horses, Peruvians, FoxTrotters, and Tennessee Walkers along with a variety of open classes for all gaited breeds.
- Saturday evening breed demonstrations with each gaited breed performing a 5 minute demo showcasing their talent and versatility
- Schooling classes for novice riders and/or horses to learn first hand from the judge on how to improve with your horse.
- Lonnie Kuehn, internationally known judge, will be providing an educational presentation on gaited horses.
- Vendor Displays – breed, educational, products

For more information, contact Northwest Gaited Horse Club, 425.241.7786 or email info@nwgaithorse.com or visit www.nwgaithorse.com.

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Tennessee Walkers, Rocky Mountain Horses, Kentucky Mountain Saddle Horses, Peruvian Pasos, Missouri Foxtrotters, and Paso Finos. Each breed has unique qualities and it is wise to take the time to do some research. A good place to start is to visit various breed associations online. They will describe the breed characteristics along with the gaits performed. What is your preference for size, speed, and temperament? How much experience do you have with horses and what type of riding do you plan to do with a gaited horse? Supplement your online research by attending horse expos and shows that feature a variety of gaited breeds (See sidebar).

2. The next step is to find a reputable natural gaited horse farm to view your desired breed in person. This is going to take some time and research as well. There are many horses for sale by owners that don't know how to correctly identify each particular gait. They may be able to hear a four beat gait, but not know which of the four beat gaits it is performing. It takes time, patience, and experience

riding these horses to develop an eye and feel for a variety of gaits. Remember every horse is different and just because it is considered a gaited breed doesn't guarantee that it can and will perform the proper gait. A lot of pacey horses that may not even have the inbred capacity for developing gaits are sold for good money to unsuspecting buyers.

3. Look at the horse as a whole and don't make the mistake of buying a horse simply because he has the color you want or has a beautiful mane. Sometimes breeders focus on producing a particular color (buckskin, palomino, chocolate, etc.) and inadvertently sacrifice the gait to produce the desired color. If you are not careful you end up with an expensive beautiful animal with minimal gait capabilities.

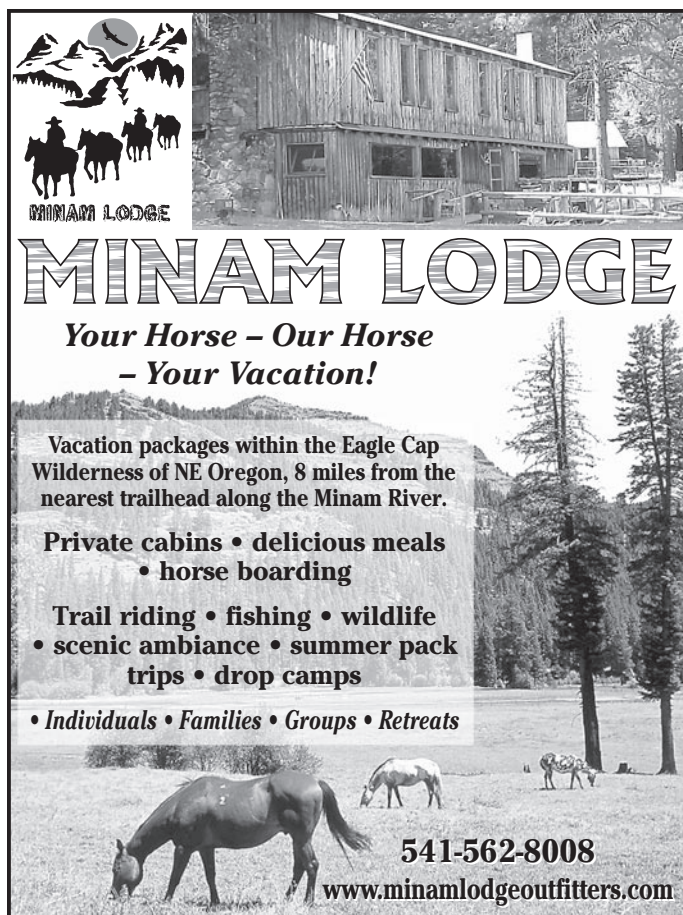
4. Have the owner ride the horse first. That will help you to detect how much they know about gaits, and how easy it is for them to get the horse to comply with requests. It will help you to discern if that horse is safe for your level of experience. Ask the owner to ride the horse at a walk, slow gait, and intermediate gait.

Watch how the horse moves. Is it moving willingly and freely? Can you tell if it is doing a pace or a four beat gait? A horse that tends to favor the pace will definitely lean toward the pace as it increases in speed.

5. If you have limited exposure to gaited horses it will be helpful to bring along an individual experienced with gaited horses. Another option is to video the horse and have a knowledgeable gaited horse person evaluate the horse and how well that horse matches your needs and experience. It is worth hiring someone for their knowledge to ensure you are getting what you are paying for and that the horse is right for you.

6. If everything checks out and the horse is a good match for you, it is wise to get a pre-purchase exam done by a vet. Be sure to use a different vet than the horse's current owner so you will get an unbiased evaluation.

Once you have done your research and found just the right gaited horse, take advantage of the secret in the smooth ride and head for the trails! **nwhs**



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