

TENNESSEE WALKING HORSES

Hunter Style!



©HEIDI ROCKHOLD

Compiled By Lisa Warmels, Mawghan McCabe & Lydia Whitlow

A Tennessee Walking Horse, with proper training and discipline, can jump with poise, grace and the correct form that will give any Hunter a run for their money.

CAN TENNESSEE WALKING HORSES JUMP?

Every horse can jump right? But can they do it with style and flair, balanced like a true Hunter? Some of your experts will say no and scoff at the idea that this breed can actually be competitive in nature. But, that is not a fair, nor accurate assumption. In saying that, remember the impression we

leave on others is lasting. Since we don't get the opportunity to go back and make that "first impression" later, let's make sure that we do it right the first time and that we present our horses fully prepared with appropriate tack and attire.

A Tennessee Walking horse, with proper training and discipline, can jump with poise, grace and the correct form



Left: Tennessee Walking Horse Sassafras's Morning Star jumping in perfect form with Mawghan McCabe. Above: When approaching the jump the riders' eyes should be forward and the horse should be centered.

that will give any Hunter a run for their money.

The problem we have encountered at our training facility is that the majority of Tennessee Walkers that come to us for training do not have the advanced vocabulary for the job that is being asked of them.

What I mean by this is that their education for advanced riding is usually lacking. So we restart and recondition to the subtle cues of a true Hunter. Outside leg pressure for the canter. Flying lead changes strong and in place with a balanced canter with even strides. The individual flat is imperative to success in jumping. You, the rider demonstrate the ability to move a horse at all phases of each gait; flat walk, running walk and canter, in a controlled and relaxed manner.

With the proper setup you build the confidence of your horse. It is easy to damage their confidence if proper steps are not taken to ensure success for them.

Teaching a horse to jump is not about clearing an obstacle. It's about

timing, balance, and frame. It's the approach to the jump that will ultimately lead to success over the jumps.

Also, many people have a misconception about what exactly is a Hunter/Jumper. The problem in hearing these words is that many people think it is

What is the difference between Hunters, Hunt Seat Equitation and Jumpers?

ONE discipline. That is incorrect. There is a difference between Hunters, Hunt Seat Equitation and Jumpers. Our judges need to learn the difference as our TWHBEA & NHSC Rule book states that each horse shall be judged on Hunter way of going.

LET'S BEGIN WITH THE BASICS.

What is the difference between Hunters, Hunt Seat Equitation and Jumpers?

A Hunter is a graceful and elegant horse. The tradition of hunters comes from fox hunting. These horses are judged on their style of jump, ability to jump, manners and evenness of pace. The distance at which the horse takes off to jump, the striding and the lead changes are very important. The horse and rider must exhibit these qualities on the course, over jumps, between jumps, and through the turns. Hunters have meticulous turnout and tend toward very quiet, conservative horse tack and rider attire. Hunter bits, bridles, crops, spurs and martingales are tightly regulated.

The United States Equestrian Federation refers to this definition for a Hunter. Hunter competitions are based on the horse with the judges trying to determine which horse comes closest to the ideal mount. The horse should be beautiful with correct, proportional conformation. The horse should be well turned out with his coat shiny and his mane and tail braided. The mane should be braided with many small, evenly spaced braids. The tack (saddle and bridle) should be clean and supple and any metal (bits, stirrups) be well shined.

While the rider's main job is to show off his horse, he/she can do much to present his horse favorably to the judges. The rider should show how easy and enjoyable his horse is to ride, demonstrating as little motion as possible. The rider's attire should be neat and clean.

Courses will simulate fences found in the hunting field such as natural post and rail; brush, stone wall, white board fence or gate, oxer, etc. A typical course is comprised of approximately eight jumps with at least four different type obstacles. The course may include verticals or gates on one vertical plane and oxers built with a second rail in back to make the jump wider. The



During the landing the riders' eyes are forward and looking up to the corner, the body position is forward and the horse is centered.

course may include an in-and-out combination. This is two jumps placed to allow only one or two strides between them. In Handy classes, obstacles must simulate those found in trappy hunting country. The course must have at least two changes of directions and at least one combination. Horses may be required to flat walk over one obstacle toward the end of the course, may be asked to lead over one obstacle or open a gate while mounted.

Although the Hunter is in a long and low frame, it should still be able to collect its stride when asked. The horse must also be proficient in lengthening its canter stride while still maintaining its tempo and rhythm.

The walk of the show hunter is free and ground-covering; the running walk will take place of the trot and should be balanced and flowing. The canter should be moderately collected. The horse should have a long galloping stride (expected length is 12 feet), but should still be balanced and rhythmic.

Hunt Seat Equitation riding originated in the hunt field. Unlike the more

common hunter classes, hunt seat equitation judges the rider rather than the horse (except refusals, which always count against the rider). However, a poor performance by the horse is usually a result of the rider it was given, and so a bad take-off spot may be penalized if the judge feels it was due to rider error. Loss of a stirrup or reins are also severe faults, and may be cause for elimination.

Hunt Seat Equitation Over Fences, the competitor rides over a course of at least 6 obstacles (usually many more). Classes often require at least one flying change and one or more combinations. The rider is judged not only on effectiveness of aids, but should also maintain an even, forward pace and meet each fence at an appropriate distance.

A **Jumper** provides a thrilling performance at the show based on height and speed! The horse that can jump the highest and fastest wins. The purpose of the jumper is to clear the obstacles without knocking them down which is considered faulting. Style, action, conformation or pace is not considered in the judging.

SETTING UP YOUR HORSE TO JUMP

In order to setup a horse to jump, it takes months, even years of preparation and disciplined training for both horse and rider to achieve the desired results to have a fit horse that is responsive and willing and able to compete on the Open Hunter/Jumper circuit.

We're looking for relaxation, rhythm and straightness. Make your horse laterally supple, immediately bend as you bring your horse back to gait from canter. Next you want to work with poles on the ground.

Let the horse be natural over the poles on the ground, just let it happen. Remember, the horse does 90%. And then add some little jumps. Be honest to your rhythm and the jump comes to you. A good canter produces perfect distance. Train yourself to look at the fence, even when it's just a tiny cross rail.

The ability to accurately judge correct take-off distances is of paramount importance for any jumping discipline as it positions the horse at the most comfortable location in front of the jump. When a horse arrives at this "sweet spot" he does not have to adjust his stride length or balance in front of the jump and is given the best chance of negotiating the obstacle with ease. Accurate riders have mastered the ability to see their take-off spots well before each jump and are easily recognized for their smoothness on course. These riders achieve accuracy by keeping a rhythmic stride when approaching an obstacle, which helps them make the jumping experience as pleasant as possible for their horses.

ESTABLISHING RHYTHM AND FINDING THE DISTANCE

Horses do not have the ability to predict their own take-off locations in

front of the jump. If you watch horses free jump (without a rider), you will notice that their take-off distances are random and very inconsistent. If they happen to arrive at the perfect take-off distance it is only out of blind luck. **It is the rider's job** as navigator, to anticipate whether the upcoming take-off location will be too long, too deep or just right. In order to do so consistently, **the rider must establish a predictable canter.**

The canter rhythm is the most important factor that influences the rider's ability to recognize take-off distances early. If your canter is uneven with an inconsistent rhythm, you will have an extremely difficult time finding your distances.

EXERCISE - FINDING YOUR RHYTHM

Riders with good eyes are not only well-practiced, but they tend to have a good sense of rhythm - they are often good dancers. If you struggle with finding your rhythm on your horse, try cantering around the arena to music. As you go, try to keep the beats of the horse's canter rhythm in sync with the rhythm of the song. You will notice that your horse's natural rhythm is surprisingly inconsistent. For example, most horses tend to slow down through turns and speed up along straight-aways. Try sensing these variations in his rhythm and keep him on track with your rhythm. It's a great feeling when you can sustain your horse's rhythm to a good tune!

FEELING THE SWEET SPOT

More important than knowing where the take-off spot is, is "feeling" where the take-off spot is. This happens in almost every accuracy sport. You know when you have hit a ball with the sweet spot of a golf club or baseball bat. This same feeling happens when a

JUDGING

The judging begins the moment the horse enters the ring and continues until they leave the ring. The rider makes an opening circle before the first jump. This is where the turnout of the horse and rider is very important because this is the first look the judge will have of the team. A pretty horse that moves well and has a relaxed, confident manner will have a better chance at making a favorable first impression.

The most important consideration when judging a hunter round is jumping style. The horse should jump with his front legs folded high and evenly; head and neck should stretch out and down to insure a well-balanced jump. It is important that the horse's body and legs stay straight while jumping, so that the horse stays in the middle of the jump.

The judges are looking for consistent jumping efforts. The horse should clear each jump confidently, easily and in good style. The pace should remain the same throughout.

Judges must penalize unsafe jumping and bad form over fences, whether touched or untouched.

Horse should be credited for:

Even pace
Free flowing strides
Correct jumping form
Meeting fences squarely
Jumping center of fence

Major faults:

Knock down of any part of an obstacle
Refusals
Flat walking while on course when not specified
Bucking
Stopping for loss of shoe or broken equipment

Circling while on course
Dangerous jumping
Severe changes of pace
Incorrect pace (over or under)
Cross Canter
Missing a lead change

The following faults are scored according to the judge's opinion, and depending on severity may be considered minor or major faults.

Minor or major faults:

Showing an obstacle to a horse
Missing a lead change
Kicking out
Spooking
Jumping out of form
Jumping into corners of obstacles
Not jumping the center of fences
Minor changes in pace
Unhappy expression (pinning ears)
Excessive use of crop

The following may or may not be considered as faults, depending on their severity and frequency:

Light rubs
Swapping leads in a line
Late lead changes
Excessive show of animation
Adding or eliminating a stride in a line

Elimination:

Three refusals (i.e., refusal, run-out, stop on course (unless for reset) extra circle)
Off course (i.e., jumping an extra fence)
Jumping a fence before it is reset
Bolting from the ring
Fall of horse or rider

rider comes to a fence and finds that magic take-off spot where everything happens perfectly... the sweet spot. Finding a take-off distance is actually a “feeling” that happens when you sense where your horse will arrive in front of the jump given the canter rhythm you are on. It is not necessarily something you see.

IMPROVING YOUR EYE

So now that you are familiar with what the sweet spot feels like, it is your goal to arrive at this sweet spot every time you jump. You will most likely be frustrated by the fact that you don't see your distances consistently. Sometimes you sense them from three strides away, other times five strides away and a lot of times you don't see them at all. Seeing distances consistently is as elusive as finding the perfect golf swing every time. The only way to improve this ability is through practice and patience.

PRACTICE

The only way to develop your eye is through practice. Your eye will improve in proportion to the amount of obstacles you jump. Since it's not realistic to jump your horse over heights every day, as it can be hard on them, all you need is to jump over ground rails. This is a great solution since the optimal take-off distance to a ground rail is essentially the same as it is to any moderately sized jump. Jumping poles on a daily basis is perhaps the most important tool for developing your eye, because it is something you can do to challenge your eye every day.

BEGINNING THE PROCESS

1. Make sure you have all of the following required appointments – hunt seat saddle or all purpose training saddle, snaffle bit, and

approved ASTM Headgear. We are under the understanding that your horse now has a solid canter cue in place, and you have mastered solid flying lead changes.

2. Set your poles/cavaletti on the lowest height and warm your horse up around them. Don't ask him to go over them yet.
3. Get off your horse, run your stirrups up, and walk around for a moment. If you don't walk your horse regularly, then he'll wonder why you're stopping in a lesson to walk him around.
4. Head for the first pole/cavaletti (hereafter a pole) and walk over it as if it's no big deal. If you've done any trail riding this step should be easy.
5. Walk over the poles until your horse walks over them easily, without pausing to look at them.
6. Mount up, and walk over the poles.
7. Dismount, ask your horse to flat walk, and flat walk him over the poles. You may or may not need to adjust the distance between them to allow him freedom of movement. (See related topics)
8. Continue this for several days, skipping the getting off and walking him. When you can walk, flat walk, and canter him over the poles easily and without hesitation, then move on to the next step.
9. Raise the poles.
10. Repeat steps 1-9, then raise the pole to the highest height (it should be 18 inches) and repeat again.

TIPS

- When you're going over the lower heights (on the ground, six inches) then don't change your

posture over the jump, you will just confuse your horse. He's still adjusting his stride for the poles, don't throw him off balance. When you reach 18 inches, then just go into a slight two-point.

- Warm your horse up really well before starting.
- When cantering your horse over the poles, find the correct distance from the jump to ask your horse when to jump. Be sure that if your horse is going too slow towards the jump, ask him for more momentum and if he is going too fast shorten his stride to get the right distance.

WARNINGS

- Be warned to not take it too quickly, if you rush a horse that is not mentally or physically ready you'll end up with a horse that balks or ducks out of jumps.
- Do NOT let your horse pick up speed irrationally. When a horse lands a jump he's automatically moving faster, but when he gets going too fast you can't control him. 🐾

