

Disciplines

English Versus Western

WHETHER YOU RIDE A PASO FINO, A PAINT, or a Welsh Pony, chances are you ride for pleasure. More horse owners in this country—about 42 percent, according to a 2005 survey by the American Horse Council—ride for pleasure than for any other activity. Only 29 percent show or compete.³⁰ Pleasure riding is typically defined as trail riding, and although it is not technically considered a riding discipline, trail riding is most closely associated with Western-style riding.



AMY KOLZOW

A horse in Western tack well equipped for the trail. The saddle's back belly band prevents the saddle's cantle from tipping up in steep terrain; the saddle pad is well fitted; the bridle is hooked over the horn since the horse is secured to his trailer by his halter.



AMY KOLZOW

Trail riding can offer the challenge of the unknown and an unmatched view of the terrain from between your horse's ears.

Whether you learn to ride English or Western (as defined by the two predominant and different saddle styles) depends most typically on how and where you learned to ride.

If you started riding by taking lessons at a local riding stable or lesson barn east of the Mississippi, you probably learned to ride in an English saddle, since most instructors at such barns have an English-riding background. If you started riding at a rental stable, dude ranch, on a family property, or west of the Mississippi, you may have learned to ride in a Western or stock saddle.

The various equestrian sports have more in common than they have setting them apart, and riders can—and do—cross freely between them. Many tend to call one sport “home,” however, finding that it melds best with their personalities and goals. Each sport generates its own community as well, populated with trainers who specialize in the discipline, boarding barns that organize around it, publications that cover it, and tack shops that cater to its participants.

The vast majority of horses can be trained in either style of riding and can be ridden with either style of equipment. A number of horses can go both ways, adjusting their way of traveling to English and Western styles pretty effortlessly, depending on how they are ridden. Recreational riding is particularly democratic, and you are likely to see pleasure riders sporting a mix-and-match style of clothing and tack that reflects comfort, safety, and availability rather than the exacting standards of either the English or Western show ring.

That said, equestrian sports mostly fall under one main umbrella or the other, although a few pursuits don’t fit neatly into either category. (We don’t attempt to inventory and describe all equestrian sports here, but instead introduce some of the most popular activities.)

The two camps use different terminology and tack, they prefer different kinds of horses, and their style and dress couldn’t be more dissimilar.

The most notable difference, and the one that allows any individual rider’s “denomination” to be discerned at a glance, is in the tack. Western riders use a larger saddle with a deep seat and a horn and



AMY HOLZOW

A horse in English tack well equipped for the trail: the halter under the bridle provides a safe option for tying his head; boots provide protection from overreaching strides on rocky terrain; waterproof saddle bags are strapped securely to D rings at the front of the forward seat saddle. (Stirrups ideally should be run up the stirrup leathers, however, when the horse is tied so they do not bang the horse's sides or catch on trailer hardware—see photo A on page 256.)

generally use a bridle with no noseband, split reins, and a curb bit (one that acts via leverage on the horse's poll). The tack can be simple and plain or extremely ornate.

Those who ride English use a smaller saddle—flat, without a horn—usually with a snaffle bit (one with direct action on the bars of the horse's mouth), although curb bits are found and used frequently.

English styles of riding vary from the forward position of hunt seat to the deeper seat of dressage or saddle seat, but one commonality is that all English riders can choose whether to post or sit the trot, and most English sports call for both. Western riders use a deep seat almost exclusively, and riders do not post. Western riders also hold their reins in one hand and steer their horses via neck reining (the horse moves away from the light pressure of the rein on the side of his neck); English riders hold one rein in each hand and guide their horses with direct pressure on the rein.

Western riders tend to favor a smaller, stockier animal with a shorter stride and smoother canter, or lope, like a Quarter Horse, Appaloosa, or Paint. English riders tend toward taller, lighter horses, like a Thoroughbred or Saddlebred, and dressage riders strongly prefer a horse with an exaggerated overstep that yields spectacular, but often hard-to-sit, gaits.

English riders generally sport a hunt coat and breeches, although saddle seat showing usually dictates a saddle suit or riding habit (jodhpurs and a long coat—which may be either formal or informal, depending on the time of day—in conservative colors, paired with short jodhpur boots and a derby or top hat), and their horses “walk, trot, and canter.” Western riders are typically in blue jeans and a cowboy hat, although dress can be considerably more ornate in certain segments of the show world; Western horses “walk, jog, and lope.”

Despite outward differences, the same tenets of good riding apply across all disciplines—a balanced seat; educated, soft hands; and a finely tuned horse who’s immediately responsive to any cue and happy in his work.

The English Sports

English is considered the “classical” form of riding: the result of the natural progression of horsemanship over time. As you might expect from the name, the English style of riding originated in Europe, emerging primarily from the military. Horses used in battle needed to be responsive, well trained, and agile. The Olympic equestrian sports—dressage, show jumping, and eventing—are English disciplines with military backgrounds.

One of the innovators in the English discipline was Captain Federico Caprilli, an officer in the Italian cavalry in the late 1800s who taught riders and horses the skills they needed in war. At the time, a deep seat was the only seat that existed. Even over fences, riders stayed seated on the horse, leaning backward, behind the natural arc of the horse’s body, as the horse jumped.

Caprilli realized that this posture interfered with a horse’s natural balance and movement, so he shortened his riders’ stirrups and had them move forward, keeping their weight over the horse’s own center

of gravity in what became known as the forward seat. When it became apparent that horses were able to perform much better under Caprilli's system, it was adopted for the entire Italian cavalry and, eventually, throughout all of Europe.³¹

Show Hunters, Show Jumpers, and Hunter Equitation

When someone in the English world speaks of a “horse show,” the person is usually referring to a competition featuring the three sister sports of hunters, jumpers, and equitation. The classes might look quite similar—in each horses and riders navigate a course of flower-festooned jumps in an arena—but they are judged completely differently.

Originally, hunter classes were intended to judge the horses that were best suited for a day in the hunt field. An ideal hunter had a tidy, efficient, jump; “daisy-cutter” movement on the flat, showing minimal knee action and a smooth, flat stride; and rideability with a calm demeanor. Competitors jumped courses of natural-looking obstacles on grass footing.

In the last several decades, however, “hunters” have evolved into a sport of their own, straying from the original intention of selecting horses for fox hunting. Today's hunters show a jump with tremendous bascule (the arc of the body over the fence) and are expected to be silky smooth and foot-perfect in the ring, right down to the number of strides between fences. The sport requires tremendous precision and attention to detail to be pinned by the judge. Professionals and amateurs generally compete in separate divisions.

The competitors are judged subjectively on the basis of the horse; the rider's job is simply to show the horse to his best advantage. Horses are also shown in an under-saddle class on the flat, and some shows include a “handy hunter” class, where the course is more complicated.

Although a horse's natural ability is ideally enhanced by a thoughtful and skillful rider, many hunter classes are so competitive that tiny disobediences can make the difference between first and tenth place.

While the hunters are about presenting a quiet and beautiful picture, the jumpers are about jumping error-free and fast. Jumper courses are

exponentially more complicated than hunter courses, with tight turns, long gallops, and combinations of fences. Instead of the subjective judging found in hunters, jumpers are judged completely objectively. A knocked-down jump rail or a refusal incurs penalty points, as does exceeding the time allowed. The horse and rider with the lowest score win.

Show jumping features the tallest fences in all of horse sports. Most jumper classes feature an initial round with a time limit, followed by a jump-off course. The horse who finishes fastest with the fewest number of jumping penalties is the winner. Jumpers compete in a variety of other classes, including timed “speed” classes; gambler’s choice classes, where each fence is assigned a point value, and the rider makes up her own course for the maximum number of points; and puissance classes, a high-jump competition with fences as tall as seven feet.

Hunter equitation borrows some aspects of hunters and some of jumpers. In equitation, or “eq,” the courses are like small jumper courses but are ridden as smoothly and fluidly as possible, showing off the skills of the rider. Judging is subjective and is based on the rider’s position and effectiveness, not on the horse’s performance.

Equitation classes are generally divided by age and are offered at different jump heights. They are highly popular with junior competitors (under age eighteen). The best young riders qualify for regional and national finals each year. Good equitation horses are expected to jump, jump, jump, in a flat reliable manner, and can log hundreds of miles over thousands of fences for a variety of young riders over their careers.

Hunters, jumpers, and equitation are overseen by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) and the United States Hunter Jumper Association.

Dressage

It’s perhaps the most difficult equestrian sport to explain, yet dressage is the most basic of all the riding endeavors. It’s the foundation on which almost everything you do with a horse is based.

Dressage is French for “training,” although it traces its roots to Xenophon. The fundamental purpose of dressage is to develop, through standardized

progressive training methods, the horse's natural athletic ability and willingness to perform, thereby maximizing his potential as a riding horse.³²

Dressage teaches the horse to move with straightness, suppleness, and acceptance of the bit. The horse should be relaxed and soft, moving with forward impulsion, and responsive to the rider's most subtle cues.

At the higher levels of training, horses appear to dance, pirouetting and zigzagging across the arena, as light on their feet as ballerinas. Although dressage was born out of a practical need to train military horses to be highly responsive and agile during battle, it owes most of its history to the pursuit of riding as an art.

Dressage is practiced both as an art and as a sport, and purists view the two forms as being slightly different. Classical dressage seeks to adhere to the teachings of the equine masters, always striving for what is truly considered "correct." Competitive dressage, in theory, seeks the same goal, but may be influenced by the fashions and trends of the day and diverge from the truest form of dressage from time to time.

In dressage competition, horses show individually in a regulation-size arena and must perform a set pattern of movements at specific points in the arena, designated by letters. The pattern is called a dressage test. Several tests are offered at each level, and shows usually divide classes for each test by rider age and amateur/professional status. Tests are offered at nine levels in ascending difficulty.

At the more advanced levels, riders compete in musical freestyle classes, where they make up their own patterns of movements and set them to choreographed music. It typically can take a horse five to ten years to reach the highest, or Grand Prix, level of training, although few horses and riders ever reach that level. Many horse and rider combinations work their entire active lives together to achieve competence in mid-level movements. That said, basic dressage training can benefit virtually any horse, of any breed and age, because of its emphasis on achieving the ideal: harmony between horse and rider.

Dressage is governed by the USEF and the United States Dressage Federation.

Eventing

Also called combined training, eventing is the triathlon of the horse world. An event is one competition in three parts—dressage, cross-country jumping, and show jumping. Horse and rider pairs earn penalty marks in each phase, and the lowest cumulative score determines the winner.

The heart of these competitions is the cross-country test, a course of natural-looking, solid obstacles navigated at a gallop across varying terrain. Horses are expected to jump into and out of water, up and down banks, and over ditches.

Originally designed to test the mettle of military horses who were used in battle, the sport today tests the horse's versatility and resilience. An event horse must be focused and rideable in the dressage phase; brave and bold on cross-country; and poised, sound, and precise enough to navigate a tricky show-jumping course.

Each level of eventing asks progressively more of horse and rider. At the lowest level, it's a simple walk-trot-canter dressage test, a cross-country course of inviting obstacles taken at a forward canter, and a straightforward show-jumping course. At the uppermost level, the dressage test contains movements at the third level of competitive dressage, and the jump heights are just under four feet, with cross-country being ridden at a full gallop.

Eventing is the pursuit of versatility, developing a horse who is quite good at three different endeavors, rather than a horse who is excellent at only one.

The various eventing levels offer divisions separated by age (of the rider) and experience (of either horse or rider). The USEF and United States Eventing Association govern eventing.

Saddle Seat

A distinctly American invention, the saddle seat discipline came into being as a way to ride showy gaited horses comfortably for long hours around large Southern plantations. Today it encompasses a wide variety

of breeds that show separately, unlike other English sports, where horses of any breed compete in classes together. American Saddlebreds, Tennessee Walking Horses, Arabians, Morgans, National Show Horses, and Freisans are among the breeds frequently shown in saddle seat classes. These classes take place at specialized breed shows and at open shows, which offer a wide variety of classes for different breeds and disciplines.

In saddle seat, the rider adopts a riding position more suited to the high head carriage and movement of the horse. The rider sits farther back, with legs slightly out in front of instead of directly below his hipbones but is still balanced over the horse's center of gravity. The rider also carries his hands higher, due to the horse's head carriage. Saddle seat uses a cut-back saddle, a flat saddle designed to be placed farther back on the horse's back and with a cutaway pommel to allow for the higher withers and neck set.

Horses are shown solely on the flat (without jumps) in group classes and generally are judged on their manners and way of going, although different classes vary in their requirements. Some divisions reward "bigger," flashier movement, while others are geared toward selecting an amiable pleasure mount. In some classes, special shoeing is allowed to alter or enhance the horse's gaits, while others allow only plain shoes. Certain breeds are required to show their specialty gaits, including the running walk for Tennessee Walkers, and the rack and slow-gait for five-gaited Saddlebreds. There are also equitation classes, which are judged primarily on the position and abilities of the rider.

Unlike some of the other classes you might see at English horse shows, saddle seat classes tend to be exciting and raucous, with exuberant applause from the crowd showered on the competitors throughout the class. The high-energy, high-stepping show horses thrive on the cheers and attention.

The USEF oversees most saddle seat classes, although individual breed organizations usually govern the classes at breed-specific shows.



HOOF CARE AND LAMENESS

A saddleseat rider appointed for the show ring in long coat and derby hat (her Freisan is equipped with a pelham curb bit and a crupper (a piece of tack that is looped around the horse's tail to keep the saddle securely positioned)).

Going Gaited

Gaited horses and horsemanship are included here as a “discipline” primarily because their aficionados are drawn to the animals first and foremost for their gait rather than for other attributes that might make them suited for a specific activity. However, many specimens of the gaited breeds are extremely versatile and compete in other disciplines discussed in this chapter.

A gaited horse does not trot or pace but instead performs some version of a four-beat intermediate gait (the ground-covering gait between the walk and canter or lope). Most gaited breeds have a specific preferred gait, with other gaits considered undesirable or even penalized in the show ring. All gaited breeds perform some version of the walk, and some are also expected to canter or lope.

Discouraging the trot under saddle (where the smoothness of the four-beat gait is prized) can prevent gaited horses from competing in some open breed competitions that either require or strongly favor the trot. The majority of gaited horses compete in breed-specific shows that offer divisions for a variety of gaited breeds. Gaited horses can be ridden and shown under either Western or English tack, though some breeds have unique tack and attire rooted in the customs of their place of origin.

Only the Paso Fino Horse is recognized by and included as a breed division in the USEF, perhaps because the gaited breeds have developed their own rules, judging systems, and show circuits over time. (The Tennessee Walking Horse was included until the 1980s, when it was removed from the USEF, then known as the American Horse Show Association, or AHSA, rule book due to the breed's struggle with the problem of soring, discussed below).

While the gaits are bred into the gaited horse, some individuals perform them more easily and naturally than do others. A breed-gait expert may need to develop and refine a horse's correct gait (so the horse learns what is expected and does it willingly) and to assist the novice rider in perfecting and maintaining it, through patience, persistence, and long hours in the saddle. "Shortcuts" or gimmicks, such as weighted shoes, long toes, long-shanked bits, action devices, or pain-inducing techniques, should be rejected. Any gaited horse owner or prospective owner should ask questions about a potential trainer's methods, techniques, and aids. If they sound harsh, cruel, or illegal—stay away!

Soring

Soring is practiced on gaited horses to obtain a flashier, more extreme, and unnatural way of going—often rewarded in the show ring—than can be achieved by traditional, humane training methods. Irritating chemicals are applied to a horse's front pasterns to cause pain, or his front hooves are trimmed almost to the quick, then shod tightly in a procedure known as pressure shoeing. To avoid putting weight on his sore front feet, the

horse snaps his front legs high off the ground and rocks back onto his hindquarters to produce an exaggerated, or “animated,” gait.

In 1970 Congress passed the Horse Protection Act, which outlawed soring and mandated that the U.S. Department of Agriculture set up a process of inspections at Tennessee Walking Horse shows (where soring was originally seen) to detect it. As the practice spread to Racking Horses, Spotted Saddle Horses, and Missouri Fox Trotters, they, too, came under government scrutiny. These inspections continue today, but the level of compliance varies widely and soring remains a problem. Offenders have become adept at concealing soring or teach their horses not to respond to pain during an inspection (often using abusive tactics to do so).

The best way to enjoy your gaited horse to his fullest potential—without inhumane treatment or fear of violating federal law—is to choose a horse who moves as naturally as possible, without gimmicks or pain-inducing practices. Seek advice from owners and trainers who use only humane training practices. If you are bitten by the show “bug,” research and choose those show venues where only the sound, natural horse is rewarded.

Competitive Trail Riding

For most of us, trail rides are leisurely affairs, for fun, to enjoy the scenery, or to take a break from work in the ring. But for endurance and competitive trail riders, the trail ride is the sport.

Competitive trail riding (or CTR) is based on the challenge of riding a planned course safely and without overly stressing the horse. The goal is to find the best horse-and-rider combination for trail riding. Horses and riders seek to complete the ride within a certain window of time, and horsemanship judges along the trail evaluate rider skills and safety by watching competitors navigate certain areas of the trail, or by asking them to complete a specific test (such as mounting from the ground or backing their horse). Veterinary judges also assess the horse’s soundness and condition during several checks en route. After the ride, the judges determine the placings based on their on-course observations.

Competitive trail rides vary in length. The longest are about fifty or sixty miles and take place over two days. There are three levels (novice, competitive pleasure, and open), with the pace of rides increasing as one moves up the levels. Different weight classes may also be offered at each level.³³

Endurance riding is competitive trail riding taken to the maximum and suited to elite athletes, both human and equine. It's a race to see which horse-and-rider pair can complete the course first. As in human marathons, only a few teams are generally in the event to win. Most simply want to meet the challenge and finish the race. In fact, the unofficial motto of endurance riding is "To finish is to win."

Veterinary checks are established along the route during which horses are evaluated to be sure they're fit to continue, and are meant to provide mandatory short rest periods. On longer rides, competitors generally have "pit crews" to assist them with caring for the horse and going through the veterinary checks.

A veterinary check is also conducted at the finish of a ride, and any horse who is unduly stressed is disqualified, even though he finished. In addition to an overall winner, a "best conditioned" award is given to the horse who was supremely prepared for the ride and finished in top shape.

Competitors in CTR and endurance can ride with either Western or English tack, although as one progresses up the levels, specialized endurance saddles (similar to a very minimalist Western saddle without a horn, very lightweight, and designed for comfort on long rides) are likely to be used.

Endurance rides are governed by the American Endurance Ride Conference, and CTR by the North American Trail Ride Conference.

Western Sports

The Western style of riding traces its roots to the Spanish conquistadors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who reintroduced horses to the Americas. Along with the horse, the Spanish brought cattle, and cattle ranching became the lifeblood of the American West. By necessity, Western riding evolved alongside—the deep seat of a Western saddle

kept the rider secure while chasing after cattle; using just one hand for the reins left the other free for swinging a lariat, which could be tied around the saddle horn when a calf was roped.

Most people who ride Western today do so for recreation rather than for working cattle. These sports identify strongly with the cowboy persona, however; unlike the more formal English riding attire, the Western “uniform” is blue jeans, a cowboy hat, and cowboy boots.

Western riding also tends to more popular in the western and central portion of the United States, although there are Western riders all over the country. And although any breed of horse can be trained to go Western, the American Quarter Horse, who is almost synonymous with Western riding, overwhelmingly dominates these disciplines.

Reining

The sport of reining is somewhat similar to dressage, although the two pursuits couldn't be more different in outward appearance. Reiners, in their chaps and blue jeans, look nothing like dressage riders in their top hats and swallowtail coats, but both sports show off the skills of different types of horses in their purest form.

Reining competitions judge the abilities of ranch-type horses within the confines of an arena, replicating the talents required on the range or when herding cattle. Like dressage riders, reiners execute a set pattern of movements. There are ten different reining patterns, each containing the same maneuvers. A horse-and-rider pair starts with a score of seventy points, and points can be added or subtracted for each maneuver, depending on the quality of its performance.

The reining maneuvers are all executed at the lope, and include roll-backs (180-degree turns), “large fast” and “small slow” circles, spins (high-speed pivots on the hindquarters, also called turnarounds), lead changes, backing, and the crowd favorite, sliding stops. The performance should be smooth and precise, and the horse's attitude willing and without resistance. It should look easy and effortless, but the horse is completely attuned to the cues of the rider and is intently focused

on his work. Unlike dressage horses, reining mounts are ridden mostly on a loose rein.

Reining competitions offer classes based on the horse or rider's age and experience (determined by how much money either has won in competition) as well as a rider's professional/nonprofessional status. Freestyle competition is also offered, where competitors choreograph their own patterns of maneuvers to music.

Reining is a relatively new as an organized sport—the National Reining Horse Association (NRHA), which sets the standards for competition worldwide, wasn't founded until 1966. The sport has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade, and the NRHA now counts more than fourteen thousand members in its ranks and sanctions about 660 competitions around the world.³⁴

Reining is governed by the USEF and NRHA.

Cutting

In reining competitions, horses are asked to show off the skills that might make them good cattle horses. In cutting competitions, on the other hand, they have to prove it!

Cutting is the process of separating one cow from a group. Being a herd animal, the cow in question is likely to be rather uncomfortable with this state of affairs, and will do her best to return to the safe surroundings of her herd. It's the job of a cutting horse to prevent this, and a responsibility he handles on his own without assistance from his rider. The horse and cow stare each other down, feint, and whirl like professional basketball players, one trying to slip past, and the other trying to block whatever path is chosen.

A talented cutting horse has what's known as "cow sense"—the innate ability to outmaneuver and outthink his bovine charge in the same way that dogs of herding breeds instinctively know how to round up sheep. Although training fine-tunes the instinct, it's something a horse either has or doesn't have. It can't be learned if it's absent.

Good cutting horses were the prized members of the remudas (strings of ranch horses) that traversed the wide-open ranges whenever herds of cattle needed to be rounded up. Humans being the competitive folk they are, cowboys, of course, wanted to compare their prized cutting mounts to their rivals, and a sport was born.

Today, the best cutting horses strut their stuff in show arenas instead of on the open range. In competition, a rider is given two and a half minutes to allow the horse to demonstrate his cutting prowess. The horse and rider must cut at least two cows (of the rider's choosing) from the herd, including one from deep within the group. This involves the horse quietly and calmly snaking through the herd to the target cow, taking care not to upset or distress any of her herd-mates.

Once a cow has been cut from the herd, the rider must loosen the reins and give the horse his head. Until the rider decides to "quit" the cow, it's the horse's job to hold her away from the herd. The horse is awarded points for his skill, style, speed, and agility, and is penalized if he loses a cow and she returns to the herd.

Four other riders assist the contestant. Two are assigned to keep the main herd from interfering with the competing horse and rider; the other two prevent the cow who has been cut from running to the far end of the arena, away from the herd and the cutting horse.

As in reining, cutting classes are divided by age and experience. The National Cutting Horse Association sanctions competitions in the United States and Canada, and various breed shows and all-around Western shows also feature cutting.

Team Penning

Like cutting, team penning is a competition-ring replication of a situation encountered by actual working cattle horses. In this incarnation, teams of three riders work together to move three cows from a herd to a small pen at the opposite end of the competition arena.

The herd consists of thirty cows, each bearing a number from zero to nine. (Three cows in the group wear each number.) Before the timer starts,

a number is called out, designating the cows the riders need to pen. They then have sixty seconds to find and move the designated cows; the team with the fastest time is the winner.

Like many other Western sports, team penning is popular at casual local get-togethers on summer evenings where folks bring their horses, share a bite to eat, and enjoy the camaraderie of some friendly competition. But this sport has become something of a national phenomenon; the United States Team Penning Association, founded in 1993 to provide some consistency and regulation for these scattered local events, now counts more than six thousand registered members and sanctions more than seventy-five penning events per year, attracting as many as a thousand teams at the largest shows.

A note about cutting and team penning: horse folk typically view these activities from the horse's point of view, that is, how skillful and well trained the horse must be to excel and how the horses seem to "take" to them in a way that seems fun for all participants. We do want to ask, however, that the cow's point of view in these events not be overlooked: the cattle deserve humane treatment, too. We urge anyone involved in cutting and team penning activities to make sure the cattle are well treated before, during, and after all practices and competitions.

Barrel Racing

In barrel racing, horses and riders negotiate a cloverleaf pattern around three barrels, and the team with the fastest "trip" wins. It sounds easy until you see it in action: the best barrel-racing horses are so fast that tenths of a second separate the placings.

The three barrels are set up in a triangle and placed a specified distance apart and from the start/finish line. Riders can start with the barrel on their left or the one on their right. The goal is to make the fastest time, without hitting a barrel (knocking a barrel over adds a five-second penalty to the rider's time). Competitions range from local get-togethers to national championships.



BIGSTOCKPHOTO / RON HILTON

A barrel-racing duo on course.

Western Pleasure

This extremely popular discipline is a staple at any local show that offers Western classes and epitomizes what many consider the ideal horse for casual riding.

In Western pleasure, all contestants show as a group in the arena. They walk, jog, and lope on a loose rein in both directions, exhibiting smooth transitions in response to imperceptible cues from the riders. They must also rein-back and halt and are usually asked to show an extended jog as well. The horses are expected to be calm and unflappable, traveling at an easy pace with a low-set head and neck (the head about level with the withers) and exhibiting an alert and pleasant expression. These classes are evaluated subjectively, with the judge selecting the winner and other top placings.

You find Western pleasure classes at open and breed shows, most notably American Quarter Horse Association shows, as the Quarter Horse is considered the archetypal Western pleasure horse. Horse-and-rider pairs accumulate points by virtue of their placings at local shows, thereby qualifying for prestigious championship shows for their breeds.

For example, Quarter Horse riders qualify their mounts via AQHA-sanctioned shows, earning the right to compete at the AQHA World Championship Show, the world's largest and richest championship horse show, with more than \$1.6 million offered in prizes and awards.³⁵

Driving

As a modern-day sport, driving is dwarfed in size by the more popular disciplines, such as hunter/jumpers and reining, but it's a thriving part of equestrian culture that is gaining converts. While all the English riding sports maintain a strong sense of tradition, driving seems almost frozen in time. The carriages look as if they've just been driven out of the carriage house on a nineteenth-century English estate. The drivers might be decked out in top hats and swallowtail coats (for the gentlemen) or long skirts and hats with veils (for the ladies), with a lap robe tucked around them, harkening back to the sport's original trappings.

Driving can seem like something of a mystery to other equestrians. Since the sport is smaller in scope, it's not something with which many come in casual contact. It has its own set of equipment and terminology that can seem completely foreign, even to otherwise-experienced horse people. But there's also a level of intrigue—those of us who often have trouble managing to get one horse to do as we ask, even with all of the cues at a rider's disposal, are amazed at the feats a driver can coax from an entire team of horses.

In the show ring, classes generally fall into three categories: working (where the abilities of the horse are the primary focus); reinmanship (judged mostly on the skills of the driver); and turnout classes (where the quality and authenticity of the vehicle, harness, and dress are judged).



ISTOCKPHOTO / DEANNA WITZEL

A lady competitor in a manicured show ring drives a pony put to a two-wheeled cart.

Many breed shows, especially those for ponies, offer driving classes. Open shows are run under the rules of the American Driving Society, but breed show classes may differ, depending on the sanctioning breed association.

Combined Driving

Imagine what eventing would be like with a horse and carriage instead of a horse and rider, and you've got a good sense of what's involved in the sport of combined driving.

Just like eventing, combined driving has three phases, and although the execution can differ from the ridden sport (horses hitched to carriages can't jump!), the aim of each phase is similar.

The dressage is exactly like its ridden counterpart, except that it is conducted in a larger arena, and the driver is allowed to use his voice as an aid. Horses show only at the walk and trot but demonstrate extended and collected gaits at the more advanced levels. Judges look for obedience, impulsion, and willingness as well as accuracy of the movements. The driver and horse (or horses) are also judged on their turnout and appearance.

The second phase is what's known as the marathon—it's an endurance test made up of either three or five sections, depending on the level of competition, where the last section is essentially a cross-country course with "hazards" instead of jumps. The hazards look like mazes and are made of natural materials, such as logs and brush, and incorporate water crossings and changes in terrain. Each hazard has a series of gates the carriage must pass through in a certain order, and the idea is to navigate the hazard as quickly as possible.

The other sections of the marathon, which precede the hazards portion of the phase, require the horse and driver to cover a certain distance within an optimal time and at a specified gait. Veterinary checks are conducted to be sure that horses are fit to continue to the next phase.

The final phase is the cones, which replicates the show-jumping portion on an event. Instead of a course of jumps, drivers must navigate between pairs of cones with balls sitting atop them. Knocking off a ball (or knocking over a cone itself) is the equivalent of knocking down a rail in show jumping.

Combined driving is offered at several levels—training, preliminary, intermediate, and advanced—and each level offers divisions for horses and ponies as well as for teams (singles, pairs, or higher multiples).

The sport is quite exciting to watch, especially the marathon phase, where carriages pulled by up to four horses blast through the hazards at high speed, making it look easy!

Combined driving is an international sport, with world championships offered every other year, and is part of the World Equestrian Games. At the national level, the sport is overseen by the American Driving Society.

A Final Word

Each equestrian discipline has its challenges, its traditions, and its advocates. None is inherently better, from the horse's perspective, than another. Each has its model horsemen, and each has its abusive followers. Which one you choose is not anywhere near as important as finding the right one for you. Work with instructors and ride a variety of horses. Find one who shows potential—or has experience—in the discipline(s) you want to pursue so your combined talents are well matched. Then, when you do bring a horse into your life, you will have the best chance of making him your partner and companion for life.