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Fundamentals of Conformation and Horse Judging

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Looking for a good horse? This guide offers tips for judging or just looking.

Horses must be "athletes" to be useful. Certain qualities of conformation are necessary for good performance. Discussion in this guide can be applied to any breed or weight of horse.

Body dimensions and performance

Major contributions to a good-bodied horse are shown in Figure 1 and include long, sloping shoulders (B); short, strong back, (C); long underline (D); and long, rather level croup (E).

Figure 1. Long sloping shoulders; short, strong back; long underline; and a long, rather level croup increase the probability that your horse is or can become a good "athlete." (Drawing by Orlin Mixer, courtesy American Quarter Horse Association and adapted by Doug Ross.)

If shoulders are long and sloping, they extend the stride in running, absorb shock, reduce stumbling, move the elbows away from the girth, and raise the head slightly. They should be surmounted by clean, high withers that extend well backward to afford maximum security of the saddle.

Short backs and long underlines move the fore and rear legs farther apart, tend to raise the croup and head, contribute to style and action, and increase height and length of stride. Also, short backs are stronger, reduce the length of coupling (hip bone to last rib), and are usually more muscular than others. Finally, well-sprung ribs that blend into hips and shoulders with minimum roughness tend to accompany short backs.

Long, rather level croups accommodate more muscling, increase style and balance, and are less often associated with crooked hind legs.

Since all of the power used in motion comes from the hindquarters, muscular development should be extensive, commensurate with breed requirements. Breeching, thighs and gaskins should be especially muscular. Long, smooth muscles are preferred to those that are short and bunched.

Leverage is gained with maximum length from hip to hock and minimum length of cannon. These dimensions are developed to a high degree in breeds that race.

Smoothness, balance and symmetry are a result of all parts blending together, being of proportionate size, and each contributing equally to the whole of a symmetrical individual. These combined with refinement, alertness and a proud carriage contribute to style.

Leg set

Be thorough when observing leg set of a horse. Proper leg set is essential to durability and good action. A leg should be properly positioned under each corner of the body, knees and hocks should not deviate inward or outward, and feet should point straight forward.

If a horse stands straight, he will probably move straight. Conversely, if he stands on crooked legs, he must move likewise (see MU publication [G2842](#), *Leg Set: Its Effect on Action and Soundness of Horses*). Crooked moving detracts from appearance, wastes energy and predisposes to unsoundnesses.

Legs should be positioned on the corners of the body. A straight line drawn from the arm downward should bisect the forearm, knee, cannon, fetlock, and pass behind the bulb of the heel (A in Figure 1). A line drawn from the point of the shoulder downward should bisect the arm, knee, cannon, fetlock, pastern, and hoof. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Forearms, knees, cannons, ankles, pasterns, and hooves should be centered under the points of the shoulders. (Courtesy Appaloosa Horse Club, Inc.)

When viewed from the side, a straight line drawn downward from the back of the buttock should touch the back of the hock, cannon, and fetlock. Viewed from behind (Figure 3) the line should bisect the gaskin, hock, cannon, fetlock, pastern, and foot.

Figure 3. Thighs, gaskins, hocks, cannons, ankles, pasterns, and hooves should be centered under the points of the buttocks. (Courtesy Appaloosa Horse Club, Inc.)

Pasterns should be medium in length, sloped at approximately 45 degrees, and flexible but strong. Hoofs should have the same angle as pasterns, and be deep and wide at the heels, moderate in size, dense of horn, and free of rings. White hoofs are softer (wear faster) than others. Slope of shoulders and pasterns and expansion of heels account for shock absorption when the horse is in motion.

Bone should be adequate in size, show definition of joints, and should appear flat viewed

from the side, compared to a front view.

Bone spavins, bogs, thoroughpins, and weakness are common to sickle hocks. Jarring from short, straight pasterns and shoulders predisposes to side bones, stiffness, bogs, and lameness (see MU publication [G2840](#), *Unsoundness and Blemishes of Horses: Feet and Legs*). Pigeon toes tend to wing, whereas splayed feet tend to swing inward in motion.

Effect of quality on wearability

Quality is indicated by refinement of head, bone, joints and hair coat. It is reflected in thin skin, prominent veins and absence of coarseness, especially in the legs. Good circulation in the legs is important to durability (Figure 1). Coarse, "meaty" legs with reduced circulation tend to stock, puff, bog, and become unsound.

A horse of quality has more attractiveness, therefore more buyer appeal.

Effect of head and neck on flexibility

The length and shape of a horse's neck and size of his head affect action. The neck should be long, slightly arched, and fine and clean at the throatlatch for maximum balance, style and maneuverability. Fine throats enhance ease of breathing and allow maximum flexion of the chin without binding the jaws on the neck. Short-necked, thick-throated horses "steer" hard and may be "head slingers" from jaw pressure when pulled up short. Size of head should be in accord with breed requirements. Ears should not be oversized and should be carried alertly. Eyes should be wide-spaced, large and clear. Nostrils should be large but refined, and lips firm instead of pendulous.

Effect of disposition on usefulness

If riding is to be a joy and safety a requirement, good dispositions become a "must." They may be both "born" and "made." Some breeds are more docile than others, and wide differences exist among individuals within breeds. Any horse appropriately trained will have a satisfactory disposition for normal riding. Conversely, horses of excellent dispositions can be spoiled by improper handling.

Watch the ears and eyes of the horse for nervousness and resistance. Have the owner handle its feet. Ride the horse (if it is trained) to see if it is dependable and adequate for your purposes. Take it on a trial basis if possible. Green colts will usually be unsatisfactory for beginners.

Courage or "heart" is necessary for horses used for racing and sporting events. Intelligence or ability to learn is an asset in any horse. These can be identified in horses trained or in training and may be predicted in part by pedigree or family relationships.

A horse with the conformation and disposition described is physically able to be an effective performer. To do so, it needs to be fed appropriately and kept healthy.

See MU publications [G02806](#), *Feeds for Light Horses*, and [G02807](#), *Feeding Horses*, for information on feeding and health, and [G02836](#), *Selecting Your Riding Horse*.

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