

# Pisos! Pisos! PISOS!

BY RAUL RISSO

**T**he title of this article may be considered an exaggeration according to the present need to improve our Peruvian Horse after so many years of selection to this end. However, I feel that we must continue emphasizing the natural gait, in order to retain and preserve it. Not only the rhythm of the steps, which is the principal consideration, but also the distinctive, unique way of moving the front legs (termino), which make our horse different from all other naturally ambling horses.



The following are so of the reason for my conclusions:

A) Our horse's peculiar gait is inherited and it is a recessive trait. Trotters dominate over amblers when two such animals are crossed. The resulting progeny are primarily trotters.

B) Similarly, within our breed of natural amblers, we find variations in the ideal gait, the paso llano. Therefore, if a breeder is continually breeding individuals that, with few exceptions, do not have a truly fine gait, he will gradually be losing the real essence of our Paso Horse. This is the ability to move naturally at different speeds displaying all the "aires" of our ambling horse, with the legs on the same side moving in sequence.

C) In our efforts to strengthen the quality of our horse's gait, we could lose the other two main characteristics: brio and functional conformation. These features all compliment each other. However, we as breeders must remember that no horse has an excellent gait if it lacks the temperament or is not strong enough to sustain the paso llano over a lengthy ride and is able to hold this last characteristic within a considerable lifespan.

Following are many considerations which I feel are important and should be considered when deciding how to interpret the needs of our breed. I must admit that this is the hardest way to carry out commercial breeding. I realize that breeders with programs based mainly on regal, refined individuals moving with elegance, showing termino and lift but no real cadence attract the inexperienced buyer and sell their stock well. Horses with cadence and depth of breed are not always appreciated by those who are buying.

Often a riding horse is sold without the buyer ever having ridden it. And even if s/he had ridden the horse, he would rarely consider it necessary to take a long demanding ride before deciding to buy. It's important to remember that on long rides is where we can discover if a horse has little brio or functional conformation. Due to fatigue, they often change their proud 4 beat lateral gait into a 2 beat ambling one, or on to a bastardizing "pasitrote". In both cases, these animals lack depth of breed.

We should remember that the conformational beauty of our horse is intimately linked to the way it moves and the Peruvian Horse expresses itself in movement. There are areas of horse morphology that are related to our breed's unique beauty, and which are necessary characters to our gait, and both conformation and function are essential to each other.

Our breed requires individual horses with strong kidneys, rounded haunches, strong thigh muscles and the correct angle at the stifles & hocks to enable the horse to move its rear end harmoniously in communion with its front one. The back should show a sharp angle at the union with the forearm that, together with the corresponding stifle/hock angle, permits extended lateral leg movement, and allow the horse to cover ground with less steps, and therefore more smoothly. The depth of girth at the level of



Above: Author with his mare, National Laureada mare, \*RyR Fantasia+. She was the National Champion of Champions Breeding Mare five times, winning her Laureada at the age of 16. Left: Here we see in slow motion a gelding executing the signature gait of the Peruvian Horse, the paso llano. The rear and front legs on the same side leave the ground at the same time but the front leg's apex is concurrent with the hind leg hitting the ground.

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the rear ribs allow our horse to move as though it were firmly attached to the ground.

The stifle/hock angle also allows the horse to place his rear legs firmly on the ground under his trunk, supporting the weight properly; the resulting change in the center of gravity; thus frees the opposing side's steps from weight, as the horse moves forward. When trying to visualize the above description, I hope that the reader can appreciate the harmonious movement between the hocks and the knees of a well gaited horse. They should move as though they are invisibly tied together by a rod, like the wheels of a train.

This appreciation of the correlation between good conformation and the horse's gait, is also offset by certain weaknesses that are directly related to its movement, affecting its gait. One of these is extreme weakness of the animal's rear end. This can be seen in certain horses when released from their box stalls into a pasture or wide open space where they can run, jump and play freely. Horses that do not have indispensable strength of movement in their rear end carriage constantly lose the coordination of movement between their rear and front legs. This defect is clearly seen when the horse starts or stops abruptly or turns. Such weak horses can be detected early on in life and should be eradicated from the gene pool as the principal point for a breeding horse is a truly functional animal.

To assess foals, I feel it is useful to let them run freely and observe the coordination of their movements. When they are only a few days old, I can get a good idea of what they will be like when they mature, especially regarding gait. Moreover, other weaknesses such as pasterns that are too long, in a 5-day old foal generally indicate that this weakness will stay with the individual his entire life and when he matures, he'll age prematurely.

To be quite frank, long pasterns are something that our breed

can do without. It is true that they can contribute to a smooth ride, but we should not seek smoothness through a defect. A horse with a smooth gait and long pasterns lacks functional conformation and therefore has a limited useful riding life. Smoothness should be achieved by rhythmic, four beat lateral movements, which together with the brio and conformation, will allow the animal to place the back foot in front of the front foot's hoof mark and thus cover more ground with less paces.

Nature, of course, frequently establishes a fine line between horses with excellent gait and certain weaknesses. A good breeder must know how to distinguish the difference. In dairy cattle, there is a certain similarity. The "angularity" of a dairy cow, known as the "milk feature" is an inherited characteristic related to the cow's ability to produce more milk. Similarly, if this characteristic is not well handled through its mating, we may end up producing a fragile cow whose skeleton and muscular systems cannot sustain the several pregnancies that her milk production requires of her. Nature has given man the necessary tools in the genetics of dairy cows and Peruvian Horses to permit him to pass by these defects, and at the same time maintain a pure breed while constantly improving the performance or production of these animals. The greatest challenge in eliminating defects is to find individuals that compliment one another but which, however, are also similar in type and way of moving. I don't believe in mating two extremely different types. For example: breeding a very coarse horse with a very refined one or a high-bellied one with a deep-bellied one, etc. The two extremes tend not to "balance" each other out and the result is often a horse that has the extreme imperfections of the parents.

There is a little more to be said regarding the correlation of gait and brio. The horse's obedience and willingness to carry its rider the whole day, without changing its gait, is the horse's brio.





It's important that brio not be confused with excessive excitability. Brio is the spirit or character necessary for a Paso Horse to move with grace with its head up moving at the slightest indication given by its rider, its muscles should contract rapidly and energetically, and has a great resistance to fatigue.

Brio is apparently inherited, and fortunately for us, was carefully selected by old time breeders. Brio permits the Peruvian Horse to travel with the style, grace and personality that make it one of the most distinguished of all equine breeds.

The reader may be surprised at my failure to discuss termino and lift. These are aspects of the Peruvian Paso Horse that have been and will be emphasized by breeders and are it's the most eye catching traits. However, termino should not be confused with the gait itself. Although this movement of the front legs has made the horse famous, it is only an additive in the Peruvian Horse which, taken together with the lift, has been and should be carefully selected genetically, but which is not absolutely necessary to the gait.

While termino is an attractive trait, it can become a double-edged sword and it should be carefully selected for. It can lead to smoothness or a rough ride. It can also lead to the deterioration of the hoofs, fetlock joints, and/or tendons of horses lacking strength in the lower area of the legs.

With the rotary, outward flinging movement of the horse's front legs from the chest, seen from the front, the horse's footfall allows time so that the front hoofs touch ground after the back hoof on the same side has done so. When this is overly exaggerated, the agudez (lift) and/or the termino can ruin the gait, making the horse harsh or jarring to ride. A few individuals have the ability to combine large doses of termino and agudez and still have an exquisitely smooth gait. These are inherited traits therefore, a worthy achievement of these individuals and of our breed,

Termino has many characteristics. It can be extended or not, with or without rhythm in the movement, produced by greater or lesser

looseness of the shoulders, accompanied by greater or lesser looseness of the shoulders, accompanied by greater or lesser lift. Sometimes there is a great rotation of the knee joints and hoofs and sometimes nearly none. If there is one general point, it is definitely that termino should originate in the shoulders in order to provide a smooth, harmonious movement. Some horses actually show the sole of their hoofs to the rider in their rotation of the front legs. Although this an exuberant movement, if it does not start with the relaxed movement of the shoulders, then the ride will be a rough one.

Still other horses have lots of agudez and termino but their rear hoofs don't over reach and cover less ground. Generally they have lots of "metal" (making the ground resound with the stamp of their hoof beat), They can be harsh sometimes but that again, is not the rule.

There are many nuances of our horse's way of moving. A little too much of one ingredient or not enough of another, can make the horse's gait less than ideal. The "Pisos" of the Peruvian Horse is precise, elegant and difficult to attain. Since Pisos is the essence of the breed, it is critical that we assess our horses carefully for all aspects related to it, including functional conformation and brio. We all know that there is no such thing as the perfect horse but it is a breeder's responsibility to strive for it.

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**Above: An example of the huachano, which is closer to a pace than the paso llano. His front and hind legs on the same side leave the ground at the same time but they return almost simultaneously too. Below: Here is the pasitrote; a gait more diagonal than the paso llano. Note that the hind leg leaves the ground before the front leg on the same side does. This is done consistently so the timing sounds correct but it is not.**

