

Sporthorse Type

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The most common question I have been asked from Curly breeders is this:

"Is my Curly a Sporthorse TYPE?"

That is the million dollar question that seems to be on so many minds these days. First, I hesitate to say that there IS a single type, per se. At least, I would argue that there are no hard and fast rules about a single type. On the contrary, there are several different sporthorse types, many with different talents and suitable for different sports to varying degrees.

Sporthorse types:

- ◆Baroque
- ◆Warmblood
- ◆Thoroughbred

Baroque type

This type of horse tends to be of a more compact build than the other types I will discuss here. Examples of this type are Andalusian and Lippizan horses. These breeds were bred specifically for dressage high school / collected movements. This is not to imply that these horses cannot do other movements well, but their 'specialty' tends to be in collection and airs above the ground. These horses tend to be the choice for some classical dressage enthusiasts who are more interested in the process of training a horse in classical dressage rather than competing in dressage shows. Horses of this type often do not have as much scope needed for showing, such as the ability to extend their stride in all gaits.

However, I am NOT saying that breeds such as Andalusians cannot be competitive in the sporthorse world because they can be. My point is simply that the baroque breeds were bred to specialize in the collected & high school movements.

As a caveat to my remark about scope, dressage movements can be divided into 3 categories: collection, extension, and lateral movements. It is common for a horse to show strong talent in only two out of three of those categories. A horse that is truly excellent in all three areas is the exception and not the rule. The reason is that there are some variations in conformation that makes a horse good at one area and less talented in another. To say that a Baroque type of horse tends to be less talented in extensions is a generalization, of course, but the counterpoint is that a Thoroughbred type (which is at the opposite end of the spectrum in "type") tends to be better at extensions and lateral work and often weak in it's ability to collect its gaits.

Baroque Movement:

The Baroque horse tends to have a shorter stride than the other types discussed here. This type of horse tends to have more joint articulation so that a baroque horse's movement will tend to be more up and down when moving naturally rather than a longer, ground covering stride such as seen in the Thoroughbred type of movement. This movement tends to be more predisposed to collection naturally.

Warmblood type

This type probably has the most range of all of the types due to cross breeding and focus on specific events within bloodlines. The Warmblood was bred to excel as a competitive sporthorse, in a fairly broad range of events, so in general, Warmbloods tend to be positioned between the other types in the sporthorse type spectrum listed here.

BaroqueWarmblood.....Thoroughbred
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Going back in time, the Warmblood breeds tended to be substantial, lots of bone, fairly tall, many over 16 hands. The need for more speed and agility in Warmbloods for sporthorse events caused an influx of Thoroughbred cross breeding. This has been particularly prevalent in the United States, however, when Americans first began to breed Warmbloods, the reasons were because Thoroughbred mares were easy to find and cheap to buy. Good Warmblood mares were rare in the US at that time. Typically, European breeders kept the best warmblood mares and stallions for their own sporthorse development programs, they were not sold to the US. Therefore, the breeding stock US breeders started with in order to simulate the European breeders was, in general, not the best of the best.

The Europeans did cross in some Thoroughbreds, but in a very careful and calculating manner. For example, [Ladykiller](#) was a European Thoroughbred that had tremendous influence on the Holsteiner and to a slightly lesser extent Dutch & Danish Warmbloods. He brought some refinement and tremendous scope to his offspring, particularly those bred for jumping and eventing. The use of the Thoroughbred in European Warmblood lines was a calculated move, with the desire to add some speed, scope and refinement to the heavier, more traditional Warmbloods.

In recent years, the Warmblood has become lighter in build, and you may hear some referred to as 'modern sporthorse types', which refers to the lighter, more refined and elegant sporthorse. However, there are trade offs in everything and

although these horses may be very appealing to the eye, and faster on a jumping course, there are consequences faced by many warmblood breeders in their pursuit of a lighter, more elegant horse. One of those tradeoffs is disposition and the other is soundness. Some of the lighter built horses, with lighter bone tend to be subject to lameness issues more easily than those with more heavier bone. Also, most of these horses have been produced by crossing Thoroughbreds into the Warmblood lines and breeders must take care that 'heat' that can be an asset on the racetrack is not proliferated in a Sporthorse development program. Temperament and willingness to learn and work are tremendously important for sporthorses. Difficult temperaments that can be overlooked on the track do not tend to produce ideal horses for other venues. The same caution could be noted for Curly breeders as well.

Warmblood movement:

There is as much variation in movement in Warmbloods as there are body types. Warmbloods bloodlines tend to be bred for specific events so that many lines are known for producing talented jumpers or dressage horses, but often, not both. Movement as related to specific events are covered later in this article.

Thoroughbred type

It seems that this type becomes harder and harder to distinguish from Warmbloods as the years go by due to the high influx of cross breeding Thoroughbreds with Warmbloods. However, in general, Thoroughbreds tend to be lighter in build (lighter bone and body depth) than the average Warmblood. There are some conformation generalizations that can be made as well. Thoroughbreds were bred primarily to run on the track, and horses gallop on their forehand. Consequently, they are often not built to elevate their forehand as needed in collection. Some lines have very low set necks which is problematic for collection and for jumping larger fences. There are also temperament considerations, as were discussed earlier, the hotter, more explosive temperament may be acceptable (or overlooked) on the track but not very functional in a sporthorse.

Thoroughbred movement:

Thoroughbreds are built to run and the canter is their most efficient and important gait. Lots of suspension in their gaits is not particularly useful in the racing world, but a long, ground covering stride is critical on the track. This is true simply for economic reasons: the longer the stride, the fewer strides it will take to go from one point to another. This is excellent for event horses that need to cover a cross country course under a predefined time. However, it can be less ideal for a jumper going against the clock on a course with tight turns. For jumpers, extreme ability in the air is critical preferably with a moderate length of stride that is easy to adjust (shorten & lengthen) is desirable.

Movement Related to Specific Events:

◆ Jumpers (I'm referring to the event here, not the act of jumping) tend to have less suspension in their stride than dressage horses, they need to be able to shorten and lengthen their stride to adjust easily on course to meet the next fence appropriately. The quality of their gaits are less important than for hunters, event horses or dressage horses because the goal of jumper classes is to jump clean, style and movement are not such a consideration. But the majority of Jumpers 'work' is done at the canter, so an excellent canter with lots of reach under the body with good push is required. Most jumper courses are flat, jumps are high but easy to knock down.

◆ Dressage horses are at the opposite end of the spectrum from Open Jumpers. These horses tend to have the most suspension and although they also need the ability to shorten and lengthen their stride, they don't need to be catlike as a jumper. Dressage horses need three good gaits preferably with some suspension and expression. By good, I mean correct, 4 beat walk, 2 beat trot, 3 beat canter. Some corruption in gaits can be tolerated in Jumpers because their gaits are not evaluated on course. In a dressage horse, gaits are part of the final score, so they need to be correct.

◆ Event horses tend to be somewhat in between Open Jumpers and Dressage horses. They compete in a dressage phase so that movement is a factor in the dressage score. But they also need to be able to run and jump, cover a great deal of ground and adjust on course. They need some added agility and bravery above and beyond an Open Jumper because they face solid obstacles and they must jump up or down hill, into and out of water, over obstacles in a broad range of shapes and sizes.

◆ Hunters do not face the height of jumps that Jumpers or Event horses often must jump (depending upon the level of the event horse, this may not be true) and style is of utmost importance, both in movement and in jumping style. The courses are not generally very trappy and the horses are not asked to jump at high speeds or turn quickly to get to the next fence. These are the stylists of the sporthorse world and are evaluated accordingly. Elegance is of utmost importance in form and movement.

◆ Driving horses are traditionally those with more action because that has been the fashion for driving horses for centuries. However, with the growing popularity of Combined Driving, the movement of these horses has become more middle of the road, similar to Event Horses. They need to be agile, but not with the catlike ability of a jumper because they are negotiating a course with a cart behind them, restricting their ability to turn on a dime. Quality of movement is important in the

dressage phase, but in subsequent phases of competition, other factors become more critical, such as speed, agility & responsiveness.

Type Revisited:

So, what is the answer to the question concerning type? The real answer is two fold:

1. There is no single sporthorse type
2. Beauty is as beauty does

Horses of many breeds and types manage to land successful careers with sporthorse riders. However, of the different sporthorse types, some are more suitable for specific sporthorse careers than others, depending upon the event and the horse's individual talents AND the competitive desires of the rider. For example, any horse with three adequate gaits (soft gaits are excluded from this) should be able to handle lower level dressage, eventing or hunters at schooling shows. The higher levels of all sports have stricter requirements and demand more ability on the part of the horse..

But the real proof is in performance. When a foal is sold as a 'sporthorse type' this is based primarily on movement, conformation, and athletic potential, not based strictly on "type".

Beyond movement and athletic ability, the factor that cannot really be put to the test in a young horse is the horse's ability to develop a work ethic and the heart to give a tough sport his best effort. This is something that a rider won't know until the horse is under saddle and is asked to respond to some degree of pressure. Yes, as a breeder, you can evaluate a young horse's personality and disposition, but it is very hard for a buyer to know how a horse will react when the heat is on.

Consequently, most riders prefer to buy a sporthorse prospect when it is old enough to have been started under saddle. The reason is simple, if a serious competitor buys a weanling, then by the time the foal is old enough for the rider to truly discover it's strengths and weaknesses as a riding horse, he/she will have put years into the care and feeding of the young horse, not to mention the emotional attachment that may have developed. Making a choice after years of raising a foal that it will not be a good fit is painful and something most riders want to avoid, if possible.

There are other considerations as well, for one, conformation is easier to evaluate when a horse is mature. Particularly if a potential buyer is looking at a

horse during one of its more gawky stages. Second, sometimes movement changes over time (ideally this is not so) or bones may develop at different rates so that what you see may not be what you get when evaluating a foal.

So, is your foal a sporthorse type? If you are asking that question, odds are it fits one of the types listed here. But can it be a successful sporthorse? Only time will tell.