



The Importance of the Shoulder

No matter the role a pony plays in our lives, its ability to move is involved. For some people it may be riding that is important, for others driving, for still others draft work and packing, or perhaps some combination of all these uses. Or perhaps we just enjoy watching our ponies move around their world. Ponies are special because they move in ways that make them suitable for many different disciplines. They are different from draft horses and they are different from light horses. What we may not realize is that a pony's shoulder is a key part of what sets ponies apart. It is fundamental to their style of movement.



Newfarm Minneola and Newfarm Apple Blossom. Courtesy Elise Miller, May 2010

Ponies provide us with a special opportunity to appreciate the shoulder, as their versatility requires that the shoulder be just right in conformation for the work they have traditionally done. In many cases that means well balanced between what is considered desirable under saddle and what is desirable in harness.

If in addition to using ponies we are also breeders of ponies, then we may have a special relationship with the shoulder topic. Perhaps, for instance as a breeder you've heard how important it is to pay attention to the shoulder when making breeding decisions. Of course it's one thing to hear these words and quite another to know what to do about them.

If you're a rider, you've likely learned that saddle fit is important so that the saddle doesn't interfere with your pony's shoulder. Or worse, perhaps you've seen a pony that has a sore or has white hairs from an ill-fitting saddle.

"The horse's shoulder must be allowed a complete range of motion to extend the trot, cut cows, or jump fences." (1)

If you drive your pony, you may use a breast-strap type of harness. You've likely considered where that breast strap must ride on your pony's chest for optimum performance and comfort. Perhaps you've seen a pony that has been sore by a breast strap that is insufficiently padded or incorrectly positioned relative to the shoulder.

"Because of the way the horse's skeleton is constructed, the weight of the carriage rests at all times on the horse's chest, and thus on the bottom of his shoulder blades, just above the point of the shoulder.... Evolution has not adapted the horse's shoulder for this purpose. This means that our training program and our driving equipment must allow for as much shoulder freedom as possible.... If we don't make these allowances, we will destroy the horse's shoulder movement." (2)



I have to say that I prefer a driving collar on a cart or carriage [versus a breast strap] for the simple reason that my two main driving horses prefer them. How do I know? When I start off with a breast collar -they don't step out as fast and they are not as relaxed, when I stop with a breast collar, there is slightly more rock back to the stop. I can feel the horses tense just a bit more with a breast strap harness. My breast strap harnesses are well fitted, I just can feel the difference in the horse being more supple and relaxed with a proper driving collar (not a thick work collar). (3)



If you do draft work with your pony, you've likely been told that the fit and adjustment of the collar and harness are important so that your pony can perform at its best and so its shoulder doesn't get sore. Perhaps you've heard of point of draft and angle of draft. Perhaps you've seen a pony that has a sore shoulder because its collar didn't fit or its harness wasn't adjusted properly.

Locating the point of draft of the harness over the ideal point of draft on the horse's shoulder is a matter of proper collar size and fit and proper hame size and hame adjustment... (4)

'Regardless of the style of harness, it is extremely important that the traces leave the hames at a 90 degree angle from the line of the hame/collar/shoulder. Otherwise the forces of pulling a load can have potentially damaging consequences on the animal's shoulders'

Doc Hammill (5)

If you're a breeder, you've perhaps been told that the shoulder is both highly important and very difficult to get right. Or worse, maybe you've seen a poor shoulder on a pony and that trait is passing to its progeny. Yet the description of your breed uses words that might as well be written in a foreign language when you look from them to the pony before your eyes.

Shoulders – most important, well laid back and sloping, not too fine at withers, nor loaded at the points – a good long shoulder blade, muscles well developed. – Fell Pony breed description (6)

Shoulder: Well muscled with good length and angulation. The shoulder and neck should be viewed as a balanced, functional unit . - Norwegian Fjord Horse breed description (7)

Shoulders: Clean, fine at top, well-laid back. –Exmoor Pony breed description (8)

The Shoulders should be well shaped, muscular with a generous slope of 45° to carry the horse's neck and head graciously. – Percheron breed description in New Zealand (9)



In the Fell Pony in particular, shoulders count for 15 points in judging guidelines out of a total of 125. Movement, which is related, counts for 25 more points. One could argue, then, that the shoulder influences nearly one third of Fell Pony quality.

- 1) http://inspiritusequine.homestead.com/The_Anatomy_of_Saddle.pdf
- 2) Bean, Heike and Sarah Blanchard. *Carriage Driving: A Logical Approach Through Dressage Training*, Hoboken, new Jersey, Wiley Publishing, 2004, p. 25-26.
- 3) <http://www.drafthorsevillage.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=62394&sid=ee3e06eb8f3217dd1b4f4d90cfa52a8d> as accessed 1/1/15
- 4) Morrissey, Jenifer. "Harness Geometry", *Rural Heritage*, Dec/Jan 2014, p. 49
- 5) Morrissey, Jenifer. "Harness Variety and Function", *Rural Heritage*, June/July 2013, p. 86.
- 6) Fell Pony Breed Description and Scale of Points,
<http://www.fellponysociety.org.uk/forms/DescriptionOfTheFellPonyAndScaleOfPoints.htm>
- 7) <http://www.nfhr.com/catalog/index.php?breedstd=1>
- 8) http://www.exmoorponysociety.org.uk/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=21
- 9) <http://www.percheronsa.co.za/index.php?p=5#shoulders>