

## **A Few Frequently Asked Questions about Horses**, copyright 2002 [Julia Ross](#)

Horses are important in several of my novels, especially in [My Dark Prince](#), and other writers often ask me for help with horse-related questions. ( To find out how I learned about horses, see my personal letter about my own [horses](#) )

In July 1998 I gave a workshop called "The Horse in Romance" at the RWA National Conference in Anaheim, California (the year I won my RITA), when I was writing as Jean Ross Ewing. Here's some of the information from that workshop, updated a little:

[Top Ten Pet Peeves](#)

[How Far and How Fast](#)

[Colors](#)

[Other Terminology](#)

### **Top Ten Pet Peeves, or Horse-Related Mistakes to Avoid in your Romance—as collected from Horse-wise Romance Authors:**

- 10) The mare that takes all night to foal while the breathlessly watching hero and heroine sort out their conflict. (Nature ensures that healthy mares foal fast. As prey animals, they must be up and running quickly! A long time in labor spells serious trouble for any mare. You'd be getting the vet, not sorting out your relationship!)
- 9) Talking horses—horses who neigh and scream on a regular basis. (Alas, horses are generally rather silent beasts, though they will whinny if parted from their fellows, or nicker softly in greeting at feeding time. Movies often add horse calls as sound effects in the most unlikely situations.)
- 8) Forgetting horses are animals. Horses that don't seem to need food, water, shoes, or grooming. (Horses are relatively fragile beasts. Without proper care, they don't stay serviceable very long.)
- 7) The rider who kicks and hauls, flaps elbows or reins, and gets involved in gyrations with knees or heels. (Good riders are relaxed in the saddle and signal their horses with subtle aids. A well-bred, trained horse never needs to be kicked. An expert never jerks at the reins.)
- 6) The self-conscious or uncomfortable, yet expert rider. The lady in a sidesaddle who frets over her insecurity. (Good horsemen take a secure seat and ready communication with their mounts for granted, whatever the tack or riding style of the day. Good riders ride principally on balance. They don't need to 'hang on' and they don't generally think much about what they're doing, only where they're going, except while training.)
- 5) The stallion! (While expert riders can and do ride them, stallions often have more natural aggression and may be thinking of only one thing. Therefore, they aren't the usual mount of choice these days, especially when the stallion must be used around other horses. However, according to equine veterinarian Dr. Green at RWA National, 2005, saddle horses weren't regularly gelded until the 20th Century, so many real heroes in history did indeed ride stallions, though plenty of evidence exists that they also rode mares and geldings.)
- 4) Mixing up Western and English terms and styles. (Each has its own vocabulary, especially for tack and horse terms, yet though the riding styles can be quite different, a good horseman can switch easily.)
- 3) Horses trained and/or controlled by either 'mastery' or 'magic' ignoring the real behavior of horses. The vicious stallion who can only be controlled by the hero's brute strength, or the soft, mystical touch of the heroine. (Horses respond to sympathetic, but practical, training and handling based on a sound understanding of their natural instincts. Neither brute force nor wishful thinking will go very far.)
- 2) The 'superhorse': Ignoring how far and fast horses can really go.

1) Misusing the specialized and precise vocabulary of horsemanship, especially the size, color, age and sex of the horse, thereby producing some very strange animals!

### How far, how fast, how long—

Since horses are flesh and blood creatures, the faster a horse goes, the shorter the distance he can maintain that speed without harm. A rough rule of thumb is that a horse can walk at about 5 mph, trot at 8-10 mph, and canter at 15 mph. However, if the ride involves difficult terrain, jumping, or carrying extra weight, both speed and endurance will suffer. Here are some examples of extreme performance:

- 1886: Frank Hopkins, a military dispatch rider, claimed that he rode a stallion named Joe 1800 miles from Galveston, Texas, to Rutland, Vermont, in 31 days (average 58 miles/day). Joe finished in excellent condition, after traveling no more than 10 hours/day. Readers have questioned his report, however, since apparently there's not much contemporary evidence to confirm it!
- 1892: Prussian and Austro-Hungarian soldiers raced from Berlin to Vienna. The winner rode 350 miles in 72 hours. The horse died, as did 25 others out of 199 who started.
- 1920: The first U.S. Cavalry Mounted Service Cup race averaged 60 miles/day for five days, carrying up to 245 lb. of rider and gear.
- 1988, extreme terrain, regular Western saddle: a livery-stable owner rode 100 miles through the San Juan Mountains in Western Colorado, crossing several 12,000+ ft. passes, in 17 hours, 20 minutes.
- Modern Endurance Rides: take 11-15 hours to cover 100 miles (but the rider usually spends part of the ride running beside his/her mount).
- 1860's: The Pony Express averaged nine mph over 25 mile stages.
- Today, in the Middle East, it's claimed that 26 mile marathons are won in just over an hour.
- 1808: The Marquis of Huntley rode from Aberdeen, Scotland, to Inverness (105 miles) in seven hours on eight relays of horses, according to the local newspaper. (So each horse averaged 15 mph for about 13 miles.)
- 1880's, England: *The Book of the Horse* describes a good hunter as a horse which can "after a hard day which ends at dark, ten or fifteen miles from home . . . walk and shog (sic) for ten or twelve miles at about five mph."
- One horse and rider, during the Cross-Country day of the modern Three-Day Event, might achieve something like this: Two miles of 'roads and tracks' at 10 mph (brisk trot and canter); 2.5 mile steeplechase over 10 jumps at almost 26 mph (full gallop); 10 more miles of roads and tracks at 9 mph; 10 minute rest (with vet check); 4.5-5 miles over 30 or more large and challenging fixed obstacles in natural rolling terrain at about 21 mph (gallop); and be fit enough to show-jump the next day. In other words, around 20 miles in less than two hours, with major jumping efforts involved.
- Some records from modern Thoroughbred Racing:

Distance	Horse	Date	Track	Time	mph
2 miles	Kelso	10/31/64	Aqueduct NY	3:19.2	36.14
1 1/2 miles	Secretariat	6/9/73	Belmont NY	2:24	37.5
1 1/4 miles	Spectacular Bid	2/3/80	Santa Anita CA	1:57.8	38.20
1 mile	Dr. Fager	8/24/68	Arlington Park IL	1:32.2	39.05

6 furlongs	Petro Jay	5/9/82	Turf Paradise AZ	1:07.2	40.18
------------	-----------	--------	------------------	--------	-------

### **And that Rainbow of Colors— Here are the most common ones:**

There's plenty of confusion possible here, since not all experts agree—especially in the West—and some conventions have changed over time. In general, Englishmen use fewer and simpler terms than Western horsemen, partly because English breeding has tended to select for fewer colors. I've listed the English use first, then the Western, if it's different. Essentially, two colors are taken into consideration when describing horses. The main body color and the 'points.' The points in this context are the ear tips, the mane and tail, and the lower part of the legs. (White socks, stockings, blazes, etc. don't change the basic color description.)

Black body, black points: A **BLACK** horse—may be smoky black, jet black, coal black, raven black.

Brown body, brown points: A **BROWN** horse—may be seal brown, or standard brown.

Red-brown body, black points: A **BAY** horse—may be dark bay, mahogany bay, red bay (cherry bay), blood bay, light bay, sandy bay—but every bay horse always has black points, by definition!

Reddish body, self-colored (non-black) points: A **CHESTNUT/SORREL** horse. In England, and when referring to Thoroughbreds or Arabians, always use 'chestnut'—includes liver chestnut, dark chestnut, etc. In the West, 'sorrel' is used for light reds; medium or dark reds may be called 'chestnut.' However, some Western horsemen use 'sorrel' to describe all red horses of whatever shade. Light sorrel draft horses with white manes and tails are known as 'blond.'

Yellowish body, (generally) black points: In England: A **DUN** horse—may be 'mouse dun' or 'blue dun.' In the West, **DUN** is usually a yellowish horse with black points. A **DUN** may also have 'primitive marks' (a black dorsal stripe, and/or zebra stripes on the legs). **BUCKSKIN** is various shades of tan with black points—though sometimes **DUN** and **BUCKSKIN** are used interchangeably. **GRULLO** is slate-blue with black points. **CLAYBANK** is a pale dun color without black points. **RED DUN** is often used for a reddish yellow horse with red points and primitive marks.

Dark-skinned, born dark and turning whiter each year: A **GRAY** horse: may be born black or bay, but each year shows more white—iron grey, steel grey, dappled grey, etc. A 'rose grey' was born chestnut or bay.

Mixed colored and white hairs, staying the same every year after one year old: A **ROAN** horse. Blue roan: black and white hairs. Red roan and strawberry roan: red and white hairs. However, Thoroughbreds born chestnut may be called 'red roan' even when truly gray (getting progressively whiter each year).

Large irregular solid patches of black and white: A **PIEBALD** in England.

Large irregular solid patches of any other color and white: A **SKEWBALD** in England.

In the West, these horses are **PAINT** or **PINTO**, described by how the white patches are patterned as either Tobiano (white patches have sharp edges and cross the top-line, legs usually white), or Overo (white patches have ragged edges and rarely extend over the top-line). Historically the words "paint" and "pinto" were interchangeable, but the modern Paint and Pinto Associations have their own specific requirements.

Golden coat, white mane and tail: **PALOMINO** (unusual in England). If the coat is cream-colored rather than gold, the palomino becomes an **ISABELLA**—a term often used in Europe for all palominos.

Pure white horses with pink skin are **WHITE**. With blue eyes they were once called **ALBINO**, but this term is no longer considered correct for horses. In the American West, white and off-white horses with blue eyes are **CREMELLO** or (with slightly red or blue points) **PERLINO**.

Anything else: **ODD-COLORED**: at least, in England! In the West, especially the old West, the gradations were so exact a

cowboy might ride a 'smutty olive grullo.' ('Smutty' or 'sooty' usually means an admixture of black hairs into any color.) The West also produced APPALOOSA horses, with spots—may be 'leopard,' 'flecked,' 'snowflake,' or in a 'blanket.' Spotted horses of various breeds were also known in Europe.

### **All those Other Strange Terms:**

Horsemanship uses a specialized, precise vocabulary. Unfortunately, exact meanings may vary depending on time and locale, and whether it's a Western or English context. Here's a guide to a few common words:

**Mare:** a female horse.

**Stallion:** a male horse that is not castrated. Also called 'entire' and, in the West, a 'stud' horse. (The English never call a stallion a 'stud,' since 'stud' is what they call the farm or stable that keeps horses for breeding.)

**Gelding:** A castrated male horse.

**Foal:** a young horse from birth to January 1 the next year. The female is a 'filly foal,' the male a 'colt foal.' In the Western USA, all foals may sometimes be called 'colts,' in which case the female is a 'filly colt' and the male a 'horse colt.'

**Filly:** a young female horse, up to 3 years old.

**Colt:** a young male horse, up to 3 years old.

**Yearling:** in the year after the birth year. (Incidentally, a yearling is too young to ride. Most saddle horses aren't worked hard until they're at least four years old, though breaking and training may start earlier.)

**Height:** horses are measured from the ground to the top of the withers in 'hands.' One hand is four inches. The average horse is 15 to 16 hands. 17 hands is very tall and only unusual specimens reach 18 hands. Some horses, especially in the West, are smaller. Ponies are usually less than 14 hands, two inches, though the words 'horse' and 'pony' can be used in variable ways in different contexts. (Withers?— Look in any good dictionary for a diagram of correct terms for horse body parts.)

**Gaits ('Paces' in England):** walk, trot, canter, gallop—also pacing, ambling, running walk—describe precise and different ways in which a horse moves its legs.

These days 'Thoroughbred' is a distinct breed (first studbook published: 1791), not a generic term for 'purebred.' Many breeds are quite modern, so shouldn't be used in a historic context. Check first!

### **A Few Classic References:**

**English:** *The Manual of Horsemanship*. The British Horse Society. London: Threshold Books, Ltd.

**Western:** *Breaking and Training the Stock Horse*. Charles O. Williamson. Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1980

**Packing:** *Horses, Hitches and Rocky Trails*. Joe Back. Boulder: Johnson Publishing Co., 1959

**General:** *Horsewatching*. Desmond Morris. New York: Crown Publishers, 1988. ISBN 0-517-57267-2

**Endurance:** *America's Long Distance Challenge*. Karen Paulo. NY: Dutton, 1990. ISBN 0-525-24845-5

Understanding horses: Anything by trainer John Lyons

Historical reproduction (1880s): *The Book of the Horse*. Samuel Sidney. NY: Crown Publishers, 1985

Everything: *Encyclopedia of the Horse*. Elwyn Hartley Edwards, Ed. NY: Crescent Books, 1993

**Winner of six writing awards to date, Julia Ross is the author of fourteen romances and two novellas.**

---

[Home](#)

---