

Versatility: Tapping Your Horse's Talent Naturally

Versatility brings out the best in a horse and rider, fostering benefits such as enhanced performance and reviving that lost "spark" in a training regimen. As the horse world evolves, more and more horse owners, especially those who ride gaited horses, are tapping into and enjoying the wealth of versatility opportunities available to them and their gaited breeds. As Tennessee Walkers, Missouri Foxtrotters, and others are moving away from the arena wall and starting to venture onto more trails, more dressage arenas, and even more cattle pens, versatility is essentially the wave of the future. Riders and owners are consistently venturing out beyond the show ring, cultivating not only more venues for competition, but also creating improved relationships between horses and riders. The natural talent of individual horses is showing through, their beauty and capability harvested for what it is. Some organizations are recognizing and emphasizing the need to allow a horse to do all it can do naturally and using only humane measures to reach its potential: FOSH (Friends of Sound Horses) is such an organization.

FOSH was originally founded out of opposition to the soring techniques that, however illegal according to the HPA (Horse Protection Act), occur in the gaited competitive world, specifically affecting the Tennessee Walker. The USDA has sanctioned twelve HIOs (Horse Industry Organizations) to carry out inspections necessary for detecting the illegal soring practices at Tennessee Walker shows, but funding is minimal. Soring is the process of either painting caustic chemicals such as kerosene and diesel fuel on the pasterns or through the shoeing practice of placing a foreign object such as a nail or half of a golf ball between the sole of the hoof and a pad. Soring of any method is meant to cause the horse pain so its naturally beautiful gaits will be grossly exaggerated for the show ring.

The non-profit FOSH was formed in coalition against the use of soring, chains, stacks, pads, or any other chemical, artificial or mechanical means of manipulating gait in all gaited horses. Today, they are an organization that strives to eliminate all inhumane treatment of horses and recognizes, encourages, and awards horse owners who strive to prove that a horse's ultimate potential can be engaged by natural means alone. They promote and educate the public while showcasing the natural gaited horse, putting emphasis on the natural gaited Walking Horse in flatshod and barefoot competitions.

FOSH utilizes sanctioned competitions and a judging program to encourage humane treatment of naturally gaited horses in the show world. At each competition included in their sanctioned show circuit, carefully selected judges included in FOSH's Independent Judge's Association (IJA), paired with a USDA certified FOSH DQP (Designated Qualified Person), ensure that every horse being ridden and shown is absolutely sound. The DQP thoroughly checks the horse unsaddled before it enters the ring, saddled as it leaves the ring, and also tests for soring. Members registered with FOSH compete throughout these sanctioned shows, accumulating points and qualifications to win awards recognizing their preservation of the sound, naturally gaited horse. The Holy Grail of FOSH awards is the annual FOSH Horse of the Year award. Encouraging both versatility and promotion of the sound gaited horse in competition, the FOSH Horse of the Year is based on the rider and horse that wins the most points in sanctioned events. In 2009, Trixie Trax, owned by Cathy Warren, was that horse.

Warren, of West Chapel, FL, was introduced to both FOSH and her horse, Trixie Trax, in 2008, through her good friend Tori Blankenship, of Sarasota, FL. That year, Tori and her stallion, Playboy's Sampson, had won not only FOSH Horse of the Year but also the honor of being the first Foxtrotter to ever win the prestigious award. Trixie was originally a loan from Blankenship to Warren for a horse show but the two proved to have such a quick bond that the mare became a belated birthday gift later that year. According to Warren, "It was a match made in heaven." Not a first time owner of a Foxtrotter, Warren was still amazed at how much Trixie was capable of. In the two years since she met Trixie, she has really learned the meaning of the word versatility. Trixie can be shown not only in classes like Open Country Pleasure and trail classes at breed shows but she can turn around and perform in dressage and negotiate a trail ride like an ace. The best thing about Cathy and Trixie in all of their showing and versatility endeavors is that they do it all naturally without any artificial means. In 2008 the dynamic duo was awarded FOSH Reserve High Point Champion but after winning 2009 FOSH Horse of the Year, Cathy can't wait to see what else her mare can do.

Taking the title of FOSH Horse of the Year is not only prestigious but reflects very admirable achievement. She won after showing in 61 FOSH approved classes, accumulating her points and recognition over all participating competitors in the fifty states and Canada. Warren says, "This is a big deal. [It's] very rewarding to know that she does what she does and does it naturally. I get very excited when I talk about it. Some people don't understand and think you have to do something to a gaited horse to get them to perform." With Trixie's help, Cathy Warren has realized that Foxtrotters, as well as all

gaited breeds, can do virtually anything from showing in trail classes in a breed show to jumping to endurance riding.

Promoting the talent of gaited breeds through their versatility program, FOSH awards members who tap their horse's potential talent naturally, all the while encouraging keeping the horse's best interest and happiness in mind. The FOSH Versatility Program includes three levels: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. Each level is achieved through the completion of "four legs" or areas of versatility and each "leg" is completed after accumulating a minimum amount of points. Classes in FOSH range from speed games to jumping and the organization also has a program for endurance and trail riders.

Through FOSH, several open shows are increasing their inclusion of gaited horses into their classes.

Open gaited dressage shows, such as the FOSH affiliated Florida State Fair, introduced gaited dressage in 2010. Another example of an association acknowledging the equal talent of both stock and gaited horses is the Sheriff's Equestrian Association (SEA) in Sarasota, Florida. Also FOSH sanctioned and affiliated, the association agreed about a year ago to create a couple of open gaited classes in their open stock horse show. Twelve classes are now available for gaited horses at this show, including a few classes in which the gaited horses compete against the other stock horses like Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds. Foxtrotters, Walkers, and gaited Arabians have competed successfully. This open acceptance and acknowledgement is pivotal for gaited horses in Southern Florida, echoing a trend that is starting to increase throughout the horse competition world.

At FOSH sanctioned shows like the SEA's event, all horses have to be FOSH approved. All SEA shows through May of this year are sanctioned by FOSH. Even a gaited trail class is included, in which participants must gait over poles, perform 360s, and walk over bridges. However, open trail classes are also held wherein gaited horses compete against stock horses. Another class that involves both gaited and stock horses is the Grand and Reserve Champion halter class. In fact, Trixie placed Reserve Champion among stock and non-stock in February of this year and enjoyed being the first gaited horse to win Reserve in halter at this show.

Warren realizes how much work her mare put into qualifying at FOSH events and is extremely grateful and amazed at Trixie's disposition and willingness to try new things. Warren says, "She's absolutely fabulous. Winning the Horse of the Year is not just FOSH; it's about promoting our breed. There's people in the breed that don't believe they can do it all, and she can. Trixie can go in the ring, trail ride, tolerate wild life and water. That to me is the most important thing about a horse. I don't care how well they can perform in a ring; if they can go on the trail and show the next, that's the ultimate horse." One of Warren's more gratifying moments that she recalls in her FOSH qualifying experience with Trixie happened at the 2009 Florida State Fair. The class, Open Gaited Breed Country Pleasure, required participants to show in four gaits, including a slow intermediate gait. Generally in Foxtrotter classes, only three gaits are required: flat walk, foxtrot, and canter. Warren realized that a running walk would be the appropriate slow intermediate gait as soon as the announcer called for the transition, but she had never asked Trixie for a running walk. However, like magic, the mare seemed to know what was asked of her, and performed it beautifully. To Warren, this only furthered solidified how versatile, tolerant, and talented her mare truly is.

Even though she has brought Trixie through the show ring gate many times, she realizes the benefits of incorporating versatility not only in competition but also in the great outdoors. By working on versatility with natural means and by giving her horse a job to do, organizations like FOSH and sympathetic riders like Warren realize how important it is for a horse's mind to give them a break from their usual routine and let them truly prove their potential. A horse can be soured by an entire career of ring work and showing.

In addition, versatility also allows a rider to greatly improve her skills. Warren says, "a horse can do anything you ask them to do if you give them the proper time and instruction." Now that she's ready to retire 8-year old Trixie from the show ring, she would like to try something even more fun and exciting.

Maybe competitive trail riding. The bottom line is, if a horse is made for a job or a discipline, using natural means alone will allow the horse to shine.

FOSH has a multitude of ways interested riders and owners can get involved. A simple membership allows a rider to show in any FOSH affiliated or sanctioned show. By doing so, competitors can qualify for high point awards and FOSH Horse of the Year, to name a few. Clinics, judging classes, and USDA certifications for checking horses at shows are also available. Furthermore, interested persons can get involved with fighting against soring and other inhumane equine practices. FOSH is a huge organization, offering many opportunities to promote and conserve natural gaited breeds, including donations and

volunteering. For more information on FOSH, how to get involved, and to look at their 2010 Rule Book, go to www.fosh.info.

FOSH and riders like Cathy Warren believe that horses are capable of so much more, and should be very encouraged to do more, than just gait around a ring. The same routine can sour a horse and a great approach to maintain a relationship with a horse is to better his mind through versatility. FOSH believes in letting horses do what they can do naturally, and listening to horses if they show signs they are not ready for a new job or career. If horses allowed to grow and develop their talents gradually and naturally, most horses will be willing to try anything they are physically capable of performing with a rider they trust. With humane treatment and only natural aids, that trust will be all the stronger and the benefits beyond compare.