

# Considerations of the American Saddlebred Horse for Purchase Examination

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American Saddlebred horses have certain gaits and peculiarities of conformation that may require alteration of the examination for purchase. Author's address: P.O. Box 266, 1436 Fields Lane, Simpsonville, KY 40067. © 1999 AAEP.

## 1. Introduction

The American Saddlebred horse population has remained fairly constant in the United States and Canada with small concentrations found in parts of Europe and South Africa. Within the United States, numbers can vary from a few to large numbers found in Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Their use can vary from pleasure riding to competition at large horse shows throughout the country. The additional gaits (slow gait and the rack) are a peculiarity of the "five-gaited" horse, and this adds another dimension to the examination, yet the majority of saddlebreds do not show in this division. In performing purchase examinations of these horses it is helpful to understand the discipline, divisions, and breed idiosyncrasies.

## 2. Breed Standards

This is a brief description taken from the breed publication *Judging Standards for American Saddlebred Horses*.

The ideal American Saddlebred is well proportioned and presents a beautiful overall picture. The animal should be in good flesh, with good muscle tone and a smooth, glossy coat. Masculinity in stallions and femininity in mares are important and

should be taken into consideration. The average height is 15–16 hands and the weight 1000–1200 lb. Any color is acceptable: the most prominent are chestnut, bay, brown and black, with some gray, roan, palomino, and pinto.

### Variations from Ideal

With the natural variations of type within the breed, some horses do not conform to the ideal but are perfectly suited for various kinds of competition. If they meet all other requirements for a particular event, they should not be penalized too severely.

### Note

There are pony divisions within each major discipline that require an official American Horse Shows Association (AHSA) measurement of 14.2 and under.

## 3. Description of Gaits

### A. Walk

Flat walk (required for pleasure classes) versus animated walk (show and park divisions): The flat walk is a collected four beat gait, while the animated walk can be a four beat "bouncy" gait or a collected slow two-beat gait.

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## NOTES

## IN DEPTH: PURCHASE EXAMINATION

### B. Trot

The trot is a natural, two-beat diagonal gait in which the front foot and opposite hind foot take off from the ground in unison and land simultaneously. There are degrees of animation and speed asked for in various divisions.

### C. Canter

The canter is relatively slow, lofty and fluid, with a definite three-beat cadence. High action, proper collection and a good way of going are paramount.

### D. Slow Gait

The slow gait was developed from the pace to be a four-beat gait with each of the four feet contacting the ground separately. In the takeoff, the lateral front and hind feet start almost together, but the hind foot contacts the ground slightly before its lateral forefoot. The slow gait is a restrained, four-beat gait, executed slowly but with true and distinct precision.

### E. Rack

The rack is a four-beat gait with the same footfall pattern as the walk in which each foot meets the ground at equal, separate intervals. It is smooth and highly animated, performed with great action and speed, in a slightly unrestrained manner.

## 4. Primary Show Divisions

The primary show divisions, performance, pleasure, and park, include classes for five-gaited horses, three-gaited horses, and harness horses. There are also pony classes in these divisions.

## 5. Examination

The description will not include those areas that are common to any purchase examination but will highlight areas unique to the breed and show ring.

The upper respiratory examination is of great importance. The horses work very hard with a unique headset (elevated and flexed) that creates great air turbulence. A small yet significant number of horses upon examination will have soft palate displacements, laryngeal hemiplegia, chondroma formation on the arytenoid cartilages, entrapment of the epiglottis, various anatomic malformations, and significant asynchrony between the arytenoid cartilages. It is paramount to watch these horses work with proper tack and the head set to determine the degree of impairment.

Conformational considerations may include lordosis (low back); there is a prevalence of "soft backs" that creates a great controversy within the breed. Few will recommend breeding these individuals, yet in the show ring many of these horses are highly successful and this significant conformational defect persists. The length of foot or foot/pad that is used to aid in the "elevated way of going" creates many considerations.

Because of the elevation/shortened stride length

relationship or lack of extension on the anterior phase of the foot flight pattern these horses are not susceptible to greatly increased incidences of lameness. The most common findings are contracted heels, sheared heels, quarter cracks, and wall separation. There are no restrictions (except pleasure) on using pads, double-nailing techniques, lead weighting, clips, or bands. It is common to find large hoof wall defects filled with acrylics. The incidence of lameness due to diagnosed navicular pain is similar to that in the Thoroughbred population. There are bloodlines that seem to have a high incidence of one of the forefeet having a "dished foot." This observation is consistent with other veterinarian's and farrier's opinions. The proximal one-half of the hoof wall parallels the dorsal border of the third phalanx (P3) very closely and then deviates distally. This is found on pasture horses that have not been shod or previously in training. It may be difficult to differentiate the cause, i.e., laminitis. The suspensory apparatus should be examined carefully. Medial branch injuries and injuries of the suspensory ligament origin are not uncommon. The inferior check ligament should be examined carefully. Thickened inferior check ligaments when examined by ultrasound will often appear to be less than 50% of normal density, and fiber alignment is greatly disrupted, yet the horse may show no signs of lameness.

The incidence of stringhalt appears to be higher than in other breeds. This exaggerated elevation is usually unilateral at a walk until the horse warms up and then often subsides entirely. The hocks are of great consideration because the three-gaited horses and the harness horses are expected to use their hind legs in an exaggerated motion. Lameness due to inflammation of the intertarsal joints and tarsal-metatarsal joint is the most common problem with Saddlebred show horses.

A very common therapeutic approach to stifle soreness is "internal iodine blister," and it is usually possible to palpate the thickness over the patellar ligaments. The horse may become very agitated during this part of the examination. It is not uncommon in obtaining history from the owner or trainer that the horse has had hocks injected, stifles blistered, or both.

Upon examination, many horses will have had the ventral coccygeal muscles partially severed around the second or third coccygeal vertebrae to permit the tail to be artificially elevated. The horse will often wear a harness with a tail set attached to keep the tail in place.

The examination should include observation of the horse appropriately tacked and worked. This is extremely important with five-gaited horses if you know what the gaits should look like. This requires a competent rider, so usually the trainer selling or buying the horse will ride. This is preferable to having the amateur rider on the horse for the examination. Flexion examination can be accomplished in hand or while undersaddle. Make sure

the head is in proper position to adequately evaluate the upper respiratory tract for excessive noise. The trot remains the most important gait for the evaluation of soundness, but one peculiarity is that some horses are ridden in both directions on the same diagonal, and you must request them to ride both. The canter is considered the least important gait in the show ring, and many horses are only asked to practice this gait just before a show.

Radiographic techniques in addition to the normal selection may include lateral and anterior-posterior views before removing the shoes. These views will allow assessment of the pastern angle compared to the P3 angle. After removing shoes, most horses will have an extremely low hoof wall angle that often elevates the pastern angle and the fetlock angle. Depending on the nature of the shoeing, it may not be possible to have a competent farrier available. Because of the length of foot, it is often possible to elevate the foot on a block and add an additional 0.5-inch elevation of only the heels and then to align the beam with the plate at 60° to the sole, and the

image of the navicular bone will pass posterior to the end of the shoe and allow you to obtain diagnostic films. The incidence of osteochondritis dissecans (OCD)-type lesions of the distal tibia is not uncommon, and proximal plantar P1 lesions of the metatarsal-phalangeal joint are sometimes found. The incidence of other radiographic findings are consistent with those in other breeds. Young horses with developmental lesions such as those from OCD recover well from surgical removal of fragments. Cystic lesions, i.e., medial femoral condylar cysts, carry a "fair" at best prognosis for performance. It is not uncommon to find 10-year-old horses with large nondisplaced distal tibial fragments or the P1 lesion described above that show no signs of unsoundness.

#### 6. Summary

Understanding the various gaits, shoeing methods, and proper positioning of the head will help minimize the frustration of examining Saddlebred performance horses.