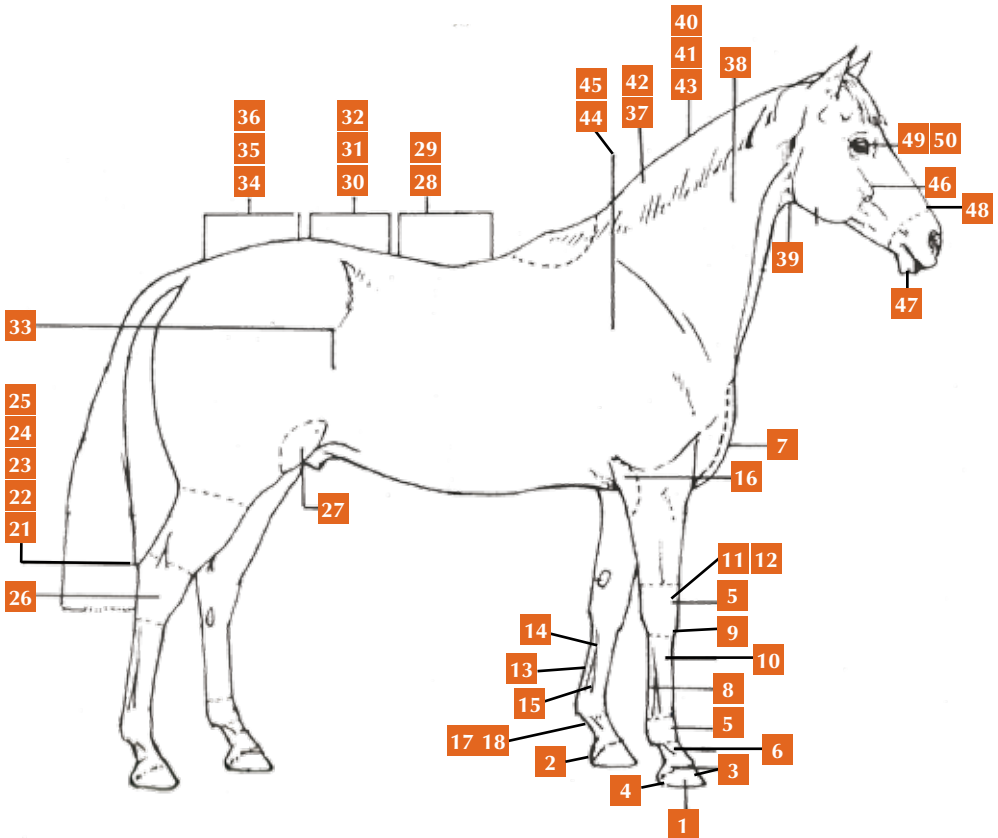


# Selecting horses: Type and conformation

by Sue Webb



When selecting a horse, it is important that you know what you are looking for. Some horses and ponies are more suitable for certain jobs than others. The make and shape of a horse are a very good indication of the suitability that you have in mind. The outside of the horse often tells us what is going on, on the inside.

## Types

Apart from the obvious difference between horses and ponies, one has to consider the different types of horses. Different disciplines require specific types of animals. In most English showing classes, the two main types are hacks and hunters. Both types can be used equally well for dressage and jumping. Then there are

the carriage and draft types, most of which can be ridden with equal success. The successful long distance horse can also be identified as a distinctive type, as can the typical Western horse. When selecting an animal, it is a good idea to let the motto “form follows function” guides you.

## Conformation

The problem with assessing a horse for correct conformation is that faults are often so slight, that only a practiced eye will recognise them. Incorrect conformation affects performance, but the significance of each fault must be understood. The illustrated table serves to grade them, the most serious first.

## Feet

1. Laminitis - ridged surface, possible rotated pedal bone
2. Sheered heels - uneven weight bearing on the hoof. This displaces the coronary band, which causes distortion of the frog
3. Boxy foot - the feet are often “not a pair” and one is upright
4. Contracted heel - buttresses too close together that may cause atrophied frog - could be associated with navicular disease.

## Legs

### Forelegs

5. Apple joints - swollen fetlocks associated with sesamoiditis and concussion
6. Ringbone - irreversible condition, interfering with the movement in the pastern
7. Toe Out - Narrow, weak chest
8. Pinfired - signs of treatment of an injured tendon
9. Bench knees - crooked limb
10. Tied in below the knee - weak, lacking room for flexor tendon
11. Over at the knee - if exaggerated, could cause stumbling
12. Back at the knee - weak
13. Bowed tendon - unsightly but often not unsound. An inherent weakness, however.
14. Splint - not a soundness problem

15. Windgall - bursal enlargement from concussion or over-strain
16. Capped elbow - treatable soft swelling
17. Upright pasterns - uncomfortable ride, no spring, predisposed to ringbone
18. Sloped pasterns - weak, places undue strain on tendons and ligaments
19. Brushing - scarring, showing tendency to strike opposite fetlock with the inside of hoof from lack of condition or crooked limbs
20. Dishing - swinging leg out and round at each step.

### Hind legs

21. Sickie hocks – often leads to curb, strained ligaments below the hock
22. Cow hocks – weak thighs
23. Straight hocks – no length of gaskin
24. Sprung hocks – weak, hocks open with each step
25. Capped hock – treatable, soft swelling
26. Bog spavin/thoroughpin – bursal enlargement
27. Locked stifle – ligaments over the patella delay, or are too short to allow the joint to bend at first.

## Back

28. Sway back – hollow behind the withers, weak
29. Short back – no swing, gives a bad ride, nothing behind saddle
30. Roach back – spinal deformity
31. Long back – weak, too much length behind saddle
32. Weak loins – top line shows a hollow in front of hip.

## Quarters

33. Dropped hip – unsoundness, result of injury, unlevel action
34. Short from croup, high-set tail – hind leg tends to step behind
35. Goose rumped – low-set tail, short femur, restricted “spring”
36. Flat – seen in saddlers.

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## Neck

37. Ewe neck – tendency to go “above bit”
38. Swan neck – bulging front muscle
39. Thick latch – difficult to flex
40. Short neck – inelegant outline
41. Broken neck – acquired fault
42. Set low – “downhill” look
43. Cresty – gelded late, over fat. Characteristic of some working breeds.

## Shoulder

44. Upright – restricted movement
45. Round – produces “choppy” strides.

## Head

46. Narrow jaw – close cheekbones
47. Parrot mouth – top jaw longer than lower jaw
48. Roman nose – exaggerated curve from forehead to muzzle, can also be ‘common’
49. Small eye – only aesthetically unpleasing
50. White of eye showing – if shown in repose, no problem.

## Outline

Correct outline should include a well-proportioned head with a big eye, erect ears, room between the cheekbones and a narrow latch, a neck running straight underneath and curved at the top down to a big, sloped shoulder. The quarters must match the shoulders.

Viewed from above, the shoulder should be flat, the ribs well-sprung to give the lungs and heart room, and the hips wider than the shoulder. The breast must be defined, the front legs a hand’s breadth apart. The forearm needs to be muscled, the knee big and flat in front. The whole leg should be straight down to the fetlock, and the limbs must all match.

The hocks must be in line with the point of the buttock and the quarters extend down to strong gaskins with well-developed muscles.

All four legs should show well-defined bone and tendon as if they have been “cling-wrapped” and must be straight when viewed from the front, back and side. The front hooves should be round with strong supporting heels. The hind hooves tend to be more oval. **SAH**

These types of bits are not allowed in showing classes or dressage competitions, but may be used in showjumping and other disciplines.

## Bitless bridles

Although this discussion is mostly about bits, bitless bridles are also mentioned as a form of communication. Like the hackamore, these have no bit that fits into the horse’s mouth. Rather, it applies pressure directly on the horse’s nose, lower jaw and cheeks. They can be made of rope, leather, or metal cable or chain that is covered by leather or sheepskin. Some hackamores with long shanks can be quite severe in the wrong hands. Mostly though, bitless bridles are quite gentle and should a horse have any mouth-related problems, often provide a preferable alternative.

None of these types of bridles are allowed in any English showing classes or dressage competitions, but they may be used for showjumping, endurance riding and Western classes.

## Combinations

Combinations of bits are often used. A rope gag with double reins will work as a normal snaffle and gag combined. Sometimes, a hackamore and snaffle are also combined. Portuguese Snaffles are often used with a “spur strap” to provide an added curb action. Then of course there are the double bridles, where a snaffle (bridoon) is put in the horse’s mouth, together with a curb (weymouth). Please note that this is not a normal pelham, as it has only one set of rings for the reins to be attached (see *Bits 4*). It can be kind in knowledgeable hands. It is mostly used for higher dressage and showing classes, although some showjumpers also like to use the double bridle because of the options it provides.

Bitting is a specialist field. To find out what is right for your horse, and more importantly, what is allowed in the kind of discipline that you plan to take part in, consult someone knowledgeable. An instructor, stable manager, or even the owner/manager of your local tack shop can help. Also important to remember, if your horse is happy with one bit, and works well in it, don’t change it just for the sake of change. **SAH**