

Tennessee Walking Horse

The Basics

Originally bred as a utility horse, the Tennessee Walking Horse is best suited for a recreational mount due to its smooth, easy ride and gentle disposition. A calm, docile temperament, combined with naturally smooth and easy gaits insure the popularity of the Tennessee Walking Horse as the “World’s Greatest Show, Trail, and Pleasure horse.”

Tennessee Walking Horses generally range from 14.3 to 17 hands and weigh 900 to 1200 pounds. The modern Tennessee Walking Horse possesses a pretty head with small, well placed ears. The horse has a long sloping shoulder, a long, sloping hip, a fairly short back, and a short, strong coupling. The bottom line is longer than the topline, allowing for a long stride. Tennessee Walking Horses come in all colors and a variety of patterns. Different colors should not be discriminated against.

The Tennessee Walking Horse performs three distinct gaits: the flat foot walk, running walk, and canter, with the running walk being an inherited *natural* gait unique to this breed. Many Tennessee Walking Horses are able to perform the rack, stepping pace, fox-trot, single foot and other variations of the famous running walk. While not desirable in the show ring, the above mentioned gaits are smooth, easy trail riding gaits.

Gaits

The **flat walk** is a brisk, long reaching walk that can cover from four to eight miles an hour. This is a four cornered gait with each of the horse’s

feet hitting the ground separately at regular intervals. The horse will glide over the track left by the front foot with its hind foot: right rear over right front, left rear over left front. The action of the back foot slipping over the front track is known as *over stride*. Over stride is unique to the walking horse breed. The hock should show only forward motion; vertical hock action is highly undesirable. A Tennessee Walking Horse will nod its head in rhythm with the cadence of its feet. The nodding head motion and the overstride are two features that are unique to the Tennessee Walking Horse and should take into consideration when judging a Tennessee Walking Horse.

The **running walk** is the gait for which the walking horse is most noted. This extra-smooth, gliding gait is basically the same as the flat walk with a noticeable difference in the speed between the two gates. Proper form should never be sacrificed for excessive speed in a good running walk. The breed can travel 10 to 20 miles per hour at this gait. As the speed is increased, the horse over-steps the front track with the back by a distance of six to eighteen inches. The more “stride” the horse has, the better “walker” it is considered to be. It is this motion that gives the rider a feeling of gliding through the air as if propelled by some powerful but smooth-running machine. Since their gaits are easy for them to perform, some walking horses relax certain muscles while executing the running walk; they may flop their ears in rhythm; some may even snap their teeth. A true Tennessee Walking Horse will continue to nod while performing the running

walk. Judging should not be influenced by speed, but rather by the true form exhibited.

The third gait is the **canter**, which is a collected gallop. The canter is performed in much the same way as the other breeds, but the walking horse seems to have a more relaxed way of performing this gait. The canter is a forward movement performed in a diagonal manner to the right or to the left. On the right lead, the horse should start the gait in this order: left hind, right hind and left fore together, then right fore. The footfall for the left lead is: right hind, left hind and right fore, then left fore. When performed in a ring, the animal should lead his canter with the foreleg to the inside of the ring. The canter lifts the front end giving an easy rise and fall motion much like a rocking chair. This is often referred to as the "rocking chair" gait.

Suggestions for Judging the Gaits

The Tennessee Walking Horse is shown under both English and Western tack and attire. There are divisions for both built up and flat shod horses in the show ring. The flat shod segment of the walking horse breed has grown tremendously due to the easy training of the breed and the natural inherited gaits.

The flat shod **plantation pleasure** horse should display brilliance and show presence while performing true walking gaits. Any tendency to pace, rack, or trot should be penalized. Form should not be sacrificed for speed. The horse is to be well mannered and manageable on a light rein. Manners are paramount for a pleasure horse and should be given serious consideration in judging. The horse should be well balanced, both fore and rear. He must back readily on command, and respond to the rider's signals to perform all gaits without

necessity for bumping and pumping of the reins. The head motion of the walking horse is very important. *If he isn't nodding, he isn't walking.* Horses shall be worked both ways of the ring at the running walk, flat walk, and canter. English tack and attire are mandatory for this class. Neatness and taste in attire are encouraged and should be a consideration in the final judging.

In a **model** class the horse should be shown in a bridle, led into the ring and parked for judging. Conformation and condition are paramount. Horses must stand quietly. Unruly entries must be excused.

Western Pleasure entries shall reflect the suitability of a walking horse as a western working horse, exhibiting an exceptionally smooth, comfortable ride without excessive animation. A good western pleasure horse should have a balanced, flowing motion with a free and easy gait. The horse should be ridden on a loose rein, and should exhibit a true, four beat walking gait with cadenced head nod. The head set should be natural, neither excessively nosed out or over flexed at the poll. The head should not be high but should exhibit the type of head carriage of a TWH used as a western working horse. If a western horse does not stand quietly, he *must* be penalized. If a western horse has a fast, uncontrollable canter or requires pumping or bumping, he *must* be penalized.

The **performance** Tennessee Walking Horse (sometimes referred to as padded or built up) is shown in English attire and tack. It executes the basic gaits with more animation and accentuated brilliance.

Specific judging criteria for all divisions is included in the National Horse Show Commission (NHSC) Rule Book. Contact the NHSC, P.O. Box 167, Shelbyville, TN 37160.

Shoes

Performance horses are commonly shown with double nailed and triple nailed pads to add dimension to the hoof. Pads are an integral part of the training of the performance Tennessee Walking Horse. They serve various functions and, when utilized properly, aid greatly in accentuating the gaits of the show horse.

The walking horse that is used for pleasure riding requires no special shoes. On an average, the walking horse will be shod at a slightly lower angle with more natural toe than some of the western type horses.

Conformation

The Tennessee Walking Horse's head should be in proportion to the rest of the animal's body. The head and throatlatch should be refined and clean-cut, with the facial bones exhibiting a chiseled appearance. The eyes should show character, being of good size and well placed, with good width between the eyes. They should be clear and bright. The face should be straight, rather than convex (Roman-nosed) or concave (dish-faced). The ears should be well set, medium to small in size, and they should be carried forward showing attentiveness. The muzzle should be small, with large sensitive nostrils. The upper and lower teeth should meet. The jaw should show bone structure, but should not show excessive thickness.

The head should join the neck at approximately a 45 degree angle, with a distinct space between jawbone and neck. The neck should be medium to

long in length, and the head should be carried high. In the adult, the neck should be slightly arched. The neck should be lean and muscled and blend smoothly into the shoulder and withers. Excessive arching or a crested neck is undesirable.

Balance is the single most important characteristic in selection because it forms the basics for movement, length of stride and, ultimately, performance. The shoulder should be long and slope forward at an angle of 45 degrees from the withers to the point of the shoulder. The shoulder should be smooth, yet well muscled. The withers should be at least as high as the top of the rump.

The topline of the Tennessee Walking Horse should be level, or slightly sloping to the hindquarters. The back should be short to medium in length, with a short, strong loin. The croup should be long with good muscling and a well set tail. The croup should slope moderately from the point of the hip bone to the point of the buttock.

The hindquarters should be of moderate thickness and depth, well muscled when viewed from the side and the rear. The muscling should be evident inside and out on the rear legs. The hock should be fairly wide and deep, with the joint being clean. The cannon area should be vertical from the hock to the pastern, with the pastern showing a 45 degree angle with the ground. It is acceptable for a walking horse to "stand under in the rear slightly" or to be slightly "cow hocked" or sickle hocked.

Excerpts taken from the TWHBEA Youth Handbook, first edition.