

Pleasure Riding – Riding Pleasure

by Chris Söffner

“I am a trail rider – I don’t need to go to a clinic.” We’ve all heard statements like this one before and know people who deeply believe it to be true. And unfortunately, a lot of clinics seem to be geared towards people who are at least remotely interested in showing their horses and on how to best present the gaits when they do. On the other hand, there are more trail/pleasure riders out there than people making a living at competitions, and there are other reasons even the most laid back trail rider might want to consider schooling themselves and their horses – even just a little bit. Riding – even casually and on the trails – our horses at less than the best of their ability may be detrimental to their health and may shorten the length of time they will be able to remain active as our riding partners. Pleasure riding horses – mostly because of the unnatural thing they do, i.e. carrying us on backs not designed by nature to carry anything – are prone to injuries and wear and tear unless ridden in a frame and balance that is healthy for them. Aggravated is all of this by any given horse’s conformation. This means that a horse with perfect conformation might actually be ridden without a lot of concern for its future health, because its straight limbs and movements, perfect carriage, strong back, croup and joints would protect it enough. Alas, most of us have horses with less than perfect conformation and we therefore should modify our demands on them and how we ask. Which brings me to the fact that I just completed a clinic for trail riders with Barbara Frische who is one of the top breeding judges for Icelandic horses and who has been doing these types of clinics for a few years now. They are very popular among trail riders in Europe and the US because riding our horses as well as possible and in a good mental and physical frame should be of interest to anybody; and because there are so few clinics out there directed at the pleasure riders of this world.

We had ten riders and eleven horses. The horses ranged in age from about 11 to 23, i.e. a rather mature group, with a rather varied skill set. Most were five gaiters, not usually ridden in pace, with a full range of lateral movements, from clear beat tölt to piggy pace. We looked at every horse’s conformation and how that conformation might affect any desired gaits, and how our riding should adjust to its limitations. We saw swaybacks, stiff backs, convex backs, long backs, dry tendons, wet tendons, steep shoulders, long croups, straight croups, flat barrels, cylindrical barrels, ewe necks, short necks, long necks, curvy necks etc. etc... Yes, we also looked at manes and tails, pretty heads and not so pretty heads, but ultimately and because this was not a breeding clinic, the necks, backs, croups and legs determine what kind of a trail horse we have, what gaits and speed range we can expect and what future potential health issues to watch out for.

Considering it was 'just' a trail riding clinic, the horses overall were of amazingly good quality and had personality to boot. One would canter with the voice command 'canter' (not so good when you swap horses with somebody but working well for the owner), another would do anything and everything her in-experienced rider even thought about asking, one gave immense confidence to an anxious rider and another stood sleepily while three people flitted all over her to help her arthritic rider heave her leg over her back to get on.

It was fun to watch horses shift from piggy pace to tölt steps over the two days, increase their speed range a little bit without falling apart and move better with a different head set. I am 'just' a trail rider and I am glad to have participated in this clinic because I do want to ride my horses as well as I am able to, and as well as they are able to.

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