

Western Pleasure

CLASS DESCRIPTION

A considerable amount of controversy over the criteria for judging the western pleasure class has occurred in recent years. Moreover, western pleasure has seen many changes throughout the years, and the trends seen will most likely keep changing. However, the main question that should enter your mind when judging this class is: **Does the horse appear as though it is a pleasure to ride?** Once you ask yourself that question, you should find the forward-moving, balanced, strided and well-mannered horse and allow it to rise to the top, because it is likely to be the most pleasurable horse to ride.

Moreover, western pleasure is the building block for all other western riding classes. A pleasure horse has free-flowing stride of reasonable length in keeping with its conformation. It should move across the ground with little effort and should have a balanced flowing motion. The quality of movement and consistency of gaits is a major consideration. The pleasure horse should carry its head and neck in a relaxed, natural position with the poll level even with the withers. It should carry his head slightly in front of the vertical giving the appearance of being willfully guided. It should be shown on a reasonable loose rein with light contact. The horse should be responsive yet smooth in the transitions. Maximum credit should be given to the flowing, balanced, willing horse that gives the appearance of being fit and pleasurable to ride.

The four major criteria for judging the pleasure class are:

1. Broke and Quiet
2. Soft and Smooth
3. Functionally Correct
4. Consistency and Quality

Broke and Quiet

The most important quality that a western pleasure horse should possess is the ability to be broke and quiet. If the pleasure horse is not broke and quiet, then he cannot effectively be evaluated on the other three criteria listed above. A horse that is broke and quiet is one that is free from major and minor refusals to the rider such as bucking, rearing, balking, mouthing the bit, ringing the tail and pinning the ears. Once it is determined the horse in the pleasure class is broke and quiet, it is time to judge the horse on the way that he/she moves.

Soft and Smooth

A soft and smooth horse is one that hits the ground light and soft on all four feet and travels with some drive and impulsion from behind. It should also be noted that pleasure horses will not travel with as much drive and length of stride as the hunter under saddle horse, yet they should remain cadenced and smooth at all three gaits shown.

Functionally Correct

Western pleasure horses are those which pick up gaits and leads when called for and do not show any deviation from those gaits throughout the class, going either direction. Breaks of gait (both upward and downward) and wrong leads are evidence that a horse in the pleasure class is not very functionally correct and is probably not a pleasure to ride. Horses that travel with the tip of their ears below the point of their withers (for several strides) are also not functionally correct and should be judged accordingly.

Consistency and Quality

The consistency and quality is extremely important in judging the western pleasure class. A pleasure horse that shows consistency and quality is one who gives the appearance of being a “pleasure” to ride. These horses are expressive, natural, attractive and appear as though they are enjoying their work. They offer an overall pleasing picture when viewed the rail and simply possess great amounts of eye appeal. The horse that is consistent in his/her quality of movement should be given credit.

The American Quarter Horse Association has now implemented a new system for calling gaits for the western pleasure class. The lope is now asked for as a “lope with a slight increase in forward motion.” This does not mean that the horses should increase their speed dramatically, and, if you have been to a large Quarter Horse show lately, the judges are not placing racehorses. However, it does mean that credit should be given to a horse that moves in a balanced, forward-moving stride with a great degree of lift and flow. Likewise, a horse that is moving in an excessively slow, unbalanced stride should be penalized. Depending on what contest you attend, the contest officials may or may not ask for a lope with a slight increase in forward motion. They may simply just ask for a traditional lope. Either way, the description of the gait should not dictate how you judge the class. The AQHA also has now asked judges to ask for an extended jog at least one direction of the rail. An extended jog should be a lengthening of gait and not a quickening of pace. Just because a horse is going faster, it does not mean that the horse is moving more correctly or with a higher degree of quality.

Some of the words being used when describing western pleasure horses today are **balance, lift, flow and self-carriage.**

- Balance in a moving horse is the ability of the animal to keep itself properly oriented or positioned while in motion, thus giving an impression of stability in motion. This also relates to stride length. The best way to visualize this is to draw an imaginary line down the center of the horse. A balanced horse at the jog and lope should take relatively the same length of stride forward of the line as they take behind the line. Quite often, horses will be forced to shorten their stride in an attempt to make them to move at a slower pace. Most of the time (this can be seen especially at the jog), the horse will then begin to move in an unbalanced stride. Sometimes, these horses will be called lame because they are moving longer with a leg on one side of the body than they are with the other. However, a horse cannot be called lame to the degree to excuse that horse from the class or placing unless they are bobbing their head consistently at the jog.
- Lift is a period of suspension or an elevated carriage, and flow is to move smoothly, easily and to be fluid.

- Self-carriage is a term that encompasses balance, lift and flow. Without the components of balance, lift and flow, self-carriage cannot be achieved. Balance and flow cannot be achieved without forward motion and the proper cadence. When a pleasure horse lacks forward motion or cadence, balance is sacrificed and flow is lost. This horse is not comfortable. Remember, a good pleasure horse should appear to be comfortable and a pleasure to ride.

The lack of forward motion affects the balance of a horse's movement and interferes with its flow and cadence in its gait. When the balance and flow are interfered with enough, this horse may start bobbing its head and hesitating in its motion. This horse may turn sideways with its hip towards the center of the pen. This type of movement is often referred to as being "over canted." A horse should be penalized when it is excessively canted toward the center of the pen. However, a correctly moving pleasure horse will be slightly canted to the degree that its rear leg closest to the rail should be in a line with the inside front leg. A horse that lacks forward motion may also cock its head slightly away from the direction it's traveling, or put its head too low on the forehead. Often, a horse that carries its head too low also appears to be behind the vertical.

DESCRIPTION OF GAITS AND MOTIONS

There are four gaits seen in the western pleasure.

1. Walk
2. Jog
3. Lope
4. Back

(+) A GOOD WALK:

The horse travels in a four-beat gait, level topline and a relaxed appearance, yet is bright and attentive. This horse flows slowly but deliberately and touches the ground softly.

(0) AN AVERAGE WALK:

The horse simply travels in a correct four-beat gait with a level topline and relaxed appearance.

(-) A POOR WALK:

The horse travels in an uneven pace without cadence. This horse may have a robotic appearance and hesitates between foot placements. This horse has no flow and may appear intimidated. Conversely, a horse may travel with an excessively swift pace, pushing against the bridle and attempting to break stride to the jog.

(++) AN EXCELLENT JOG:

The horse travels in a motion that appears effortless and efficient. This horse travels distinctly and deliberately, yet touches the ground very softly. The horse is confident, yet still soft in its motion while being balanced and under control. This horse swings flat with its knee and hock and has some cushion on its pastern because it is moving with lift and self-carriage. The horse's expression is bright and alert.

(+) A GOOD JOG:

The horse appears very comfortable to ride, always has a consistent two-beat gait, is guiding well, and has a relaxed and level topline. This horse may let the hocks drift back into the tail from time to time or this horse may exhibit some knee action, but is obviously soft on the ground.

(0) AN AVERAGE JOG:

The horse travels in a two-beat diagonal gait in which the diagonal pairs of legs touch the ground simultaneously. This horse has a level topline and a relaxed appearance.

(-) BELOW AVERAGE JOG:

The horse seems to hesitate or skip a beat in the two-beat motion. Also, this horse does not keep an even and balanced motion and may not have a level topline. This horse appears to shuffle and may appear to walk on the hind or front legs. A horse must have a true two-beat gait to be average at the jog.

(--) POOR JOG:

The horse cannot seem to maintain a two-beat gait and appears very uncomfortable in an attempt to accomplish the gait. This horse does not have any flow or balance in its motion and appears very uncomfortable to ride.

(++) AN EXCELLENT LOPE:

The horse rounds its back and has a strong, deep stride and a flat swing with its front legs. This horse swings its legs correctly and long, yet seems to do so effortlessly. This horse keeps a very level topline, and the hocks don't drift behind the tail. This horse has a relaxed, yet alert and confident appearance. This is a unique horse in that it is correct and deliberate, yet soft. This horse has a great degree of lift and self-carriage.

(+) A GOOD LOPE:

The horse appears to have more lift and flow than the average horse, with a strong but smooth drive from behind. This horse may exhibit some knee action or may let its hocks drift into the tail slightly, but this horse still has a level topline and relaxed appearance. This horse definitely appears comfortable to ride and exhibits self-carriage.

(0) AN AVERAGE LOPE:

The horse has a true three-beat gait, with a level topline and very little head and neck motion. This horse has a comfortable motion, guides well and has a relaxed appearance.

(-) BELOW AVERAGE LOPE:

The horse may appear to have a distinct gait but has no lift. This horse also may be hollow in the back, and consequently will display knee action on the forehand and will be uncollected behind. This horse shuffles and has a lack of flow. Also, this horse bobs its head to an extreme to give the appearance of exerting a great deal of effort. This horse does not appear comfortable to ride.

(--) A POOR LOPE:

The horse does not have a distinct true three-beat gait. Additionally, this horse has no flow,

rhythm or balance. This horse appears out of sync and is obviously not comfortable to ride.

(+) A DESIRABLE TOPLINE:

A correct topline is defined as one that has the ear being level with the wither at the lowest point, or eye being level with the wither at the highest point. This is called head carriage. Credit should be given to a horse with a still and consistent topline that exhibits self-carriage.

(-) AN UNDESIRABLE TOPLINE:

This will occur when a horse's head is consistently higher than eye level with the withers. Consequently, the back will become hollow and this horse loses drive from behind. This may also occur when the head is consistently lower than ear level with the withers. This horse becomes heavy on the forehand and has a lack of lift and flow. In both cases, the horse loses self-carriage and appears to struggle.

(+) A DESIRABLE HEAD SET:

The horse's head will be slightly nosed out. The horse will also appear to be comfortable and have an alert appearance. This horse will also be ridden on a trusting (loose) rein. If the horse is ridden on a trusting rein while displaying an attractive gait, this horse by definition displays self-carriage.

(-) AN UNDESIRABLE HEAD SET:

This horse's head will be behind the vertical. The horse will appear to be uncomfortable and may appear to be intimidated. Often this horse will be ridden on a tight rein, but a horse can be behind the vertical and intimidated while being ridden on a loose rein. This horse will often pin the ears and mouth the bit.

(+) (0) THE BACK:

The horse should back at least one horse length quietly. This should be done with light contact and smoothly. This is the standard or average; however, more credit should be given for correctness and smoothness rather than how quickly it is done.

(-) A BELOW-AVERAGE BACK:

This horse appears resistant or heavy in front. The horse gaps its mouth or throws its head.

Competitive judging contestants should be reminded that western pleasure is a class to judge how horses move on the rail, and emphasis should be placed on just that. Rules in the respective rule books should be followed; however judging students should not look for horse to commit errors and be disqualified. On the other hand, they should always judge horses on the positive (not just in western pleasure, but in all classes) looking for what a horse does well. When giving reasons, on the western pleasure class it is important that students emphasize movement of the horses and keep their reasons concise and accurate. It is also important for the judging student to be specific about gaits and which the direction the horse is going. This presents a clearer picture for the reasons-taker to use as a guide throughout the set of reasons.

FAULTS

1. Rider changing hands on the reins. The rider must use the same hand that he or she started the class with.
2. Two hands on the reins (unless showing with a snaffle bit or hackamore).
3. More than one finger between the reins (riders should only use the index finger between reins).
4. Touching horse or saddle with free hand, use of spurs or romal forward of the cinch.
5. Wrong leads when loping.
6. Excessive speed or slowness (any gait), losing forward flow/motion.
7. Breaking gait (both upward and downward).
8. Failure to assume the appropriate gait when called for.
9. Head carried to low or too high (tip of the ear below the withers for several strides).
10. Excessive nosing out or flexing behind the vertical.
11. Opening mouth excessively.
12. Excessive stumbling or falling.
13. If the horse appears sullen, dull, lethargic, emaciated, drawn or overly tired.
14. Quick or choppy strided.
15. Over flexing or straining neck in head carriage.

Western Pleasure Reasons Terminology

FUNCTIONAL CORRECTNESS

Compliments

- Better fulfilled the requirements of the class
- Maintained gaits without anticipation of cues
- Traveled straighter down the rail
- More efficient in utilizing both leads
- Traveled in the prescribed gait
- Looked straighter through the bridle
- More functionally correct in the lead changes
- Worked more squarely down the rail
- Better utilized the correct lead
- Maintained the correct/desired/prescribed gait throughout the class
- More prompt, efficient in upward/downward transitions
- More responsive to riders aides and cues
- Smoother, more fluid
- Showed more flexion of the poll
- More nearly perpendicular to the rail
- Steadier head carriage
- Traveled with neck more nearly parallel to the ground
- Maintained a more correct head carriage

- Maintained a more correct head set

Faults

- Broke gait
- Picked up wrong lead
- Carried head behind vertical

QUALITY OF MOVEMENT

Compliments

- Freer moving
- More relaxed
- Quieter
- More desirable
- Higher-quality mover
- Traveled deeper into the corners
- Traveled with more cadence
- More drive from hindquarters
- More suitable to purpose
- More stylish mover
- Moved with flatted knees
- Exhibited less vertical action in the knees
- Less elevated in the knees
- Less animated in the knees
- Moved with a more pointed toe
- Took slower, more deliberate strides
- Even strided
- More collected, greater amount of collection
- Freer
- Flat-footed
- More consistent
- Covered more ground
- More attentive
- More relaxed
- Slower
- Softer
- More collected
- More distinct
- More deliberate
- More cadenced
- More attractive
- More symmetrical at the jog
- Hindquarters driven up under
- Engaging hocks

- Cleaner
- More synchronous two-beat gait, with the diagonal pairs hitting the ground more simultaneously
- Flatter-kneed with less vertical movement
- More consistent at the trot
- Moved with more drive from the hindquarters
- Steadier
- More relaxed
- Calmer
- Traveled with a more rounded frame
- More even-strided
- More fluid
- More flowing
- Natural, free-moving
- Traveled with feet lower (closer) to the ground
- More athletic
- Straighter
- More collected at the lope
- More consistent at the lope
- Showing a greater amount of drive and impulsion
- Driving the hocks further underneath the body
- More synchronous three-beat gait, more correct three-beat lope
- Traveled with a more rounded frame
- Longer, more loose and relaxed strides
- Showing a greater amount of drive and impulsion by driving the hocks farther underneath the body and therefore traveling with a more rounded and desirable frame
- More modern mover, traveling at a slight cant, enabling three to swing the hips and drive with more power and impulsion while also rounding the back and lifting out of the shoulder
- More powerfully driven from behind
- Lighter in the forehand
- Swung the legs more freely from the shoulder
- Backing more freely
- Backing with a greater amount of ease
- Backing more willingly
- More level topline
- More consistent
- More relaxed
- Less movement
- More correct, with the head slightly in front of the vertical
- More consistent topline
- Head carriage that was more nearly parallel to the ground
- Kept head more nearly even with the withers
- More desirable flexion to the poll

- More relaxed down vertical

ATTITUDE/MANNERS

Compliments

- Easier to show
- More responsive
- Honors the bridle
- Back with mouth shut
- Less gapping of the mouth
- Quieter in the mouth with less resistance to the bit
- Softer mouth
- Backed straighter
- More freely backed
- More promptly backed
- More voluntarily backed
- Backed with less aid and cueing from rider
- Backed with less effort, less resistance from rider
- More willing
- Calmer
- More relaxed
- Steadier, quieter
- More alert
- Worked with less resistance from the rider
- Fresher
- Works on a looser rein
- More consistent
- More solid, seasoned, broke
- More disciplined
- Quieter in the mouth
- More responsive to the bridle
- More attentive, expressive
- Required less obvious cues from the rider
- Responded with lighter, more subtle cues
- Kinder
- Softer in the mouth
- Looser working
- Worked on a looser rein throughout the class, higher degree of difficulty
- More responsive to pressure
- Worked with less resistance to the rider
- Looked straighter through the bridle
- More pleasant attitude
- Less objectionable to rider or other horses in the class
- Quieter with ears, tail, mouth

- Appeared easier to show
- More consistent throughout the duration of the class
- More willing performer
- More obedient
- Required less checking and fixing
- Required less constant attention
- More broke
- Quieter with the tail
- Was more prompt in the transitions

Faults

- Constantly fighting the rider
- Challenging the rider's authority
- Constantly having the ears pinned throughout the class
- Mouthing at the bit
- Tossing the head
- Pushing against the bridle
- Less willing performer
- Less attentive
- Less willing to the rider's cues/commands
- Less desirable/less pleasurable attitude
- Less obedient to the rider
- More checking and fixing
- Required less attention/restraint to the rider
- More green-appearing
- Worked more on the bit

Example Reasons **Western Pleasure**

Sir/Ma'am, I placed this class of western pleasure horses 1, 2, 3 and 4. I chose to start the class with the most stylish mover in 1, and left the poorest-moving, most resistant horse at the bottom of the class.

After analyzing the close top pair, it was quality of movement that placed 1 over 2. One, the palomino gelding, had a more stylish way of going, moving with more balance and cadence at the walk, jog and lope. One traveled with a more definite two-beat jog and three-beat lope, having more impulsion and drive from the hocks. It was also apparent that 1 was more collected at the canter, whereas 2 tended to get hollow in the back. I am fully aware, however, that when asked to lope with forward motion, 2 excelled with a freer and more relaxed stride.

It was 2's advantages in self-carriage as well as attitude that placed 2 over 3 in the middle. First, 2 simply appeared more pleasurable to ride. Two was more consistent and calmer going both ways of the arena. Likewise, 2 also had a more desirable head set and neck carriage, showing more flexion at the poll and looking straighter through the bridle while working off a looser rein.

Proceeding on to the bottom pair of poorer-performing individuals who required the most restraint from their riders, it was definitely quality of movement that placed 3 over 4. Three showed to be more athletic-appearing, having greater length, as well as softness to the stride. Three more consistently drove the hindquarters under the body, whereas 4 tended to let the hocks slip past its tail.

In closing, there is no doubt that 4 was the straightest and most desirable backing horse in the class. However, I faulted and placed 4 at the bottom of the class because 4 showed the most resistance to his rider's aids and cues, especially the second way of the rail. Likewise, 4 was the poorest-moving horse in the class, lacking cadence at the lope and jog.

Therefore, the western pleasure is placed 1, 2, 3, 4.

Example Reasons **Western Pleasure**

Sir/Ma'am, I placed this class of western pleasure horses 4, 3, 2, 1, finding a bottom in 1, who picked up the wrong lead to the right and was thus the least functionally correct horse in the class.

In the initial pair of higher-quality movers, it was attitude that placed 4 over 3. Four was a more responsive and willing performer, moving straighter down the rail while being ridden on a more trusting rein. Four also required less checking and fixing and thus presented a more pleasant attitude, whereas 3 constantly pinned the ears throughout the class. Likewise, while both horses loped with a considerable amount of cadence, 4 moved with more drive and impulsion off the hindquarters, especially while moving the second way of the rail. I do fault 4 for being resistant to back, and I grant that 3 backed more readily.

Moving to the middle pair, it is quality of movement that placed 3 over 2. Three had a more synchronous two-beat jog, with the diagonal pairs hitting the ground more simultaneously. Three also rounded its back more when asked to lope with forward motion and had a stronger, deeper stride while still maintaining a freer shoulder, a flatter knee and a more pointed toe. Three simply exhibited more collection, cadence and self-carriage. Additionally, 3 exhibited a more stable topline, whereas 2 bobbed the head while loping. I will admit that 2 worked with a more pleasurable attitude, and it was 2's attitude and functional correctness that compelled me to place 2 over the less-functional 1 in the bottom pair.

Two simply picked up the correct lead when asked to lope to the right. Likewise, 2 was smoother and more willing in the downward transitions, especially from the lope to the jog in the second direction. In addition, 2 moved with more lift and flow than 1, who tended to let the hind legs drift behind the tail. I readily admit that 1 was more consistent, synchronous and softer at the jog.

However, I left 1 last in the class because 1 was the least functionally correct horse, missing the right lead. Likewise, 1 was hollow in the back, strung out behind and moved with considerably

more knee action than the rest of the horses in the class. One was ridden on the tightest rein and also required the most assistance from the rider.

Therefore, the western pleasure is placed 4, 3, 2, 1.

Thank you to Dr. Dave Denniston, Dr. Jim Heird, Dr. Kris Wilson and the Official Handbook of the American Quarter Horse Association for contributing to this guide for judging western pleasure.

University of Arkansas, United States Department of Agriculture and County Governments Cooperating.
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