

A Missouri Fox WHAT?
by Bonnie Martin

I got my first Missouri Fox Trotter in 1994 when they were not very common in the South. When he was ready for training, I knew I needed some help because I had never worked with a gaited horse before. At the time, I was taking lessons with a trainer/instructor who uses a lot of dressage basics. I asked Sandi Forester if she would help me with my gelding. "A Missouri Fox WHAT?" was her response. Therein began her education about fox trotters and we worked through the training together. The dressage basics were wonderful in creating a soft, supple, yet easy-riding horse. As we progressed with our skills, we began doing breed demonstrations to get the well-kept secret of this breed out to the public.

Missouri Fox Trotters are a gaited breed that is known for the gait from which its name comes, the fox trot. The breed developed in the Ozark regions of Missouri and Arkansas as settlers migrating to the area brought in their best saddle stock. The horses were used for many purposes, often times going from pulling a plow during the day to carrying a young gent calling in the evening. They are surefooted and comfortable to ride and can keep up a good speed for long periods of time without getting tired. Cowboys moving herds from TX north were often found on horses doing this easy gait because they were a comfortable ride as well as athletic enough to work with the cattle.

The Missouri Fox Trotter Horse Breed Association began in 1948 and was open to register any horse who could demonstrate the fox trot gait. In 1983, the registry closed, and all horses accepted into the registry from that point on had to have both parents permanently registered in the Missouri Fox Trotting Horse Breed Association.

A fox trot is the only smooth gait that has a footfall pattern that involves diagonal pairs. All other smooth gaits that horses do, such as flatfoot walk, running walk, stepping pace, and so on, are lateral gaits with the legs on the same side of the body working pretty much in unison. The fox trot is basically a diagonal gait, but it differs from a regular trot because the diagonal pairs of legs do not hit at exactly the same time. The front foot hits slightly before the diagonal rear hoof. The split second difference makes the gait have four beats with a slight pause 1,2—3,4 instead of two beats like a regular trot has. The fox trot provides a smoother ride than a regular trot which has a time with all four feet off the ground. The fox trot keeps two and then three feet on the ground throughout which makes it a good gait for rough terrain.

The appearance of the fox trot is that the horse is walking with its front legs and trotting in the rear. The sound of the hoofbeats is often described with the chant: "Chunka meat and two potatoes, Chunka meat and two potatoes". The gait is not a high stepping one, but it is extremely surefooted. The head and tail of the horse are slightly elevated, giving the animal a graceful carriage, and the rhythmic beat of the hooves along with the nodding action of the head and tail, give the horse an appearance of relaxation and poise. Some horses naturally get so caught up in the rhythm of the gait that their ears move in time with it and some even let their lips or teeth pop with the beat.

In addition to the fox trot, fox trotters do a smooth ground-covering flat foot walk and a nice canter. Some have a multitude of other gaits built in that they might also offer, such as running walk, rack, or stepping pace—all comfortable gaits.

Approximately 90% of the registered fox trotters are owned by people who use them for pleasure trail riding, competitive or endurance riding, or as working horses on ranches, packing hunters, or in the forestry service. The fox trotter also has a place in the show ring where it is recognized for its beauty and style. It is not unusual to see the horses doing double duty and being enjoyed in more than one discipline.

These horses used to be a well kept secret outside of the Ozark Mountains, but have really become well known across the US in the last 10-15 years. There are even quite a few Missouri Fox Trotters in Germany these days. With the average age of the general population getting older, it's not surprising that this comfortable riding, good-natured breed has really caught on.