

Learning At the Midwest Horse Fair

IVY STARNES AND THE SOUL OF THE GAITED HORSE

If you've ever sat atop a trotting horse, you know the rhythm well: the rhythmic "one-two, one-two" that requires a rider to either post with the motion or sit deep and absorb the bounce. But for a specific community of riders, there is a different sound—a syncopated, four-beat melody that sounds more like "pucka-pucka-pucka-pucka." This is the sound of the "glide," the hallmark of the gaited horse.

For Ivy Starnes, the creator of "Ivy's Glide Gate," this sound isn't just a preference; it's a calling. Based in Fort Worth, Texas, Ivy has carved out a unique niche in the equestrian world. While many trainers focus on the high-stepping flash of the show ring, Ivy's mission is grounded in the dirt of the trail and the comfort of the long-distance rider.

"I want people to realize that gaited horses aren't just 'different,'" Ivy says. "They are remarkable athletes that deserve the same finesse and softness we afford any other discipline."

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE SMOOTHNESS

To understand Ivy's work, one must first understand what makes a gaited horse unique. While Quarter Horses, Thoroughbreds, and most ponies stick to the standard walk, trot, and canter, breeds like the Tennessee Walking Horse, Rocky Mountain Horse, and Icelandic Horse possess a biological "secret sauce."

"It's the DMRT3 gene," Ivy explains. "When a horse has two copies of this gene, it allows their spine to be more flexible. Instead of the diagonal, two-beat movement of the trot, they can perform a four-beat intermediate gait. When trained correctly, this movement is incredibly smooth, allowing the rider to sit perfectly still while the horse covers ground."

However, having the genetics doesn't always guarantee a smooth ride. This is where the "problem-solving" aspect of Ivy's career begins. Many owners find themselves with a horse bred to gait that is instead "pacey" (moving laterally like a camel) or "trotty."

THE GAIT SPECTRUM

Ivy describes the movement as a spectrum. On one end is the trot (diagonal). On the far other end is the pace (lateral).

- The trot: two-beat, diagonal legs move together.
- The pace: two-beat, legs on the same side move together.
- The saddle gait (the sweet spot): right in the middle is an evenly timed four-beat gait. This is the "glide" that eliminates the bounce for the rider.



FROM VOLUNTEER TO VISIONARY

Ivy's path into this specialized world was anything but linear. Unlike many professionals who grew up in the saddle, Ivy didn't start riding until she was 15. A year later, at a summer job changed everything.

"I asked some friends if they needed help, and they said they had some yearlings to train," Ivy recalls. "I didn't even know they bred Rocky Mountain and Kentucky Mountain horses at the time. I just knew I had horses to work with."

Those three summers were her crucible. She learned to "hear" the gait before she could even see it. Over the next two decades, she began blending the traditional gaited world with classical dressage techniques—focusing on lateral work, lift, and relaxation.

Eventually, she took her findings to the internet. Through YouTube and Facebook, she began posting slow-motion breakdowns of gaits, demystifying a world that had long been shrouded in old-school training secrets involving heavy bits and weighted shoes.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SOFTNESS

What sets Ivy apart is her gadget-free approach. In certain corners of the gaited horse world, trainers have historically used heavy contact, large bits, or mechanical shortcuts to force a horse into a gait. Ivy's philosophy is the exact opposite.

"I focus on three things: relaxation, strength, and the loose rein," she says. "If I'm going to ride for hours, I want my reins loose. I don't want to be fighting my horse for a smooth ride."

1. Relaxation First

A "high-headed" horse is often a stressed horse. Ivy teaches horses to carry their heads level and soften their polls. This doesn't just help the gait; it lowers the horse's overall anxiety.

"I've had clients tell me their horse stopped spooking after we worked on gaiting," Ivy notes. "It's because we brought their baseline stress level down through softness."

2. Strength and Conditioning

Gaiting is a physical workout. Ivy uses dressage-inspired exercises to help the horse lift his back and carry the rider's weight more effectively. Without the proper muscle memory, a horse will "default" back to a bumpy trot or a jarring pace when he gets tired.

3. The Goal of the Loose Rein

The ultimate test of Ivy's training is whether the horse can maintain a perfect, four-beat gait without the rider pulling on his mouth. By building neural pathways through praise and "soaking time" (letting the horse stand and think after a successful movement), the horse eventually learns to offer the gait as his preferred way of moving.

THE "SILVER RIDER" REVOLUTION

The demographic that gravitates toward Ivy's work is a specific and passionate one: women over age 50.

"Many of my clients are retired or close to it," Ivy says. "They've ridden walk-trot horses their whole lives, but their bodies are starting to say 'no more' to the bouncing. They want to stay in the horse world, they love trail riding, and they want to be able to ride 17 miles in a weekend without being sore on Monday."

The appeal isn't just the comfort; it's the temperament. Gaited breeds are often known for being personable, calm, and "people-oriented." For a rider who wants a partner for leisurely forest meanders or competitive endurance rides, the combination of a smooth "glide" and a steady mind is irresistible.

Ivy shares a personal anecdote to illustrate the difference: "I recently rode 34 miles over a weekend on a gaited horse and felt great. Then I rode a Quarter Horse for just two hours the following week, and I was sore! You really can't go back once you've experienced the glide."

EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

While Ivy takes horses in for training at her home base in Fort Worth, she is a firm believer in making knowledge accessible. Her husband helps her capture high-quality, slow-motion footage for her classroom sessions—a tool she considers vital for training the human eye.

"In a demo, I might only get a horse to gait for five steps," she admits. "But in a classroom, I can slow that footage down

and show exactly where the footfall is. I can explain the 'why' behind the 'how.'"

In addition to traditional clinics and expos, Ivy has embraced the "virtual" frontier. She now offers lessons via Zoom, where a rider in another state—or another country—can set up a tripod and receive real-time coaching through Bluetooth earbuds.

"I just did a lesson with a woman in Spain," she says. "The technology allows us to share this niche knowledge with people who otherwise would be stuck with a 'bumpy' horse and no local help."

DREAM COME TRUE: THE MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

For Ivy, the presenting at the Midwest Horse Fair is more than just another professional engagement; it's a full-circle moment.

"I've been going to the Midwest Horse Fair since I was 16," she says, her voice filling with emotion. "The first time I went, it was to volunteer for John Lyons. I watched how he treated every person who came to his booth—whether they were buying a saddle or just asking a simple question—as if they were the most important person there."

That experience with Lyons shaped Ivy's business model. She vowed to produce free content and help riders of all levels, regardless of their budgets or the "quality" of their horses. She saw another popular clinician at the time who only spoke to the "wealthy-looking" riders, and it left a sour taste in her mouth.

"I wanted to be like John. I want people to feel valuable," she explains. "I moved to Texas five years ago, but I've wanted to teach at the Midwest Horse Fair for forever. It's a dream come true."

CONCLUSION: THE GIFT OF THE GAIT

At the end of the day, Ivy Starnes isn't just training horses; she's preserving the relationship between the horse and the rider. When a horse learns to gait properly, it isn't just the rider who benefits.

"I think the horses love it," Ivy concludes. "When they find that balance, they stop being bounced on. They feel the rider's praise. They become more confident. It's a win-win for everyone involved."

Whether you're a seasoned gaited horse enthusiast or a "trot-person" curious about the other side of the spectrum, Ivy's work serves as a reminder that in the world of horsemanship, there's always a smoother path forward if you're willing to listen for the rhythm.

ABOUT MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

Since 1979, with a goal to serve as America's premier destination for the equine community, the Midwest Horse Fair strives to provide the ultimate experience for equine enthusiasts and the public through exposition, education, and entertainment. As the largest three-day horse fair in the U.S., it caters to both Western and English riders. The Midwest Horse Fair is owned by the Wisconsin Horse Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes the equine industry in the state of Wisconsin. Net proceeds from the fair benefit the Wisconsin Horse Council for grants and scholarships, trail improvements, leadership programs, and communication to help future growth and development of the equine industry. The 2027 fair is scheduled to take place April 16-18 at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison, Wisconsin. For more information, visit MidwestHorseFair.com.

