

# HORSE JUDGING I - WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Judging horses, like all livestock judging, is an art that must be developed through patient study and long practice. A horse judge must:

- Know the parts of a horse and their location
- Know which parts are most important and the most desirable form of each part
- Visualize the ideal horse, perfect in all respects.
- Make keen observations of horses and compare them to his ideal
- Weigh the good and bad points of each horse
- Develop a system of examining horses so he won't overlook important points

## CONFORMATION

Conformation includes type, muscling, balance, and structural smoothness. It also includes the form and proportion of the various parts of the body.

## TYPE

Type depends upon the function a horse is to perform. Our study of horse judging will focus on *saddle horse type*, since saddle horses, or light horses, comprise most of the 4-H projects and judging contests.

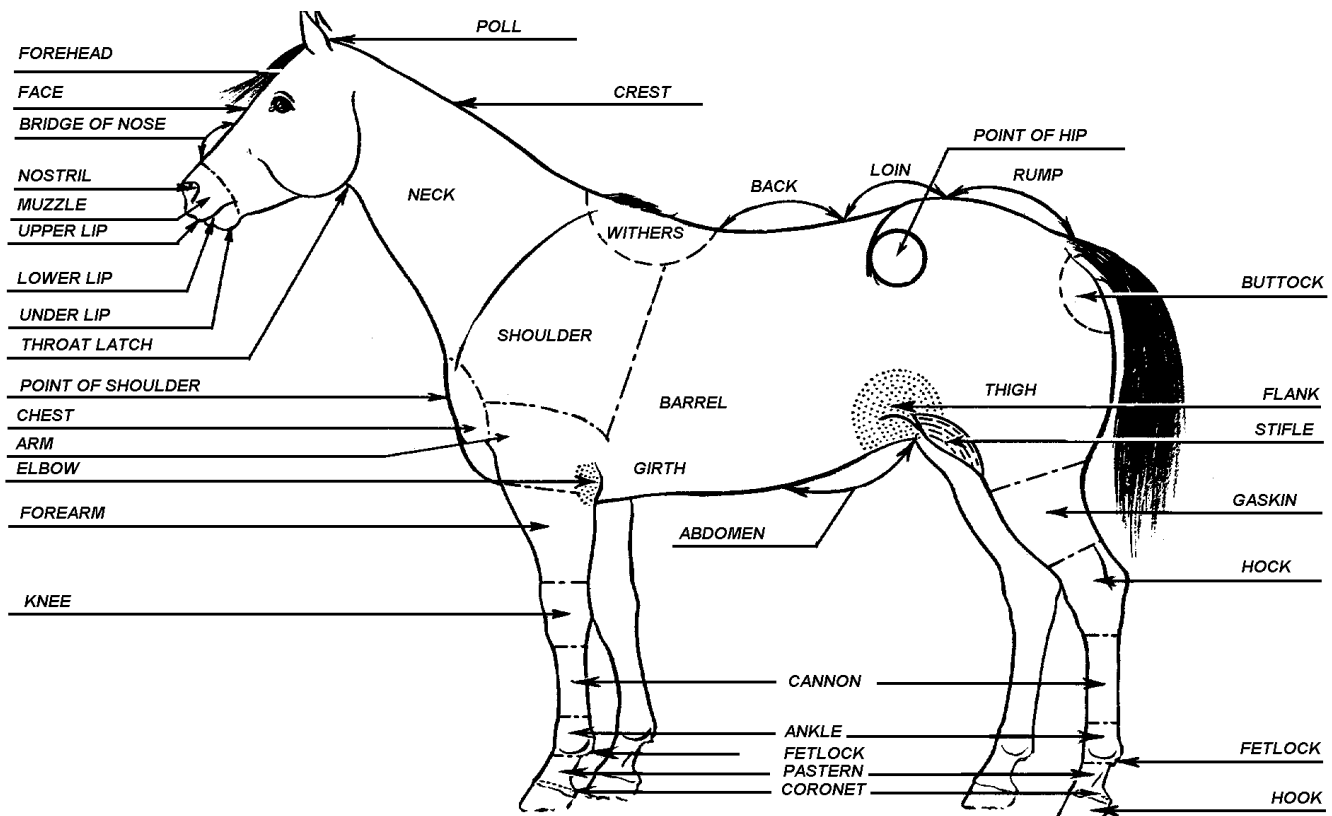
Desirable type in a saddle horse requires a horse of medium size and weight, generally ranging in height from 14½ to 17 hands and weighing from 900 to 1300 pounds, depending on the breed. This horse has a long, sloping shoulder, a long croup, a fairly short back, and a short, strong coupling. The bottom-line is much longer than the top-line, allowing a long stride.

Both fore and rear quarters show an adequate amount of muscling for the breed. The chest is deep and the ribs well-sprung. Legs are clean, flat-boned, and medium to short in length.

Horses that do not fit this general description are called off-type. They may be too small (pony-type) or too large and heavy (draft-type).

The several breeds of saddle horses have distinguishing type characteristics (breed type). Usually, all horses in a judging class will be of the same breed. They should be compared as to how well they exhibit breed type.

**Muscling.** Both the quantity and the quality of muscle are important. Muscles should bulge and be distinctly visible on the surface under the skin. The muscles in



PARTS OF A HORSE.

the arm, forearm, V-muscle, stifle, and gaskin should be smooth, long, and well attached. Long, tapering forearm and gaskin muscles that tie well into the knee and hock both inside and outside are preferred to short, "bunchy" muscles.

**Balance.** A balanced appearance comes from the forequarter and hindquarter appearing to be of nearly equal size and development. They "fit" together well. A heavy-fronted horse that is narrow and shallow in the rear quarter is not balanced, neither is a heavy quartered horse that is narrow, flat, and shallow in front.

**Smoothness.** When all the parts of a horse blend together well and the muscling is long and tapering, then the horse has smoothness. The head and the neck should be in proportion, and the neck should blend smoothly into the shoulder. The shoulder and forerib should fit smoothly together, and the coupling should be short and strong so that the top line is strong and the hips tie in smoothly. A horse with a thin neck and a sharp break at wide, prominent shoulders is not smooth. One with a weak coupling and jutting hips is not smooth nor is a horse that is extremely "bunchy" in his muscling.

**Head.** Each of the light horse breeds requires slightly different characteristics about the head. These should

be considered when breed classes are judged. In general, the head should be well proportioned to the rest of the body, refined and clean-cut, with a chiseled appearance. A broad forehead, with great width between the eyes is desired. The face should be straight as compared to convex (Roman nose) or concave (dished). The eyes set wide-apart, should be large and clear. The ears should be medium to small in size, set wide, and active. The muzzle should be small, the mouth shallow and the nostrils large and sensitive. The upper and lower teeth should meet when biting. A contrast is the parrot mouth where the lower jaw is too short.

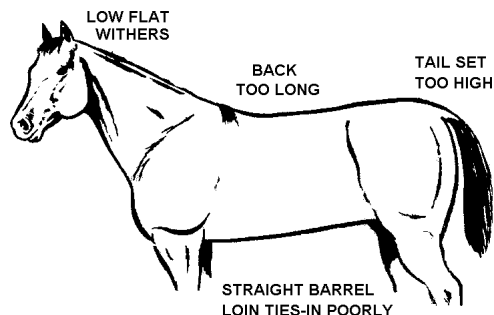
**Neck** The head should join the neck at about a 45 degree angle with a distinct space between the jawbone and the neck. This is the throat latch. It should be clean-cut.

Depending on the breed, the neck should be medium in length to fairly long, the head carried either high or at a moderate level. The neck should be slightly arched, lean and muscular, and blend smoothly with the shoulder. A high-arched or heavy-crested neck is undesirable.

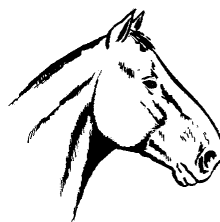
**Shoulders.** The shoulder is long and set at an angle of about 45 degrees from the withers down to the point of the shoulder. Shoulders should be smooth yet well muscled. The withers should be well-defined, extend well-back beyond the top of the shoulder, and be as high as the hips. Low, flat withers do not hold a saddle well.

**Chest and Forelegs.** The chest is deep and fairly thick, with this depth and thickness extending back into the forerib and barrel. A deep heart girth and well-sprung foreribs give room for good respiratory and digestive capacity. The forelegs are wide-set and blend smoothly into the shoulder. The forearm muscle is large and tapers into the knee when viewed from the back or front. The knee joint should be clean and the pastern medium in length. The pastern and the hoofs are set at about a 45 degree angle to the ground.

**Back, Loin, and Croup.** The top-line should include a



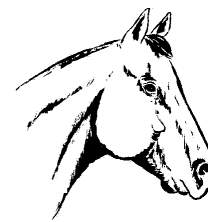
ALL THESE HORSES HAVE UNDESIRE CHARACTERISTICS



ROMAN NOSE



PIG - EYED



PARROT MOUTH

short, strong back and loin a long, nicely-turned and heavily muscled croup, and a high well-set tail. The loin (coupling) must be short and very strongly muscled because it supports the weight of the saddle and rider and lifts the forequarters when the horse is in motion (see Figure 3 for undesirable characteristics).

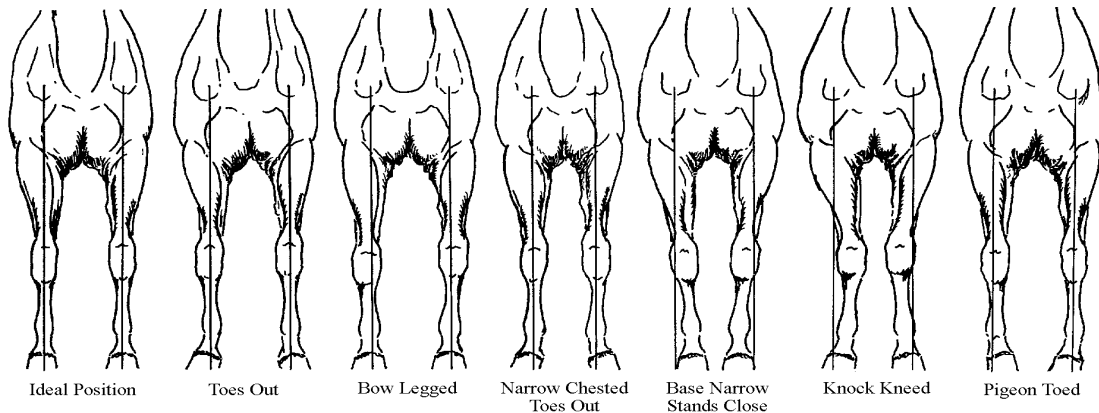
**Rear Quarters.** The rear quarters should be thick, deep, and well-muscled then viewed from the side or rear. This muscling shows in thickness through the thigh, stifle and gaskin. The hind legs are muscled both inside and out with the gaskin tied in low in the hock joint. The hocks are wide, deep, and clean.

**Bone, Legs.** The bones of the legs should be flat, clean, and free from fleshiness and puffiness. The bone should be of adequate strength and substance to

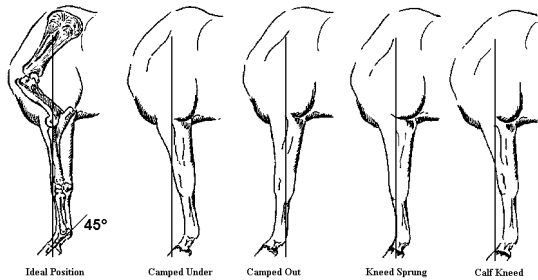
support the horse during strenuous performance.

The hock should be large, clean-cut, wide from front to back, and deep. Gaskin muscles should tie-in very strongly and low on the hock. The knee should be wide when viewed from the front, deep, and clean-cut. When viewed from the front or rear the knees and hocks should be bisected by an imaginary vertical line down the center of the legs. Tendons below the knees and hocks appear sharply separated from the cannons, giving the leg a flat appearance.

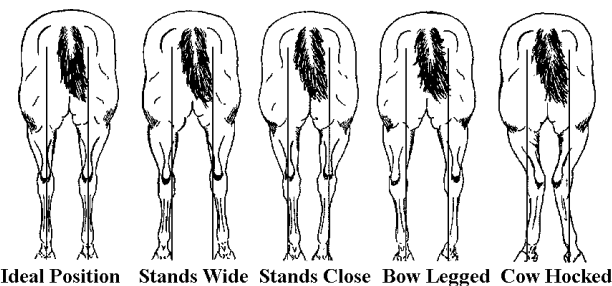
All four legs are set squarely under the body. From the front view, the forelegs are parallel with the feet pointing straight ahead. From the side view, a line drawn perpendicular to the ground should bisect the



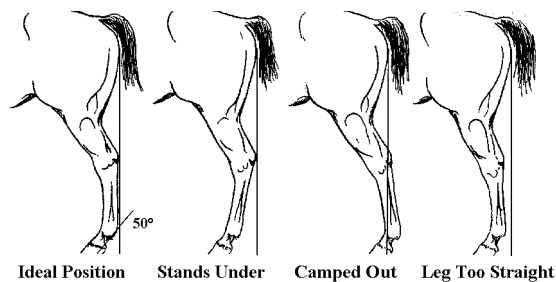
Vertical line from point of shoulder should fall in center of knee, cannon, pastern, and foot.



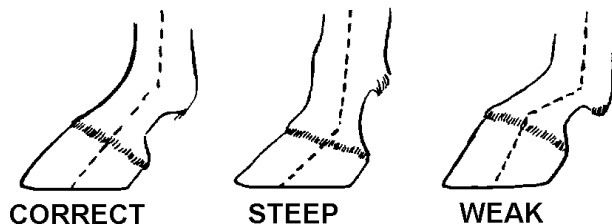
Vertical line from shoulder should fall through elbow and center of foot.



Vertical line from point of buttock should fall in center of hock, cannon, pastern and foot.



Vertical line from the point of buttock should touch the rear edge of cannon and meet the ground behind the feet.



foreleg all the way from the shoulder to the rear of the hoof. From the rear view, the hocks should point straight back or turn in very slightly. The hind legs should set well under the horse and the feet point straight ahead. The hock should be set at the correct angle. Too much angle at the hock with the feet set too far under the body is called "sickle-hocked". Too little angle is called "post-legged".

**Feet and Pasterns.** The hoof should be well shaped, roomy and balanced in size with the horse. The heel should be deep, wide, and open. The hoof should appear tough and durable.

The pasterns should be medium in length and set at approximately 45 degrees to the ground. The hoof should have the same angle as the pastern. If the pastern is too straight, it does not cushion the shock of the foot striking the ground and can lead to serious damage as well as a rough ride.

## QUALITY

Quality is indicated by cleanness of the bone and head, general body smoothness, and stylishness. The bone should be clean and hard. The joints, free from fleshiness. The tendons in the legs stand back from the cannon bones and give the legs a flat appearance. The head looks clean-cut and chiseled. The body is smooth and the haircoat glossy. However, a slick fat horse might appear smooth and glossy and still be of low quality.

## SEX AND BREED CHARACTER

By sex character, we mean masculinity in the stallion and femininity in the mare. The stallion should have a bolder, stronger head, a more massive jaw, and thicker heavier neck and shoulders than the gelding or mare. The stallion has heavier bone and is larger and more rugged than the mare. Geldings do not show excessive masculinity. Mares should be feminine about the head and neck and more refined than stallions.

Each breed has slightly different characteristics about the head as well as in body conformation. These are the points which make us recognize one breed of light horses from the others. In breed classes or in selecting a horse of a particular breed, these points should be considered. USDA Farmers Bulletin 2127 and page 3 of this manual give some of the breed characteristics of the various breeds.

## ACTION

Although the degree of action will vary somewhat with the different breeds of light horses depending on their use (saddle, racing, stock horse, show, etc.), the usefulness of all horses depends on their ability to move well. In all breeds the motion should be straight and true, with a long, well-coordinated, elastic stride. Excess lateral movement of the feet reduces efficiency and detracts from coordination.

Action is affected by the set of the feet and legs. A horse that stands crooked usually moves crooked. A horse that toes in (pigeon-toed) on the front feet will usually paddle or wing out. Some horses place the front feet too close together, sometimes interfering as they move. A horse that toes out (splay-footed) in front will usually dish or wing in.

Fairly close hock action, with the hindlegs moving straight forward is desirable. Lateral movement of the hocks is undesirable.

The horse should move with snap and determination, as if he knows where he is going and is sure to get there. A halting, sluggish movement is undesirable. Some common defects are:

**Cross-firing.** - A "scuffing" on the inside of the diagonal forefeet and hindfeet: generally confined to pacers.

**Dwelling.** - A noticeable pause in the flight of the foot, as though the stride were completed before the foot reaches the ground: most noticeable in trick-trained horses.

**Forging.** - Striking forefoot with toe of hindfoot.

**Interfering.** - Striking fetlock or cannon with the opposite foot; most often done by base-narrow, toewide, or splay-footed horses.

**Lameness.** - A defect detected when the animal favors the affected foot when standing. The load on the ailing foot in action is eased and a characteristic bobbing of the head occurs as the affected foot strikes the ground.

**Speedy Cutting.** - The inside of diagonal fore and hind pastern make contact: sometimes seen in fast trotting horses.

**Stringhalt.** - Excessive flexing of hind legs: most easily detected when a horse is backed.

**Trappy.** - A short, quick, choppy stride: a tendency of horses with short, straight pasterns and straight shoulders.

**Winding or Rope-walking.** - A twisting of the striding leg around in front of supporting leg, which results in contact like that of a rope-walking artist: often occurs in horses with very wide fronts.

**Winging.** - An exaggerated paddling particularly noticeable in high-going horses.

