

Form to Function: How Your Horse's Conformation Affects His Athletic Ability

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PALM PARTNERSHIP TRAINING™

It's a simple fact. How a horse is built affects his performance. I call this "form to function." Once you understand how a horse's conformation affects his personality and athleticism, you will have a better chance of choosing an equine partner who will stay sound and help you meet your goals.

Remember, no horse is perfect. These are rules of thumb for the "model" horse. These tips can help you evaluate future equine prospects or help explain why you are getting certain reactions from your horse.

Heads Up

Let's look at conformation traits to evaluate intelligence, temperament, and sensitivity.

Start with a horse's head. He should have a large, dark, "kind" eye to help him see well. I've found that horses with small "pig" eyes have difficulty seeing. Horses with "bugged out" eyes with all or part of the white sclera surrounding the eye showing may have a kind attitude, but tend to be very unpredictable. When the whites of a horse's eye shows, I look for him to show a tendency to be spooky and inconsistent.

Next, evaluate his forehead. A horse whose forehead has a lot of width between the eyes tends to be more intelligent than one who has a narrow forehead. Look at the structure of the horse's forehead. A flat forehead tells me that the horse will have a great personality, while a horse with a bulge between his eyes tends to be more stubborn and temperamental.

Even a horse's ears can give you clues to his personality and temperament. Ears should be set on top of the head and be "sharp" and erect. They should have distinctive curves and sharpness. These ears say, "I have a great personality and a bright expression!"

Less desirable are floppy-eared horses with their ears set too low. These ears show a lack of expression. They indicate a slower, more mellow horse, but one that will rarely have brilliant expression.

"Pins ears" are the least desirable ear conformation. This conformation fault is caused when the ears are attached too close to the poll, and these horses tend to be very temperamental.

Horses also use their ears to "talk" to us and tell us what they are feeling. Good horsemen learn to read their horse's ears.

Here are some of my translations:

Ears forward, alert -

Can mean he's surprised, not certain, or happy

Ears working back and forth softly -

Can mean he's attentive, accepting, has good concentration and is trying to please

Ears straight up -

Can mean he's lazy, bored, or asleep

Ears facing straight back -

Can mean he's confused, mad, doubtful, or showing the first signs of resistance

Ears really laid back -

Can mean he's unhappy, mad, or aggressive toward another horse

As we continue our "head to toe" analysis of how a horse's conformation influences his temperament and performance, let's consider three characteristics many riders overlook: the horse's nostrils, mouth, and skin.

A horse's nostrils do not indicate temperament, but they are an important conformation factor for performance. Large nostrils are a desirable trait, and are typically found on horses with good lung and breathing capacity. A horse with small nostrils may be limited in his endurance and stamina.

Since the horse's mouth holds the bit, it is a key component in how we communicate with our equine partners. Look for a horse with thin lips and a short, shallow mouth, as this horse will tend to be the most responsive to your rein aids. Horses with thicker lips and longer mouths tend to be duller.

Can a horse be too "thin skinned?" This may be used to describe sensitive people, but it also applies to horses. A horse's skin and hair coat can tell you something about his personality. The thinner-skinned and finer a hair coat a horse has, the more sensitive he will be. For example, Thoroughbred horses are typically thin-skinned with fine coats that feel like doeskin or sealskin. They also tend to be more sensitive and high strung.

The opposite also tends to be true. Thicker-skinned horses with coarser coats tend to be quiet and lethargic.

Performance & Conformation

If you are interested in competing in a specific performance event, you will want to more closely investigate specific conformation traits that affect a horse's function for that specialized event.

Let's evaluate how a horse's topline conformation affects performance. The more prominent a horse's withers, the greater the chance he will carry himself with a desirable "uphill" balance. From the withers, evaluate the horse's back between the end of the withers and the beginning of the loin. The shorter a horse's back, the stronger and more athletic he will tend to be. The length from the middle of the horse's withers to the point of his shoulder should ideally be the same length as his back.

The horse's loin area is where the limbs of his hind legs attach to his spine. This is a critical area influencing a horse's athleticism. When viewed from the top, the loin should be broad and round. The loin muscles should be placed forward toward the withers, shortening the span of the back. This conformation is strong and athletic. The straighter all of the topline elements line up, the stronger a horse's back will be.

Let's move back down the topline looking at some undesirable traits for a performance horse. A horse with very low withers is called "mutton withered," a trait that will negatively affect his balance, causing him to carry too much weight on his front end. The longer the horse's back, the less ability he will have to do more difficult performance tasks such as reining, collected canter pirouettes, and jumping. A horse that is narrow across the loin or whose loins are "peaked" at the topline will lack the strength and ability to engage his powerful hindquarters.

Angles count when it comes to how conformation affects performance. A 45-degree angle is the most desirable for a horse's shoulder angle. Also consider the placement of the horse's shoulder in relationship to his withers. A horse with the ability to freely move his shoulders and front legs always has the middle of his withers positioned in a vertical line to his heart girth.

The length of the hip should match the length of the shoulder and the length of the back. Again, a 45-degree angle, when measured from the point of the hip to the middle of the buttocks, is best for performance.

A horse's neck influences his balance and flexibility. I often say I've never seen a horse with too long of a neck, but I will add that neck length needs to be in proportion to his body. The neck should be neither too long nor too short. A good rule of thumb is that the length of the neck should not exceed the length of the body.

The base of the neck should "tie in," or be attached, into the shoulder approximately



three-quarters of the way up the chest. The top of the neck should tie in high up on the withers. The point of attachment between the neck and withers should be smooth, without a dip or depression between them. The neck should look like it flows from the middle of the back in a nice arch that supports the head.

Horses with necks tied in too high, attached to the upper one-quarter of the chest and too high at the withers, will have a steep neck angle, making it difficult for the horse to round his spine to collect his balance. If the neck is tied in too low, the horse will carry his balance on his forehead and also have difficulty achieving collection.



Paint Horse - *Rugged Painted Lark* – owned by Lynn Palm & Heidi Burkhalter
Western Type Performance Horse



Appendix Quarter Horse: *My Royal Lark* – owned by Lynn Palm & Trisha Crang
Hunter or Dressage Type Performance Horse

One of the least desirable neck conformations is a “ewe neck.” A ewe neck makes it appear as if the topline of the horse’s neck is inverted and the neck put on upside down. It is just the opposite of a desirable arched neck conformation. Ewe necks are typically found on horses whose necks are set on too low. Often there is a telltale depression where the neck and withers meet. Ewe-necked horses have more difficulty achieving balance and collection.

In the next article, I will discuss one of the most important areas of conformation in a horse—the legs. In the meantime, if you would like more information about Palm Partnership Training™ products and schools, please go to www.lynnpalm.com or call 800-503-2824.

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