

THE BASICS OF SHOWING YOUR FOXTROTTER

by Lee Yates

Suppose you want to show your Fox Trotter at one of the local horse shows, but don't even know where to begin. Remember, man is as much a creature of habit as the horse, and standing out in a crowd is not some thing most of us strive for. So you will need to find the guidelines for your breed, and follow them.

However, when it comes to the Fox Trotter, very little is written about what is acceptable. Most of the rules have come about by custom and repetition. So where do you begin and why? Most of what I am going to tell you is just what works for us, learned by trial and error (mostly error I think.) For the most part, nowhere is it written in stone. Check out the rule book, and then go on from there if you want to try something different.

GROOMING Your horse should be clean and neat. On the day of the show we bathe our horses early in the morning, as soon as it is warm enough. We braid their manes and tails while damp, which keeps them clean and out of the way. It also looks so nice when they are combed out. If you don't want to, it isn't required. We then tie them in their stalls until it's time to leave for the show. We usually try to do any clipping before bathing so that the loose hair is washed off.

When clipping, we trim the bridle path, using their folded back ear as a guide, starting at the tip and going forward to the poll. Some people take off more, others less, depending on their preference and the structure of the horse's neck.

The Fox Trotter is shown in a full mane and tail, the more the better in our book. However, many horses get what is sometimes called a "Missouri Hair Cut" in their forelock. This style has most of the forelock trimmed off, leaving only a hank of hair that is braided and pulled to the side for use in fastening the first ribbon. Since we prefer full forelocks, we usually braid the whole thing if it is not too full, or if it is too full we leave it loose and tucked under the brow-band and hook the ribbon to the top of the bridle.

We also do not trim all the hair from the inside of the ears, as is done with most full-time show horses. Our horses spend a lot of time at pasture and the bugs just drive them crazy if their ears are trimmed out. We simply trim all the long hairs off and leave the little fine hair inside. We do trim the muzzle, which is usually clipped very close or even shaved. This does away with the nose "feelers", but the horse soon learns to be careful about putting his head down if he doesn't his nose gets bumped.

All the long hair is trimmed from under the jaw and the fetlocks are clipped the same way. Just before we leave for

the show we black the feet. Sometimes we also use Show Sheen to put added gloss on the coat. But Be Careful! A saddle sometimes won't stay on with Show Sheen on the back! It's very embarrassing for you and your saddle to slide under the horse's belly during the class.

TACK Fox Trotters are shown in modified Western tack. By that I mean a Western saddle (except in speciality classes) to differentiate them from their Tennessee cousins, but the bridle is neither truly English or Western. It is more like some where in between. The bridle is a browband type, but usually modified with a colored browband and noseband cavasson. We usually match cavassons with blanket and ribbon color.

Bits are your own choice...whatever works best on your horse. The standard curb is most common, although you will see everything from an Argentine snaffle to 12-inch shank Walker bits. In spite of what you may have been told, a hackamore is legal. It just isn't seen very often.

Heavy silver ornamentation is usually not in evidence. Some silver is used on saddles, but it is seldom seen on bridles or show halters.

We have bought show halters with colored browbands and nose bands, but we have also made our own using a cavasson with an added browband and throat latch. We have also made our own ribbons, but considering the time and energy expended, we found it cheaper and easier to buy them ready-made from one of our Fox Trotter supply people. Ribbons come in all colors, and many of these suppliers will custom make them for you. We have found that many good local tack shops, even though not specializing in Fox Trotters, will be helpful in combing through their catalogs and special ordering for us.

One of the most frequently asked question is "Why the ribbons, and how do you put them on?" The ribbons are strictly decorative, and the rosette type has evolved over the years to simply differentiate the Fox Trotter from other breeds and to show that these are gaited horses.

To put them on, we use little alligator clips (available from any Radio Shack-type electronic store) tied on the ends of the ribbon. We take a 1/4-inch piece of mane and braid it, then slide the clip through the braiding at the tip next to the neck crest, and down underneath the braid about an inch and clip it to the hair. The ribbon can also be woven in and out of the braid to make it lie flatter.

We have also used plastic ties (bread wrapper ties come in all colors, and we save them) and pipe cleaners cut in half for

fastening the ribbons on. The shorter ribbon should be put on the mane. The longer ribbon is fastened through the top of the forelock after it is braided and then the forelock and ribbon are pulled to the side and tucked through and under the browband to hang at the jaw line. We usually fasten the ribbon down to the bridle at the junction of the browband with a tie or pipe cleaner.

Many people prefer to show trim (shave) off the under half of the forelock to make for less hair to braid and a neater braid when finished. Since we prefer full forelocks, we either braid the whole thing, or leave the forelock full and free, fastening the ribbon to the top of the bridle between the ears. After a few trial runs, you will develop your own style.

PEOPLE TACK I call it this, a little tongue in cheek, because one of the nice things about showing Fox Trotters is that it can be done with less expense than any other breed. But let's face it, showing of any kind can soon wear a hole in your pocket. However, unlike the saddle suits required for Tennessee Walkers and Saddlebreds, and the hats, chaps and Western attire required for Quarter Horses and Arabians, no special uniform is required for Fox Trotters. Again, evolution has played an important part, and no rules are written in stone.

It has become customary for men to wear a suit, tie and hat (no jeans) regardless of the weather and I know many who would give anything to shed their jackets and ties when it's over 100 F degrees. Occasionally, at smaller shows you will see no jackets, but, to us, a tie is a must. Your horse is looking its best, and so should you. Dress pants and shirt, (usually Western, but not required) along with a tie, just seems to be the mode of the day. The ladies can get by with more variety. Pant suits or dressy color-coordinated blouses and pants, usually Western, are what is usually seen. In the past few years, we have seen some stylish long skirts worn with boots, even in performance classes, that looked super. No hats for the ladies, thank goodness! I hate wearing hats of any kind.

Again, all this is just custom. If you want to be different, go ahead, so long as it is in good taste. We know that the fashion for Fox Trotter riders varies from area to area. If everyone is showing in jeans in your region, simply use your own judgement.

Of course, Costume and English Pleasure classes require a whole different attire. I would like our side saddle classes to go back to a more authentic costume. Riding habits were never covered with ribbons, bows and lace like we are seeing today. The original habits were most often in subdued colors, featuring slim and elegant designs with at most, a lace jabot at

the throat and decorative matching feathers on the hat. Yes, this is the only time a hat should be worn by women. Never in any Western class!

I would definitely like to see a few more English Pleasure and/or Hunter apparel classes in our shows. I know that a Fox Trotter is usually thought of as a Western Pleasure horse, but they look good in English tack as well. We also have many Fox Trotters doing very well as hunter/jumpers and endurance horses. Additional classes would liven up our shows.

We should also look into having more difficult trail classes. I wouldn't miss our Annual Celebration in Ava for the world, but after seven days of halter and standard performance classes, even the most dedicated of us have had enough.

We should also consider more equitation classes. I will venture to say that because they are so easy to ride, the Fox Trotter world probably has more poor-posture riders than any other breed association! Now I don't want to make anyone out there mad, but the truth is the truth, even when it hurts!

I have spent hour after hour on the back of a Quarter Horse, learning proper equitation. It makes me cringe, when everywhere I go, there are riders in the show ring doing exactly what I try not to do, and teach my students never to do.

It is nearly impossible to ride off your thighs on a Fox Trotter. The easy slide back and forth simply will not let you. Instead of using the thigh/seat combination, one must rely on the seat alone, and it can be done. The hardest thing is remembering not to use the reins as a method of balancing and hanging on. Reins are your steering wheel, not your life-line!

Perhaps I have discoursed long enough. I have not gone into any great detail in any portion of this article but merely skimmed the surface. I hope to have given you enough facts to serve as guidelines for learning the basic information and skills. I hope some of you find it helpful, but even if you don't, or disagree with me, it was still fun putting this together for you.

Happy Fox Trotting!

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