



Tölt training

-with Bergrún Ingólfssdóttir

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Tölt—the gait the Icelandic horse is most known for. Why is that? There are many different opinions and answers to that! For me, it's the thrill of being able to feel the horse dance under you, to be able to control the power and speed, and how the feeling puts you on top of the world!

To experience this sensation you'll have to spend a lot of time training—not only your horse, but also yourself. The rider and horse have to become unified—understanding and respecting each other completely. The rider must speak a language the horse understands. I like to say that the communication has to be 'black and white'. By that I mean that the rider has to use the same aids and build up a language over time. The language should constantly develop and make communicating easier. To train and build up a good horse takes time, and there will always be ups and downs, but stay focused on your goals and you will achieve them!

I have often been asked the question of how to reach a strong good beat in tölt. Believe me, I wish I had one solid answer for that question, but the answer is always specific to each pairing of horse and rider. That being said, however, there are few things I find very important when you are focusing on training tölt.

First of all, what is tölt ?

Tölt is one of the gaits the Icelandic horse is most known for. It gives the rider a soft and comfortable seat. Tölt can be from little more than a walk speed all the way up to galloping speed!

Tölt is a four-beat gait, where the sequence of footfalls is even—just like in walk, but faster. There is always at least one



Figure 1 Slow tempo Tölt

foot on the ground, and sometimes more—for example, in slow tölt.

Horses have different talents with tölt. Some tölt from their first day in training, but others need more help. It takes some time for a horse to gain the strength and power needed to carry himself in tölt. Training needs to start with a good foundation, so in the future it gets easier to build on top of it. There are many things that affect the horse's ability to tölt. The first thing to mention is the Rider.

The Rider

When you ride your horse you are always affecting him in some way, sometimes even without realizing it. It is important that the rider has good balance so he can follow his horse. A stiff rider is often reflected in a stiff horse, and the result will be a horse who is unable to demonstrate good gaits. You will see this especially with gaits like tölt—where we are looking for soft and supple play between horse and rider. That is one of the reasons why I always focus first on the rider before I start helping with the actual gait training.

A few things to keep in mind about your body position as you are riding:

- ✓ Are you having any tension in your body? Why?
- ✓ Breathe through your stomach, not your lungs.
- ✓ Relax your legs, but have them close to your horse.
- ✓ Relax your arms.
- ✓ Roll your wrist, shoulders and ankles.
- ✓ Roll your head.
- ✓ Let the horse move you—not the other way around.
- ✓ Have a strong body position, but not stiff—there is a difference.

This list could be so much longer, but these are just a few ideas that can make a big difference, and are something everyone can take a few minutes of their time to examine. The rider is reflected in his horse. I usually go over this mental checklist during the warm up (when I'm still riding walk).

The horse was not designed to carry people, and therefore it's our responsibility to help him with his balance. And that is next to be mentioned.

Balance

From nature the horse is built to carry more in the front than in the back. When we train tölt, we're asking the horse to carry more with the hindquarters, and that is often not so easy for them. It takes time for the horse to gain strength enough to carry himself in this way and to readjust his balance for tölt. The rider needs to help him with building up this strength, and the adjustment in balance will naturally follow.

The most common beat problems in tölt are because of lack of balance. Balance problems can be that the horse jumps up on one leg during tölt training, his beat gets closer to pace than tölt (sometimes called piggy-pace), or that the gait ends up being closer to trot than tölt. Like I said before, it is very different between horses. There are many different ways to strength train your horse, and I am going to name a few methods that I find most effective.

Exercises that train balance are, for example:

- ✓ To ride walk-tölt-walk. Here you have to focus on smooth transitions between walk and tölt—both when you go up into tölt, and when you come back down into walk again. As previously mentioned, here it is important that the rider follows his horse. The rider's hands should be soft and the seat relaxed. This helps the horse to gain balance in a slower gait and keep that balance as he speeds up. When I ride transitions like this, I try to keep the distance (or work area) short and give breaks in between so the horse becomes more willing to do well for me as his rider.
- ✓ Canter is a great way to loosen up the whole body, and it is very important to do on both hands. It can be a good way to even out unbalanced strength in the horse that often results in the horse jumping up on one leg.
- ✓ Speed changes—not only in tölt but in every gait.
- ✓ Working tölt is a form I use a lot in my training that helps me achieve better beat and balance. Working form is, for me, a form where my horse has his head in a rather low position; light on the reins, supple in the body, and not at all forced into a form where he doesn't like to be. He works through his back, and his hindquarters are the 'motor'.
- ✓ I like to train all gaits evenly—even though this article is focused on tölt training—and that is something to keep in mind as well. Gait training improves the horse in so many different ways, and helps the horse gain muscle, conditioning, and strength.
- ✓ Classical dressage, with a focus on suppleness.
- ✓ Trail rides, hills, sand, and snow. Your imagination is your best friend when training horses. It keeps your horse interested and willing to work—doing the same speed, same trail, and same track gets boring! And a horse that gets bored will not be willing to work for his rider.



Suppleness

When training gaited horses, there are many things that the trainers have to keep in mind. Suppleness is one of those things. I like to name that especially for the good foundation of a strong beat tölt. Exercises like shoulder in, curves, and riding on a circle of differing sizes come in handy and can be done any time. You can do these in an arena, on a track, or during the trail ride. Not only are these activities good for the horse's body, but they can also make the leadership of the rider stronger. The horse has to be ready to listen to his rider at any time.

Tölt training is a long-term commitment for yourself and your horse. It takes time, dedication, work, and practice, but I can say that it is all well worth it! The rider has to be open to learning new things and willing to make changes to his training program if it is not going anywhere, or if there is a lack of improvement in the horse.



Always have a goal in mind, and be sure that goal is attainable for both the horse and rider.
I like the saying 'Less is more'.

“Never stop learning—because life never stops teaching.”
--Unknown