

Western Pleasure: Much More than Just a Class

Face it: western pleasure tends to attract misconceptions. Mention western pleasure, and the phrase often conjures up images of stiff-legged stock horses, heads lowered to an unnatural level, moving at a jog trot that would leave them in the dust of any other performance horse's walk.

But in the real world, successful competitors and trainers that focus on this discipline know the truth. Mention balance and creating a solid foundation for communication and oneness with a horse, and many immediately think of dressage. However, contrary to what may be often considered as a "cop-out" discipline, western pleasure is basically the elementary levels of dressage disguised with a different costume. Not only beneficial for stock horses that go on to be reining horses or very nimble trail horses, gaited horses can gain a very substantial foundation for any future goals using the principles of western pleasure, from Western Pleasure World Champion to Extreme Cowboy Challenge trail horse to a successful dressage horse.

Western pleasure requires a horse to have a calm, willing, happy-go-lucky disposition. The stride is to be shorter than what would be preferred in an English Pleasure class. While specific guidelines for showing in western pleasure differ slightly depending on the breed association, gaited horses perform a walk, intermediate gait in lieu of a jog, and a lope.

Equipment, including tack and legal bits, can be found in show and association rule books but all western pleasure classes require a nice drape in the rein with minimal contact, without being held in a "frame." Sound a bit like classical dressage without the extended gaits? According to the AQHA, "Maximum credit should be given to the flowing, balanced and willing horse which gives the appearance of being fit and a pleasure to ride." Regardless of breed, this statement says it all. Tori Blankenship, of Sarasota, FL, can testify to the balanced flow of training for western pleasure and what experiencing true feel through communication is like for her and her Foxtrotters.

While western pleasure certainly holds its own at shows as a class that reflects the finesse and diligence required to visibly define the pleasurable and happy experience of riding a quality western show horse, Tori Blankenship knows that the discipline of western pleasure is an actual philosophy that shines from far beneath the gleam of ribbons and a well-turned-out horse and rider. With western pleasure comes versatility and an overall handiness of control between horse and rider. Once the horse masters maintaining gait, and a straight line, the next step is to teach them to work off the seat and leg. After this logically follows lateral work, such leg yielding, turning on the forehand and haunches, side passing, and then neck reining. All these steps go into creating a winning western pleasure mount, and establish a solid foundation of training for ultimate usability. Blankenship says, "A finished western pleasure horse that has graduated from "elementary school" should be able to complete all of these maneuvers without a bridle." Once a horse is trained to this degree and is guided solely on a rider's body movements, the horse evolves into a completely flexible and maneuverable partner that can go on to be successful in a variety of competitions, gaited or mixed breed.

Blankenship accredits the easy-going cooperative nature of a western pleasure horse with two aspects of the discipline. First, specifically concerning gaited horses, a western pleasure horse is allowed to enjoy the ride as he freely gaits, not being pushed into the bit to collect or asked to extend. In a shorter stride, he carries himself closer to how he would naturally out in his pasture. When asked to work using training methods that mirror his natural way of going, he is happier to pick up on those subtle body movement and aids. As a result, the horse is much happier and receptive, ready to go anywhere and do anything.

Another important facet of training for western pleasure is that the horse is brought along through graduating levels. Just as in dressage, this discipline is a classroom of building blocks that lead to a horse's understanding via logical steps and progression. A horse cannot progress until he understands the last lesson introduced. These steps teach the horse the "why" behind what the rider is asking. For example, in dressage and western pleasure, a horse is taught to move off the leg and respect that pressure. That building block is one of many, based on a system of pressure and reward. Eventually, this system is refined to a rider simply thinking about the horse moving his shoulder three inches to the inside or yielding his poll half an inch to the right. Once the dance is established at this level of finesse with invisible body cues and mental connection, the hands are merely a support. At this point, flying lead changes with one hand would be almost as natural as a ride down the trail.

To Blankenship, the whole point of using the invaluable communication process of western pleasure as a basis is to focus on what a horse can do naturally and then build on that if the horse has a little more athletic ability. She says, "Everything is possible as long as the horse has a natural ability, and the horse is brought along step by step. To anyone who has the idea that a western pleasure horse is a performance 'cop-out': 'No, this is a solid base and platform.'" Such possibilities range from reined cowhorse clinics to competitive trail riding to jumping. At the FOSH (Friends of Sound Horses) Region 2 Championships in Missouri, a class is offered to amplify the skills a horse learns in western pleasure. This class is based on stock horse western riding patterns, including 8 cones and 10 lead changes. Quality in this class is judged according to the horse's seamless performance based solely on a rider's seat and legs. Other opportunities, such as a reined cowhorse clinic, attract breeds like the Foxtrotter who hold their own alongside the stock horses, maintaining balanced lopes, hand gallops, sliding stops, spins, and roll backs. Because of the western pleasure basis, they have the athleticism to compete with stock horses. And, unlike a stock horse, an properly trained and athletic gaited horse can play with the cows, and then walk out of the pen, head nodding, at a fantastic fox trot.

Blankenship's own horses are testament to using western pleasure not only to set down a solid foundation, but to illuminate their natural talents. Probably the most noteworthy example is Playboy Sampson, winner of 2008's FOSH Horse of the Year. Playboy Sampson, now retired to a drug rehab facility called Cirque Lodge in Utah, is a horse with a history. Abused through the early part of his show career, enduring severe "training" practices that left him frightened and explosively dangerous, he learned to overcome his past through the help of Tori, her husband Bud, and the gentle communication and understanding that comes with the western pleasure training philosophy. Blankenship kindly encouraged his talent to fully radiate and the pair went on to participate in and win several awards. Among these accomplishments were becoming a finalist at Florida's Great Extreme Cowboy Challenge in 2007. Also in 2007, he was in the top ten finish of five MFTHBA World Champion divisions, including Saddleseat and Western Pleasure. In 2008, his crowning year, he took several Grand Champion placings at competitions such as Thru the Gaits Championship Show and North American Gaited Horse Championships, earning titles as Grand Champion Versatility Horse and Grand Champion Missouri Foxtrotter, among many others. Of course, in 2008, he also became FOSH horse of the year. All this was possible because of his solid base that Tori built, founded on western pleasure and a continuous awareness of "feel" and understanding in her training. On other horses, she has enjoyed similar successes at the Foxtrotter World Show and in jumping and dressage.

One of the best rewards from actively training for western pleasure and beyond is the relationship and communication that comes from starting with this foundation and branching off

into versatility. Keep in mind that not every gaited horse will be able to do everything but through the logical training process of western pleasure or dressage, and gathering the opinion of a knowledgeable gaited horse trainer, a rider can begin to discover a horse's natural talent and tap that in a safe and sustainable way. From versatility, a relationship filled with respect and learning and partnership is fostered. Communication becomes a whisper of a leg, or a mere thought. The horse is working off the rider, and the rider off the horse, responding to each other every step, and communicating, having a conversation, with every movement and every request. Blankenship says, "You need to feel the horse's legs, and feel the gait. Your hips need to do what their hips do. You are an extension of the horse, and visa versa." This is feel. Beyond the ring and the ribbons, western pleasure can get a rider and horse to this zen-like place. All a rider really needs to do is listen.

Good horsemanship is good horsemanship, regardless of the "costume" or tack. Many roads lead to Rome as well, and western pleasure is one of several ways to acquire a solid, long-lasting foundation and partnership. If a rider uses a foundation such as western pleasure and then grows a horse's strong points and talent naturally from there on out, a horse will most likely continue to be willing and happy. Blankenship attests to this by saying, "Always give 110% with proper training, and the horse will give you back every ounce he has." If a rider can find what a horse can do naturally, like competitive trail riding or cattle work, and the horse has the logical "feel" of good training backing him up, that horse will never quit. That said, western pleasure alone is a great class to show and train for, but the discipline and opportunity for bonding with the horse is its best kept secret.