

# A QUESTION OF

# TYPE

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To understand a particular horse's potential abilities, consider whether he is built for speed, strength, stylish movement or endurance. What type is your horse?

**P**robably no area of horse-registry rule-making generates as much controversy as the question of "type." Some breed fanciers campaign for a particular shape of head or a preferred set to the tail, while others lobby for characteristics at the opposite end of the spectrum.

Although type in this sense helps to distinguish one breed from another, it is downright trivial when it comes to understanding a particular horse's potential abilities.

Instead, I view type in a much broader context, going beyond

the look of a head, tail, croup or shoulder, and considering the work the horse is intended to perform. For me, type means a specific set of body characteristics that makes a horse suitable for a certain class of work.

In times past, there were many recognized types or "classes" of livestock, particularly for work in harness. Our forefathers did not consider the shape of the head or the set of the tail to be of primary importance. Physical factors they did emphasize were the horse's weight and height, his overall shape and build, the cleanness and stoutness of his legs ("bone substance") and his way of going.

Of all factors, overall size and weight—the "scale" upon which a horse is built—is by far the most important. It is a feature that cannot be changed, and yet by the immutable laws of physics, one that underpins and governs a horse's propensities and abilities. Primarily on the basis of weight, early-day livestock breeding and management textbooks defined "classes of equine livestock" to include draft horses ("the heaviest and highest-priced class of market horses"), express horses, heavy and light chunks, and "saddlers, the lightest and most refined of all classes." Some books also mentioned

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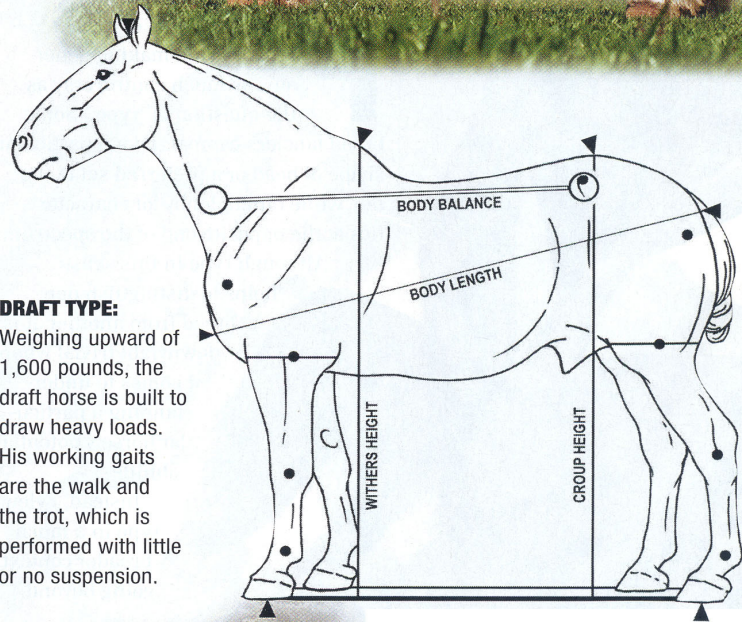
roadsters, sprint-racers and flat-racers or “stayers.”

Thanks to the advent of motorized farm equipment, demand for horses massive enough to perform farm work is much lower today than it was in 1900. By contrast, the market for horses of riding type has expanded enormously. I divide horses being bred today into four major types: draft, harness, racing and riding horses. In addition, I discuss a fifth “type”—actually nowadays the most common of all—that doesn’t fit neatly into any of the previous four categories for reasons I’ll explain later.

In this first installment of our discussion of type, I will describe draft, harness, and race horses. Please note that I will avoid any mention of breed, because breed does not in itself dictate type. Of course, it would be rare to see a purebred Belgian of riding type, or a Tennessee Walker of racing type, or a Thoroughbred whose conformation did not retain, in some measure, the stamp of a long history of selection for speed.

The Quarter Horse, the Thoroughbred and the Arabian comprise 80 percent of all horses owned today by private individuals, and it is important to note that all three of these breeds are composed of bloodlines that, in different combinations, have produced racehorses, jumpers, pleasure hacks, cutting horses, reiners, endurance horses and park horses. And you can get a horse of any breed (or mix of breeds) that proves to be an all-around athlete. For these reasons, when looking to purchase a horse for a particular activity, you can’t always go just by the breed.

In learning about type, it’s helpful to focus upon the animal’s particular array of physical characteristics. This is, after all, what conformation study means. The buyer must also have a clear idea of what the horse will be expected to do—the nature of the horse’s “job.” Listed at the top of each category below is a nutshell description of the task that defines the type.



**DRAFT TYPE:**

Weighing upward of 1,600 pounds, the draft horse is built to draw heavy loads. His working gaits are the walk and the trot, which is performed with little or no suspension.



## DRAFT HORSES

► **Task:** To draw heavy vehicles over moderate distances at no more than moderate speed. The working gaits are a walk and a semi-suspensionless trot. Sharp knee and hock “action” is of some importance. The expected useful life span (the number of years over which the horse normally performs the specified work) is from 10 to 15 years.

► **Scale:** Massive, with weight upward

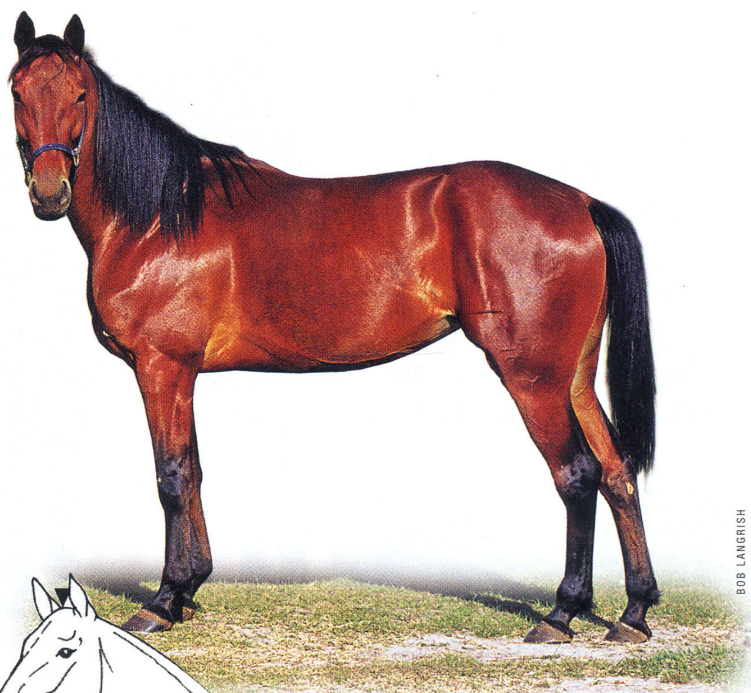
of 1,600 pounds (the heaviest draft horse on record weighed 2,350 pounds). Great weight helps horses of draft type to draw heavy loads, but it also makes them ponderous in movement. The heavier the horse, the more energy it takes for him to move with perceptible suspension, and the more the concussion of landing tends to inflict wear and damage upon the limbs and feet.

► **Body balance:** from slightly to markedly downhill from core of loins to base of neck

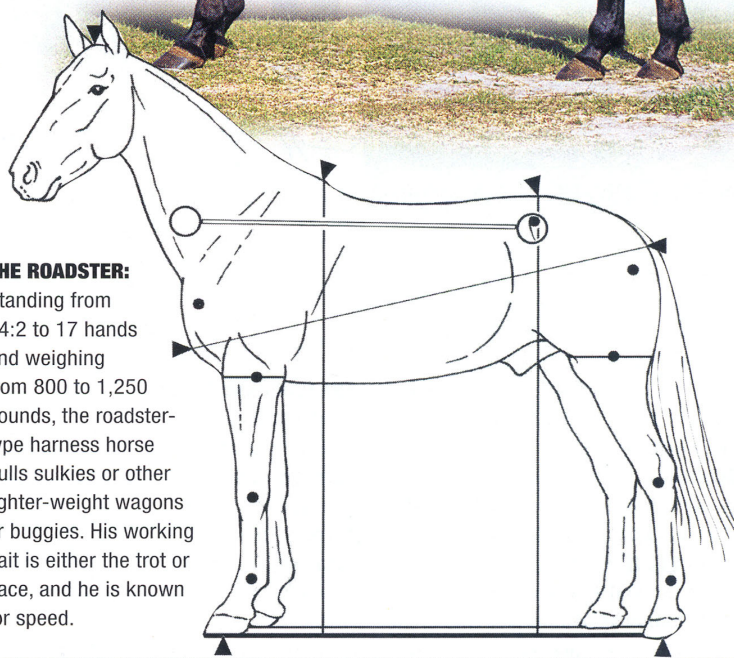
► **Weight-bearing ability:** In normal usage, the ability to bear weight upon the back is irrelevant to the draft type. However, draft horses can be ridden. The best physical predictor of weight-bearing ability in any horse is the width across the lumbar part of the back (the section between the last rib and the point of hip). In horses of draft type, lumbar width ranges from moderate to broad, giving the animals not only absolute capacity to bear a load upon their backs (due to large overall size), but also capacity relative to the body size. For this reason, heavy riders (those whose body weight plus equipment weight totals more than 250 pounds) may find that the only horses who can carry them comfortably for more than a few minutes at a time are of draft type.

► **Pelvic length:** Medium to short. Because there is no requirement for either fast acceleration or racing speed in horses of draft type, power is supplied by the sheer size of the whole animal (as in a truck) rather than by a pelvis or “engine block” that is large relative to the body mass (as in a racecar).

► **Neck shape and attachment:** The requirement to bear a collar has meant that well-bred horses of draft type have deep shoulders with moderate to low angulation. The withers carry well back and are high (though usually covered in flesh, so not knifelike). The neck is relatively short but cresty, shapely and easily arched.



BOB LANGRISH



**THE ROADSTER:** Standing from 14:2 to 17 hands and weighing from 800 to 1,250 pounds, the roadster-type harness horse pulls sulkies or other lighter-weight wagons or buggies. His working gait is either the trot or pace, and he is known for speed.

## HARNESSES HORSES

Two subtypes are easily discernable among harness horses: roadsters and carriage horses.

► **Task:** All harness-type horses are bred to draw vehicles, but roadsters are lighter in weight, potentially speedy, and today almost exclusively seen hitched to a racing sulky. The working gait is either the pace or trot. Often in the past and occasionally today, hitched

in pairs or singleton, this type pulls lighter-weight wagons, sulkies, hansoms and buggies. Carriage horses are larger and instead of speed are known for their flashy knee and hock action. They are bred to pull vehicles of medium to heavy weight, working singleton, in pairs, or more rarely in teams of four to six. At the upper end of the weight spectrum, and in an earlier day, the vehicles would have been “caissons”—the massive two-

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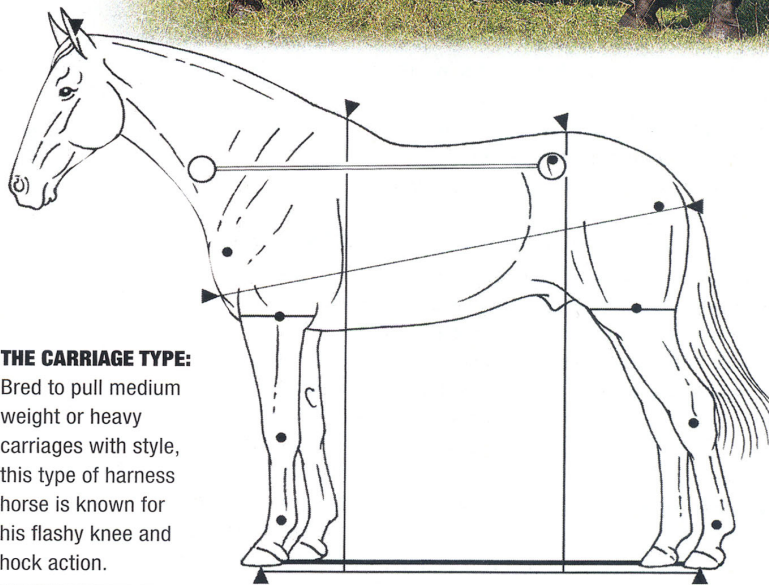
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wheeled carts that bore cannons and other field artillery. More often today, horses of carriage type pull the more stylish coaches and broughams of the wealthy. The expected useful life span of harness horses of both classes is from five to 10 years.

► **Scale:** Roadsters stand from 14:2 to 17 hands and weigh between 800 and 1,250 pounds. Carriage horses stand from 15:2 to 17 hands and weigh between 1,100 and 1,500 pounds.

► **Body balance:** Of all types, this is the one most likely to have a level or even an “uphill” body balance.

► **Weight-bearing ability:** Weight-bearing ability is of no direct relevance to either the roadster or the carriage horse. However, animals of both these classes are frequently used under saddle or as bloodstock in riding-horse breeding programs. This is not a bad idea, especially when attempting to create a riding-type horse out of a racing-type mare, and such a strategy has been used very successfully by



**THE CARRIAGE TYPE:**

Bred to pull medium weight or heavy carriages with style, this type of harness horse is known for his flashy knee and hock action.

breeders of warmbloods. Both roadsters and carriage horses tend to have medium-length backs with a perceptible center arch (“high-centered” backs) and are typically wide and flat across the lumbar span. The pelvic angle in the carriage horse is typically medium to steep, a factor that also adds to weight-bearing ability.

► **Pelvic length:** Medium to short. Again, there is no requirement for fast acceleration or sprint speed in either the roadster or the carriage horse.

Harness races almost always use rolling starts and cover distances of one mile or (occasionally) more.

► **Neck shape and attachment:**

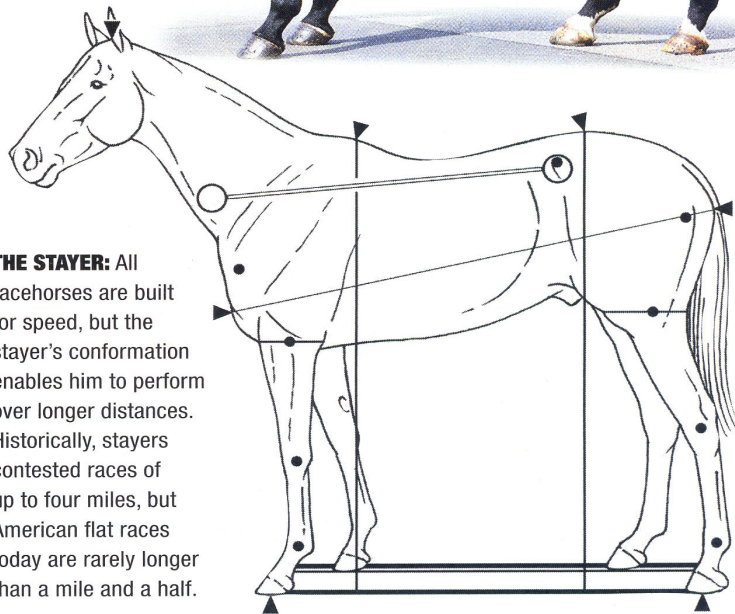
The longest necks are found among horses of this type. Generally, the neck is attached high at the base, contributing to level-to-uphill body balance. In roadsters the neck is usually lighter, less cresty, and straighter, while among horses of carriage type the neck is heavier and shaped to readily arch.

BOB LANGRISH

Of all types, the racehorse has the most straightforward task—to get from point A to point B in the fastest possible time.



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**THE STAYER:** All racehorses are built for speed, but the stayer's conformation enables him to perform over longer distances. Historically, stayers contested races of up to four miles, but American flat races today are rarely longer than a mile and a half.

## RACEHORSES

The two subclasses of racehorses—stayers and sprinters—are easy to tell apart.

► **Task:** Of all types, the racehorse has the most straightforward task—to get from point A to point B in the fastest possible time. Stayers are bred and structured to carry their speed over a distance of ground. The working gait is a gallop. Historically the stayer was expected to “course” for four miles

before reaching the finish line; such distances are still typical in point-to-point, steeplechasing, and some (usually European) turf racing. American flat-track racers rarely run more than a mile and a half, which has tended to drive the successful physical type closer to that of the sprinter.

Sprinters typically race over a distance of a quarter mile, always on the flat. The expected useful life span of racehorses, especially stayers, has declined greatly in recent years. In the

last quarter of the 19th century it was not unusual to find stayers who were still winning not only races but championships past the age of 12. Today, according to Jockey Club statistics, the average number of lifetime starts for Thoroughbreds is between six and 10 races. Obviously, durability is not an important factor in racehorse selection.

► **Scale:** Racehorses stand between 14:2 and 17 hands and weigh between 800 and 1,300 pounds. By both measures, they are “medium scale” horses.

**Statistics show that the average Thoroughbred racehorse today makes six to 10 lifetime starts. Obviously, durability is not an important factor in racehorse selection.**

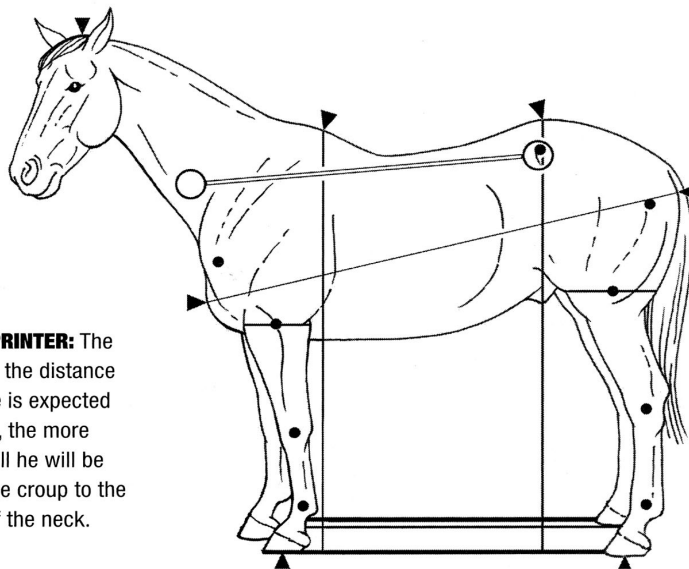


► **Body balance:** The successful racehorse has a perceptibly “negative” body balance, so that he goes downhill from croup to base of neck. The shorter the distance over which the horse is expected to race, the more downhill he needs to be built. Thus, sprinters are typically built more “downhill” than stayers. Downhill body balance helps to ensure that, as a result of powerful acceleration, the fore part of the body does not “pop a wheelie” or “fly up.” Horses that “fly up” in front experience greater wind resistance at the same time that they lose traction with their front feet; both

factors would act to slow them down.

► **Weight-bearing ability:** Among racehorses, weight-bearing ability is not only irrelevant, it is an actual detriment. The very factors conducive to weight-bearing ability—shorter length in the freespan of the back, shorter and

broader lumbar span—get in the way of speed. Most of a racehorse’s speed—just like that of the cheetah, the greyhound or the fastest antelopes—comes from the flexibility of its back. In order to take a long, ground-eating stride, the animal does not just swing its legs, but



**THE SPRINTER:** The shorter the distance a horse is expected to race, the more downhill he will be from the croup to the base of the neck.

rather must be able to freely coil and then stretch out its back—especially the lumbar part of the back. The world’s fastest animals all have relatively long, narrow, flexible lumbar backs that have a rounded rather than a flat contour, and so should a racehorse. Sprinters

have the longest backs, relative to either body length or body weight, of all types. Neither the sprinter nor the stayer is well-adapted to carrying the average to heavy rider for day-in, day-out riding.

► **Pelvic length:** Of all types, racehorses have the largest pelvic length

relative to their overall body length (or weight). They are the Porsches and Ferraris of the equine species, the possessors of the largest “engine block,” structured for fast or even explosive acceleration. The percentage of pelvic length of stayers is consistently higher than that of sprinters, because the denominator in this calculation is body length (or body weight), both of which tend to be somewhat higher among sprinters.

► **Neck shape and attachment:**

Racehorses typically have necks that “come straight out the front.” The neck is attached lower on the chest, contributing to the generally downhill body balance already noted. The withers may be anything from high and knifelike to moderately low and somewhat fleshy. The neck is not cresty and not particularly apt to arch, but it can be long. ●

<b>Coming next month:</b>	<b>The riding type and more</b>
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