

Conformation Standard of The Ideal Show Horse

The definition of good conformation is:

Many good points

Few indifferent points

No bad points

Conformation is the framework upon which muscle, tissue and sinew is built. Like and structure, unless the foundation and framework are good the structure will give way under the stress and strain of everyday use. The better the framework, the better the finished product. Good conformation applies equally to an 11 hh pony or a 17 hh hack. The only difference is in type, characteristics and performance.

Very few people have the gift of being able to select a good horse in poor condition or one in a paddock full of horses, so for most of us that ability comes with experience. It is often easier to appraise the horse in sections, starting with the head, throat, neck, withers, back, rump, tail, shoulder, girth, ribs, hind legs, forelegs and feet. Then stand back and look at the overall picture.

Head, Muzzle and Ears

The head should be in proportion to the body, not over large, well set on with defined features, the forehead broad, tapering to a finer muzzle with large open nostrils. Small closed nostrils can affect the horse's breathing and certainly are not desirable for fast or hard work.

The ears should be neither too small or large but in keeping with the size of the head. Loose or loopy ears are not desirable in a show hack.

Eyes

The eyes should be large and bold, showing no white and should be set towards the side of the head with a nice flat forehead in between. Eyes which are set too close together or to the front of the head restrict the horses' peripheral vision and they are constantly moving their head and neck from side to side to see behind them, or they get into the habit of tilting their heads to one side.

Neck

The neck should be of a length to look in balance with the remainder of the horse. The neck length can affect the horse's balance. Short, thick -necked horses usually find it hard to arch their necks and are frequently thick through the throat causing problems with breathing and giving a jammed effect. They usually find it difficult to come on the bit. A neck which is too long causes the horse to go on the forehand, as the horse finds it difficult to hold the weight of the neck in the correct position. The top line of the neck should be longer than the underside and should be well muscled with a nice smooth line from the poll to the withers. The highest part of the horse should be his poll.

Throat

The horse should be fine through the throat, with a well-defined loose gullet. The line at the throat should be clear cut and the head set well into the neck.

Withers

The withers should be fine and defined. It is the highest part of the vertebrae in a mature horse and should be higher than or level with the croup, definitely not lower.

Shoulders

The shoulder should be long and sloping, back from the point of the shoulder, vanishing into the wither. The shoulder should be flat, sloping back in the wither. Upright shoulders cause many problems. The example, short, choppy strides and concussions make it difficult for the horse to carry a rider and move with ease.

Chest

The chest should be wide enough to allow room for the heart and lungs to function in an efficient manner. Too narrow a chest (both legs coming out of one hole) causes problems with the horse's movement. The horse is obliged to travel too close in front and will usually have a problem with brushing, apart from not allowing sufficient room for the heart and lungs. The horse which is too broad in front (gate buster) tends to roll during movement and does not give a smooth ride. If viewed from the front, horse should stand square.

Forearm

The forearm should be well developed, with plenty of muscle in the fit horse. The knees should be comparatively large and flat - no puffiness or lumps. Small knees denote weakness, as there is little room for the tendons and ligaments to attach to. A large, flat knee denotes strength. When you consider the weight, these joints have to support, you realize the importance of good conformation in this area.

Girth

The girth should be deep to allow room for the heart and lungs. A short girth gives the appearance of the horse being leggy with not much room for the heart and lungs.

Ribs

The ribs should be flat, smooth and well sprung. If viewed from behind, they do not protrude. There are eight pairs of true ribs and ten pairs of false ribs. True ribs are attached to the vertebrae and the sternum. The false ribs are attached on to the vertebrae. Some horses with slack false ribs give the effect of being rather gutty.

Back

A short-backed horse is more desirable than a long back horse. A long back denotes weakness. The back and withers should look as if a saddle would fit comfortably and as if it were made for that purpose. A hollow or sway back is undesirable. A long back is forgivable to a degree in a mare as this allows for healthy gestation.

Quarters

If viewed from behind, the quarters should be almost pear shaped, widening very slightly towards the second thigh, giving the impression of squareness and power with a well-developed second thigh below well-rounded quarters and above strong clean hocks. The hips should be proportionately broad and hidden from view, not protruding. The croup should be level with or lower than the wither. A croup high horse finds it difficult to bend the three joints in his hind legs, which enables him to lighten his forehand and give a smooth balanced ride. When viewed from the side, the line of the rump should be part of the series of beautiful curves that make up the top line.

Hind Legs

The hock should be strong, clean and well defined, free from lumps and bumps such as curbs, spavins and capped hocks. If you view the horse from behind and draw a straight line from the point of the buttock to the ground, the point of the hock should form the middle of that line. When viewed from the side, the hocks should appear wide both above and below the joint. Size is essential, as strength and prominence are necessary to allow due leverage and attachment of tendons and ligaments. Large bones usually are accompanied by large, well-developed tendons and ligaments.

Tail

The tails should be set on in such a way that it follows the top line and continues on from the vertebrae. It should be neither low nor high set, carried away from the body curving down in keeping with the graceful shape of the top line.

Cannon Bones

The cannon bone should be flat and strong and well developed with well-defined tendons. The cannon bone should be the same width all the way down from under the knee to the fetlock or under the hock to the fetlock. The circumference should be approximately 9" in a mature horse, obviously less for ponies.

Fetlocks

The fetlock joints should give the impression of flatness not roundness, free from puffiness, lumps, apple joints etc. The ligaments and tendons which attach to the fetlock joint should be clearly defined, so well defined in fact that you should be able to run your fingers down the grooves.

Pasterns

Pasterns should not be too short or upright or too long and sloping. Short or upright pasterns cause jarring, making the horse uncomfortable to ride as well as the unsoundness they can contribute to due to concussion. It is a little like a car with bad shock absorbers. Over long pasterns, although they can make for a comfortable ride, they are not desirable. Long pasterns are frequently found with an over-straight hind leg and are nature's way of compensating for concussion and strains which usually accompany over straight hocks.

Hooves

Hooves should be strong and healthy looking. They should be neither too upright nor too flat. The angle, if shod correctly, should be the same angle as that of the pasterns.

Paces, Manners & Education

The Show horse should be obedient and well mannered. However, over exuberance or disobedience for a few strides may be forgiven. These horses should not be compared with dressage horses. A hack should always display a willingness to go forward, be controlled, bright and interested in its work.

The Show horse is not expected to perform any 'true' collected movements such as collected walk, trot or canter, nor expected to perform advanced movements such as multiple flying changes etc.'

Paces

The hack should display good forward movement. It is essential for all paces to be regular and even. Any form of irregularity should be penalised. All paces should be straight and true without any noticeable deviations.

The Walk

Natural and ground covering, regular even four beat gait. The hind feet should at least cover or ideally overstep the print of the front feet. The action should be loose, the sequence being lateral.

Walk on A Long Rein

The sequence and action stay the same as the walk, however a longer contact being given on the reins allows the horse to lower the head, lengthening the frame and the stride.

The Trot

Is a rhythmical two beat gait, the limbs should move in a diagonal sequence separated by a moment of suspension. The trot should be well balanced, the horse should move forward with impulsion, the steps light, with good hock action.

Lengthen Trot

The rhythm and sequence should remain the same as the trot. The frame of the horse should lower and lengthen allowing more reach from the shoulders and impulsion from behind. The moment of suspension increases, producing a distinct lengthening of stride.

The Canter

Is a three beat gait, where at canter to the right for instance, the footfalls follow one another e.g. left hind, left diagonal (i.e. left fore & right hind), right fore, followed by a moment of suspension of all four feet in the air before the next stride begins. The horse should go forward freely with balanced light steps with obvious impulsion coming from the hindquarters.

Lengthen Canter

The horse goes forward covering more ground but maintaining the same rhythm. The strides should be long and even and the movement well balanced. The horse may reach a little more forward with the neck and be a little more in front of the vertical.

The Gallop

Is a four beat gait in which the horse must cover plenty of ground with great impulsion from the hindquarters. Whether it is a full or hand gallop, it should always be controlled. At its conclusion, the downward transition should be light and easy.

