



THE RIDING TYPE

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illustrations by
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Last month in “A Question of Type,” we began a discussion of the specific sets of body characteristics that make horses suitable for particular classes of work. I described three of the four major types—draft, harness and racing—and the specific traits that made each suitable for its respective job. This month, we focus on the last of the four types—the riding horse—along with a fifth category, “projects,” that you will likely recognize as well.

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RIDING HORSES

► **Task:** The task of the riding horse is to go from point A to point B and back again with weight loaded upon its back, repeating this task over and over again through an expected working lifetime of 10 to 20 years. The ability to bear weight upon the back, without significant damage, through the whole of the animal’s working life is an indispensable characteristic (with the maximum total load not to exceed 250 pounds).

Thus, the very essence of the physique of the riding horse is expressed by the ideas of durability, hardness and endurance capability.

► **Scale:** Horses of Riding type may weigh from 750 to 1,300 pounds and stand from about 12 to 17 hands. Horses smaller than 750 pounds are rarely capable of bearing significant weight, though a broad-backed pony large enough to be up to the minimum weight when fit may regularly be able to bear more than 150 pounds without damage. At the other extreme, as the horse passes 1,300 pounds, it begins to suffer from certain disadvantages: It can become ponderous in movement; it is often too wide in the barrel to sit on comfortably; it loses endurance

DUSTY PERIN

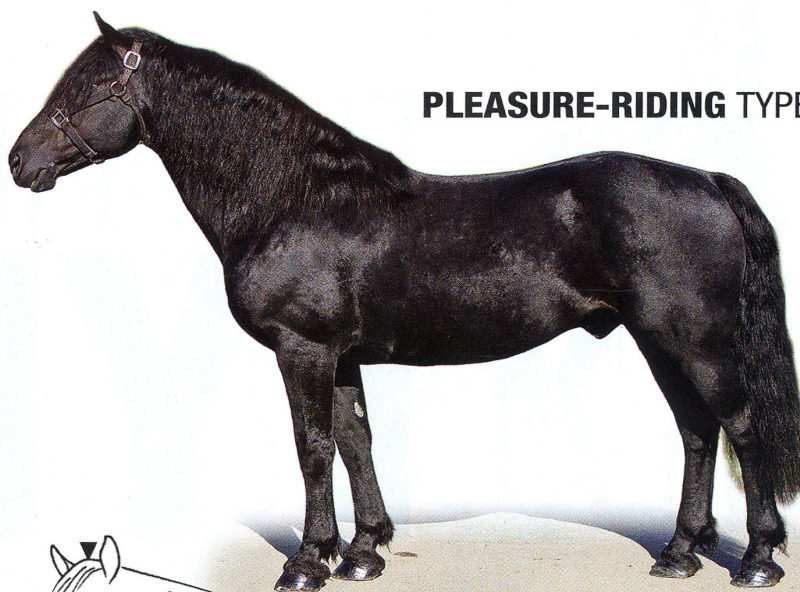
ARNOLD BRONKHORST

capability; and it becomes more prone to joint and hoof damage. Horses over 1,300 pounds often have less substantial limbs, relative to their weight, than horses that fall within the parameters for riding type. While smaller horses are suitable for a wide array of tasks, horses taller than 17 hands are disadvised because many are clumsy.

THE CLASSES OF RIDING HORSES:

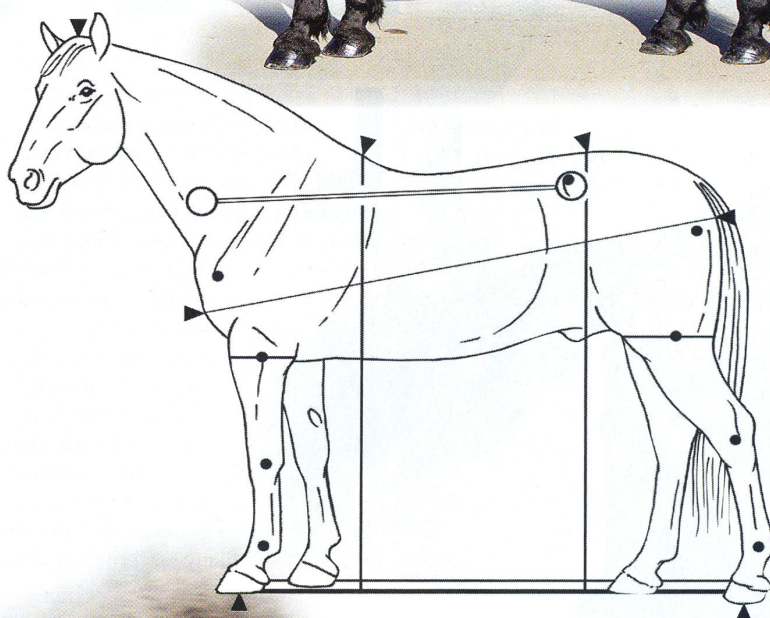
Today, because demand has so much shifted toward riding and away from other forms of use, an enormous array of riding-horse physiques can be found. I distinguish four subtypes:

Pleasure-riding horses, sometimes called “Baroque” horses, are suitable for the Classical High School, circus performance, mounted bullfighting, and general ranch and farm work. Horses that belong in this category are fleshy and broad-bodied for their height; they “ride bigger than they are.” They are typically longer than tall (they “stand over a lot of ground”) on stout limbs (they have relatively great “bone substance”). The total hind-limb length ranges from medium to long (the animals have perceptible “angulation” to the hind limbs). Because of their stoutness, they can perform light farm work or logging, and this category thus takes in all the “ride and drive” breeds. Among Pleasure-riding horses, a premium is placed upon the animal’s ability to deliver a comfortable and somewhat flashy ride, and thus it includes horses which may amble as well as trot. Built to accommodate the highest load—up to 250 pounds—this class of horse stands from 13:2 to 16:2 hands and weighs from 900 to 1,300 pounds.



PLEASURE-RIDING TYPE

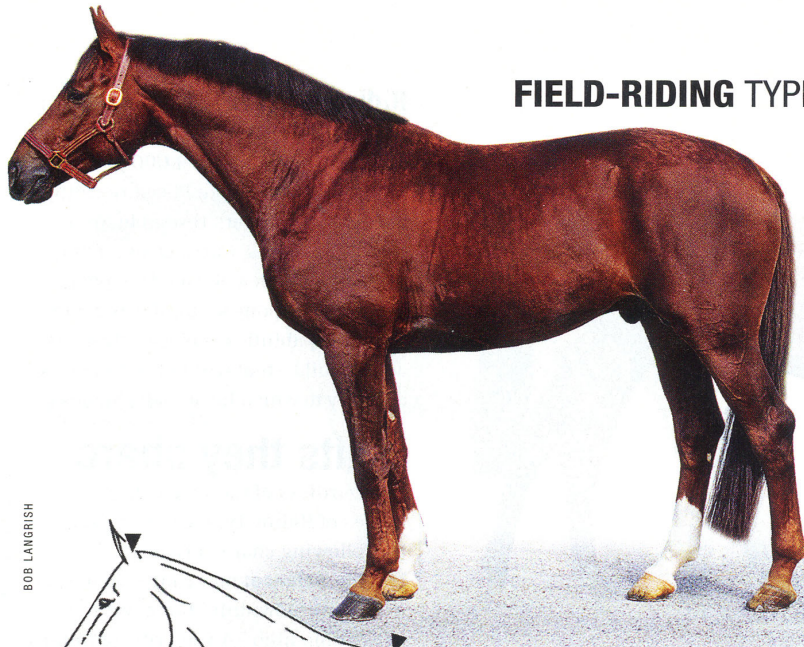
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Fleshy and broad-bodied for their height, Pleasure-riding horses “ride bigger than they are.” They are typically longer than they are tall and have stout limbs.

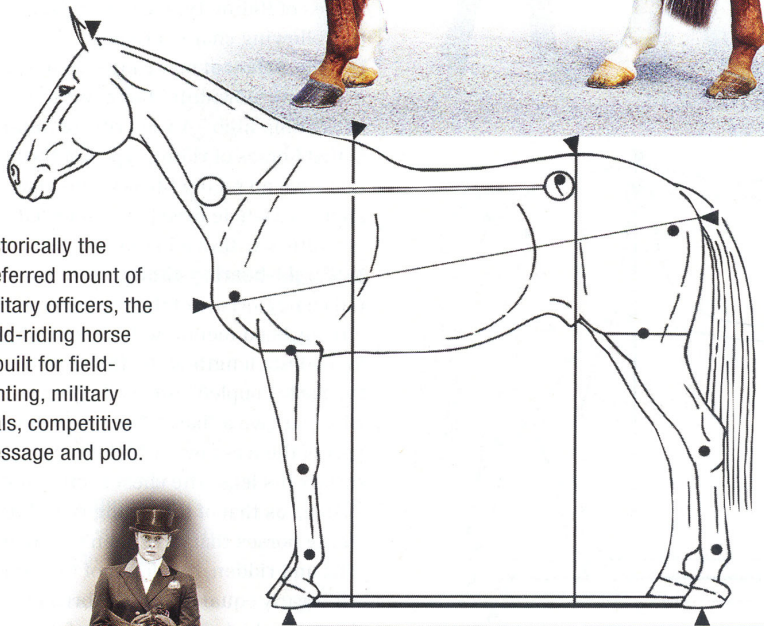


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FIELD-RIDING TYPE

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Historically the preferred mount of military officers, the Field-riding horse is built for field-hunting, military trials, competitive dressage and polo.



Field-riding horses, which often in the past were called “military” mounts, include those suitable for Field-hunting, military trials, competitive dressage and polo. Historically this class was the preferred mount of cavalry officers, standing 14 to 17 hands and weighing from 900 to 1,300 pounds. Horses belonging in this class have more “frame” (a more angular body outline) than Pleasure-riding horses and stand taller on their legs (so that withers height and body length are nearly equal—the horse is “square”). Here, a premium is placed upon the animal’s ability to move efficiently (with little or no knee and hock action) and to jump ditches and fences.

HORSE TYPES AT A GLANCE

DRAFT HORSES are bred to draw heavy vehicles over moderate distances at no more than moderate speed.

HARNESS HORSES are bred to draw vehicles.

- *Roadsters* are lighter in weight, potentially speedy, and today almost exclusively seen hitched to a racing sulky.

- *Carriage horses* are larger and instead of speed are known for their flashy knee and hock action. They are built to pull vehicles of medium to heavy weight, working singleton, in pairs or more rarely in teams of four to six.

RACEHORSES are bred to get from point A to point B in the fastest possible time.

- *Stayers* are structured to carry their speed over a distance of ground. Historically, the stayer was expected to “course” for four miles before reaching the finish line.

- *Sprinters* typically race over a distance of a quarter mile, always on the flat.

RIDING HORSES are bred to go from point A to point B and back again with significant weight loaded upon their backs.

- *Pleasure-riding horses* are suitable for the Classical High School, mounted bullfighting, and general ranch and farm work. Fleshy and broad-bodied for their height, they “ride bigger than they are.”

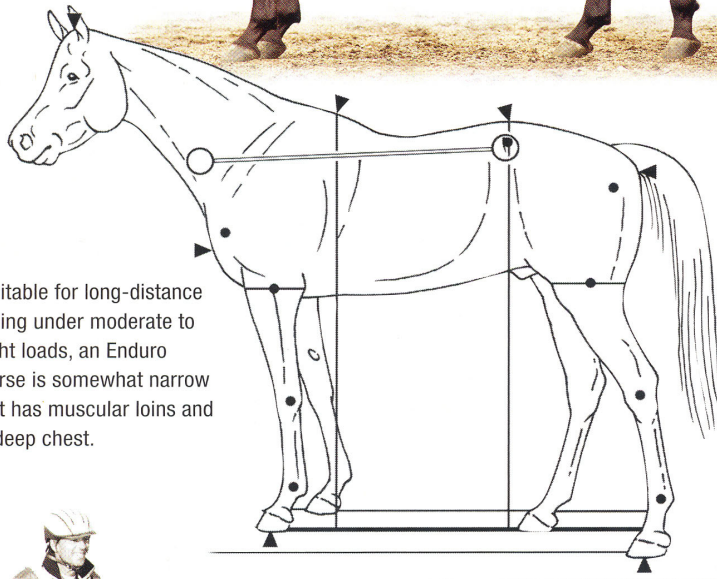
- *Field-riding horses*, which often in the past were called “military” mounts, include those suitable for field-hunting, military trials, competitive dressage and polo.

- *Enduro horses*, a subtype of riding horse suitable for long-distance riding under moderate to light loads, are smaller, flatter-chested, and lighter overall than other riding subtypes.

- *Riding ponies*, scaled for smaller adults or children, stand 12 to 14:2 hands and weigh from 750 to 1,000 pounds. Many ponies resemble miniature draft horses in build; others are more like small versions of Pleasure riding, Carriage, or Racing types.



ENDURO HORSE



Suitable for long-distance riding under moderate to light loads, an Enduro horse is somewhat narrow but has muscular loins and a deep chest.



Enduro horses,

a subtype suitable for long-distance riding under moderate to light loads, stand 13:2 to 15:2 hands and weigh from 900 to 1,150 pounds. To help with heat dissipation, it is important for horses of this class to be

somewhat narrow and flat-bodied through the fore. The loins and pelvis should, however, still be wide and muscular to accommodate weight-bearing, with the chest as deep as that of the racehorse to foster heart and lung space for highest endurance. Top weight in this class is significantly lower than in horses of the Pleasure and Field types, and the horse is narrower and lighter overall, so that Enduro horses need riders who are lighter in weight.

Riding ponies, scaled for children or smaller adults, stand 12 to 14:2 hands and weigh from 750 to 1,000 pounds. Many ponies look like Pleasure-riding horses, while others resemble miniature draft horses, Carriage or Racing types. For an idea of what to expect in terms of a pony's way of going and overall capabilities, look closely at his actual build—that will tell you the type category to which he actually belongs.

Traits they share

Regardless of their subcategory, horses of Riding type generally share the following characteristics:

► **Body balance:** may range from level to slightly "downhill," but never noticeably "rump high." A good rule of thumb is that horses of riding type are those that have no racing history. This may apply to a whole breed or to selected bloodlines within a breed.

► **Weight-bearing ability:** This essential characteristic of the Riding type has already been mentioned. Look for short to medium length of the freespan of the back, coupled with well-sprung ribs that give a "barrel" shape to the part of the torso over which the rider throws his legs. The chest is often not as deep as that of the racing type, but in riding horses that have been well handled and ridden, the depth of the groin will nearly equal that of the brisket—thanks to thick development of the abdominal muscles, which are important in maintaining the upward arch in the horse's back and thus in supporting the rider's weight.

The lumbar span will be short, very wide, rather flat in contour and well-covered with muscle that has a springy, rather than a wiry, feel to it.

► **Pelvic length:** Because rapid acceleration and high speed are not important in horses of riding type, the pelvis can be of any length. More important, the pelvic slope is medium to steep, a factor which helps the horse to

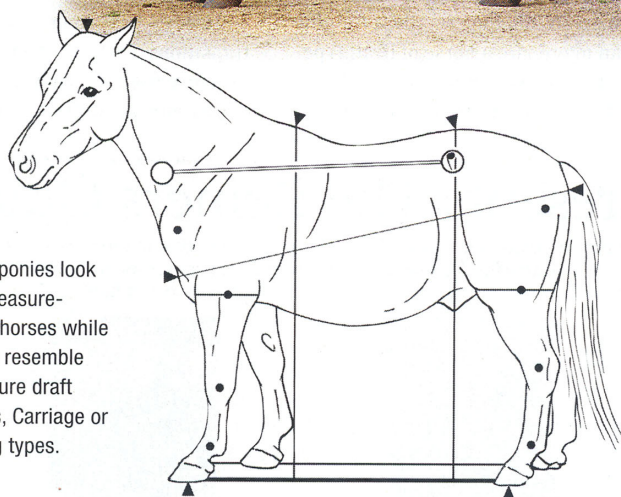
ARMED BRONKHORST

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RIDING PONY



BOB LANGRISH



Many ponies look like Pleasure-riding horses while others resemble miniature draft horses, Carriage or Racing types.

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engage the hindquarter and coil its back. Note that the pelvic slope is different from the slope of the croup; a fine riding horse can have a near-level croup (and thus a high “set” to the tail) and yet still have adequate slope to the pelvis.

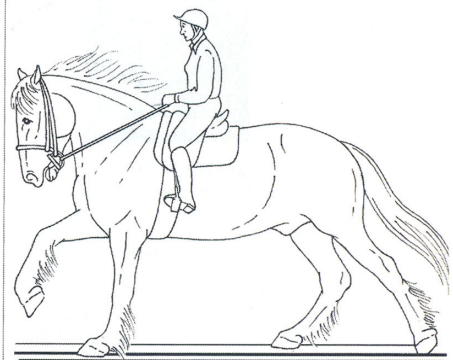
► **Neck shape and attachment:** Riding horses have medium to long necks. Longer necks gain importance if the expected activity involves jumping or steep hill climbs. In all riding-horse subtypes, the neck is set high at the base and shaped to arch.

THE FIFTH “TYPE”: PROJECTS

I propose this equine type with a smile. After all, isn’t it true that just about any horse you may wind up with—no matter how supposedly suitable for a given activity—will turn out, at some level, to be a project?! Nevertheless, there is a serious side to this type: Very nearly all so-called “riding horses” today are not of riding type. It is both enlightening and helpful to recognize any horse that is not of riding type but which is being used for riding as a “project.”

I offer two examples of project horses. First, consider a huge horse of draft type who is used for general riding. That this is a project is obvious: The animal is far too heavy to meet the durability requirements that pleasure or competitive riding imposes.

Nevertheless, the horse can be ridden and it can even be made to perform (to the best of its abilities and in its own style, which are dictated by its conformation) all the “movements” required in competitive dressage or (I have also seen this) reining. It takes horsemanship to do any of this, and that is never



A DEPARTURE: A huge horse of Draft type can be used for general riding, but he will always be a project because he is built for an entirely different kind of work.



DUSTY PERIN

A training plan to prepare a horse of draft type for a career as a riding horse will differ from the training plan suitable to prepare a horse of the riding type.

a bad thing. However, it will always be a project.

Almost certainly, to keep a horse of Draft type sound enough to compete as a riding horse will require not only an excellent rider, but a whole team of experts—from the veterinarian to

the farrier to the body therapist to the groom who daily does the necessary poultices, liniments, and wraps. Inevitably and importantly, a training plan to prepare a horse of Draft type for a career as a riding horse will differ from the training plan suitable

for a horse of Riding type.

This brings me to an even more important example of a “project horse.” So common is it today to take the retired racehorse (or the horse bred to race) and give him a second career as a “hunter/jumper” that very few people recognize this for what it is—a project!

A similar project would be the retired sprint-racer (or the horse bred to be one) who has a new career in barrel-racing: for racehorses are not riding horses. Like horses of draft or carriage type, they can be ridden, and they have frequently been incorporated into breeding programs intended to produce riding horses.

Many special techniques and procedures are traditionally used to help racehorses move into careers as riding horses: To begin with, the animal has to be taught to make “down” transitions. He has to be taught that pressure from the bit in the hands of a dressageur, a cowgirl or a show-jumping

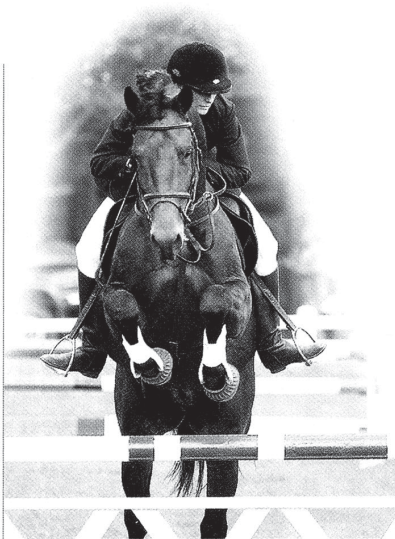
Many special techniques and procedures are traditionally used to help racehorses become riding horses.

expert means something different than it meant in the hands of the jockey or exercise rider at the track.

Curving figures less than 100 feet in diameter will pose novel difficulties in terms of both strength and balance to the former racehorse. Cavalletti and “jump gymnastics” will teach him not only to jump but to rate to the jump, to half-halt and to round up at a trot. It will be new to the racehorse.

Likewise, because racehorses mainly

GAME CHANGER: So many racehorses make the transition to second careers as hunter/jumpers that few people recognize them for what they are: projects.



gallop, if dressage competition is in a horse’s future, he will need to be taught how to trot for considerable lengths of time, and the training schedule must allow time for his muscles, tendons and ligaments to adapt to this change in the primary working gait.

My hope is that this discussion, combined with last month’s, has helped to clarify the most useful concept of type—type as defined by the task—and to highlight the array of horse types that are commonly seen today.

In upcoming articles, we will say much more about pelvises, backs, necks and every other feature of the physiognomy. And I promise—yes, we will do some installments on head shape and tail carriage. Every part of the horse’s body is important! 🐾

Coming next: Bone Substance

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