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## **The Standardbred – From Racehorse to Riding Horse**

*By Lisa Foster, Standardbred Showcase*

The Standardbred is an often overlooked option for those looking to purchase a horse. There are many myths about the breed, but those who own one know what special animals they are.

### **Why consider a Standardbred?**

Standardbreds are good natured and willing horses. They have a lot of heart and will give their best for their rider. When coming off the track, they have already been exposed to a myriad of experiences, such as grooming, bathing, boots, bandages, blankets, many different types of therapies and treatments, vets and farriers. Because of this exposure, they tend to be brave and confident. In addition, they have worn a harness, which makes teaching them to adapt to a saddle easier, and they already know how to steer and stop. Some have already even been broke to ride.

### **Myths about the breed**

Many believe that the Standardbred cannot canter. However, if you watch one at liberty, he will most definitely canter and gallop. Pacers can usually be taught to trot and often do when left to their own devices in the field. At the track, pacers and trotters are taught not to break stride, but with patience and consistency, they can be trained to trot and canter, or jog and lope.

Some people also think of Standardbreds as ugly horses with heads that are too big for their bodies. Take the opportunity to look at a lot of Standardbreds and you will see that this is a stereotype. Most are beautiful and share many of the same physical characteristics as popular riding breeds.

### **What disciplines are Standardbreds suitable for?**

They truly are a versatile breed. Often they are found in riding schools and trail riding establishments because of their calm demeanour. They make terrific trail horses and their long stride also makes them an ideal candidate for competitive trail and endurance.

However, it doesn't end there! With the advent of the Ontario Standardbred Show Series, these horses now have a venue to show off their versatility in a range of classes, including Dressage, Jumping, English and Western Pleasure, Games, Mounted Obstacle and Pleasure Driving. Those with horses that are not broke to ride can participate in halter, showmanship and costume classes. Some riders take their horses beyond the breed show ring and compete successfully in open shows in Dressage, Eventing, Hunter/Jumper, Western Pleasure, Gaming and Driving.

### **Making the transition to a saddle**

Patience and consistency is key when training any horse and the Standardbred is no exception. If he has raced, he has been taught to trot or pace and not to break stride into a canter. He can stop and steer, but he will not



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understand leg aids and usually has no concept of bending. On the track, he has worked primarily in straight lines, usually with an overcheck to help him maintain his gait.

As a riding horse, he will need to learn to lower his head and raise his back. But this can all be taught. Working on the lunge line with side reins can be beneficial in teaching balance and the beginnings of bending before adding the weight of a rider. Working over trotting poles on the lunge line and under saddle can help him develop rhythm and help the pacer be more consistent in the trot.

Be aware that he is now using his body in a completely different way to what he is used to. Observe him carefully for soreness, and proceed with his training slowly.

*This article was prepared by Lisa Foster, vice-president and media/marketing co-ordinator for Standardbred Showcase, a not-for-profit corporation devoted to the promotion of Standardbreds in non-racing disciplines. For more information, visit [www.standardbredshowcase.com](http://www.standardbredshowcase.com)*