

CHAPTER 4: CONFORMATION AND JUDGING OF HORSES



A horse that has good conformation is well balanced, muscled and structurally correct. Understanding conformation is necessary when selecting, caring for and using a horse. The *4-H Horse Judging Guide* contains information on conformation and formal judging. Remember, you evaluate your horse every time you study some part of it for grooming, feeding, shoeing, doctoring or training. If you watch for lameness, you are judging its gait. A lame horse will favor a leg or limp as it moves. To use and care for your horse properly, you must understand conformation, soundness, health and terminology. You also will apply this information to formal showing judging. Judging is an attempt to identify the horse that most closely resembles what is considered the industry ideal. When evaluating conformation, there are four major considerations:

- **Balance and quality**

Quality refers to a horse that *most* fits to the ideal of a specific breed. Quality also refers to a horse that has a clean, well-defined flatbone, clean joints and tendons, fine hair, and is refined through the head and ears. The horse that appears symmetrical with all parts blending together nicely is referred to as a balanced horse. Imagine a horse in the center of a teeter totter: the *board* should stay level, equally heavy in the front half as in the back half.

- **Muscling**

A horse should be well-muscled. Its chest should be fairly wide, deep and full. The forearm and gaskin should be well-muscled, and it should have deep shoulders and a short, strong, muscular back. The croup should be long, level and well-muscled and the rear quarters should be deep and heavily muscled.

- **Structural correctness**

See Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

- **Breed and sex characteristics**

The horse should look like the breed represented, possessing the characteristic breed standards. Mares should be feminine in appearance; stallions should be masculine in physical development. The gelding should display some masculine characteristics with refinement.

When judging a class of four halter horses, consider these characteristics and use a score chart as an aid to rank individual horses. Rank each characteristic first through fourth. Total the numbers for each horse; the horse with the lowest total score is first.

Example score chart

1	1st	2nd	1 st	1st	5 pts.
2	2nd	1st	2 nd	2nd	7 pts.
3	3rd	4th	3 rd	3rd	13 pts.
4	4th	3rd	4 th	4th	15 pts.

James C. Heird, *Colorado State University Equine Sciences Horse Judging Manual*, 1992.

Final placement of these horses would be 1-2-3-4.



Parts of a horse

The parts of a horse are shown in figure 5 below. Learn and use the correct terms for parts of the horse. Figures 6-15 show more detail.

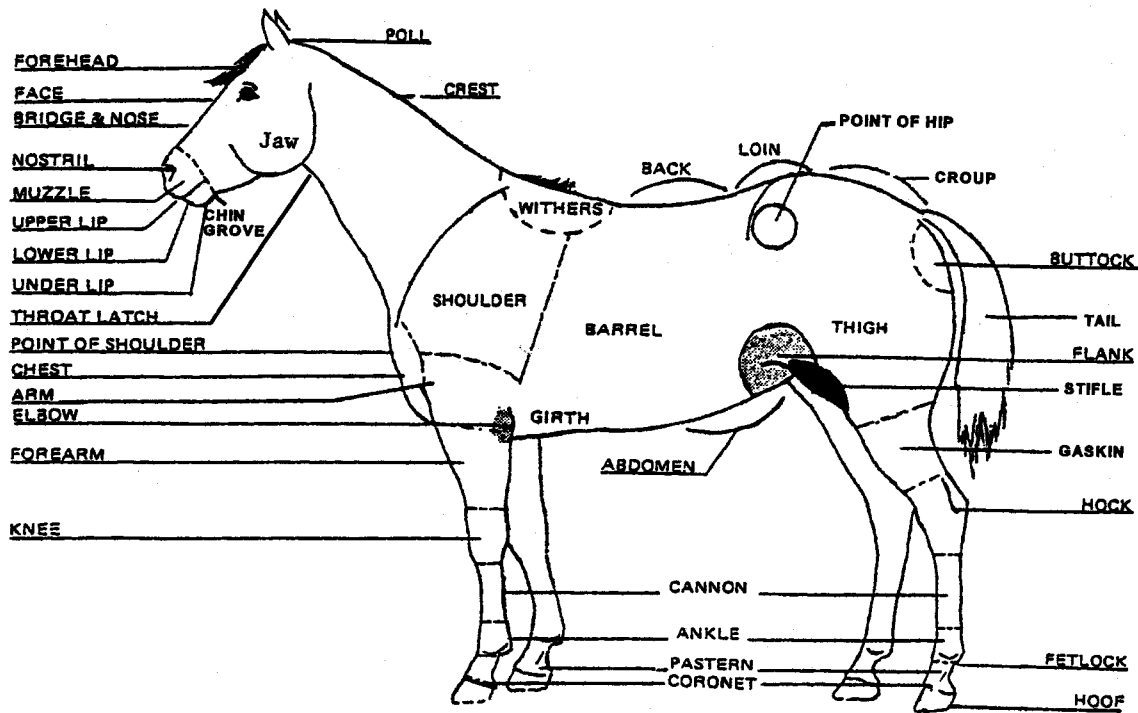


Figure 5. Parts of the horse.

Parts of the Hoof

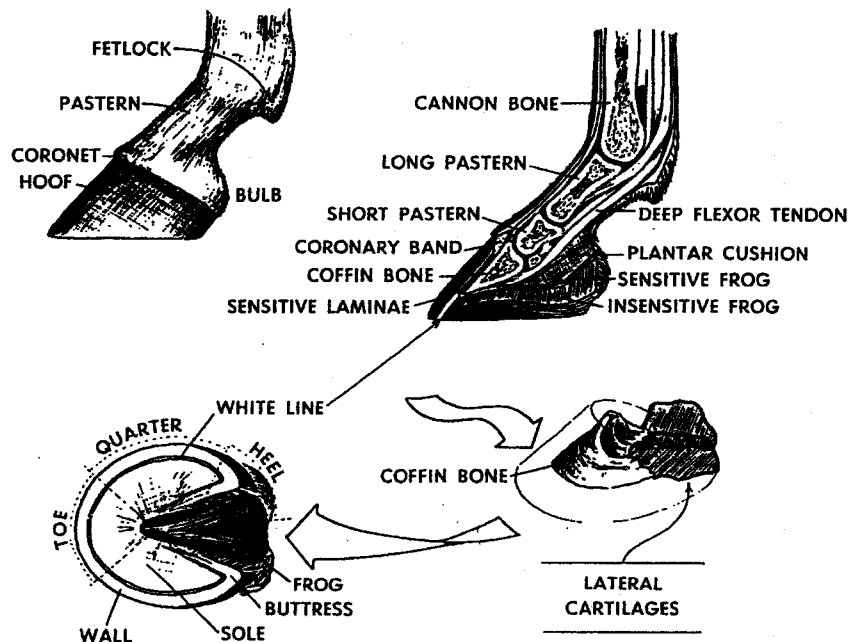


Figure 6. Parts of the hoof.



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Feet and legs

Study the following illustration of correct and incorrect leg positions commonly seen in horses. Imagine these lines as you study live horses to help you determine if the feet and legs are correct.

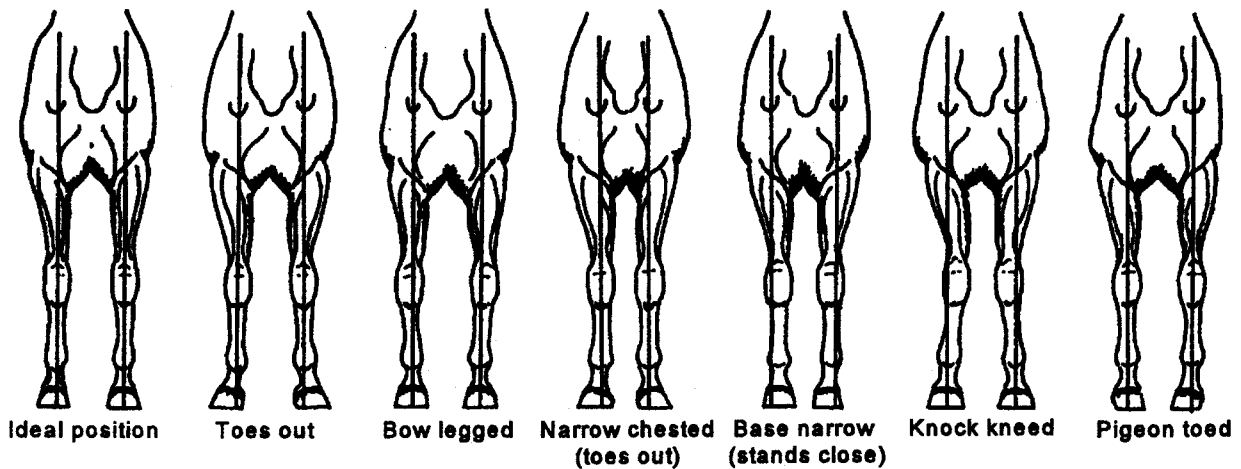


Figure 7. A view from the front. A vertical line from the point of the shoulder should fall in the centers of the knee, cannon, pastern and foot. It divides the entire leg and foot into equal halves.

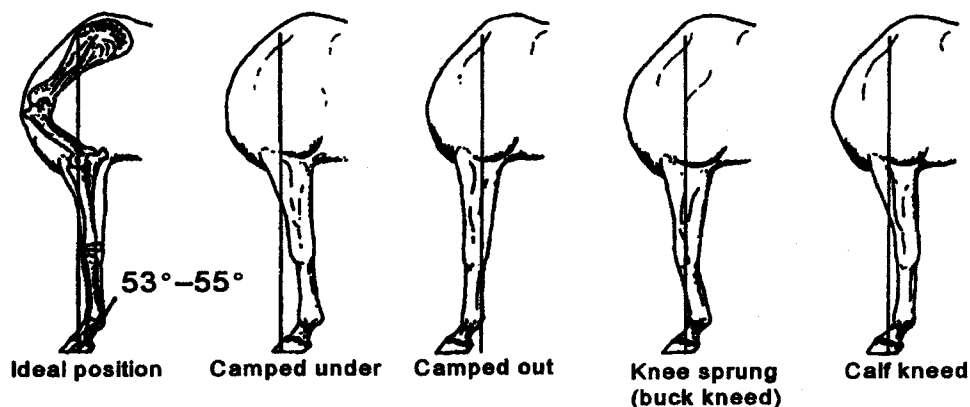


Figure 8. The front legs from a side view. A vertical line from the shoulder should fall through the center of the elbow joint and the center of the foot.

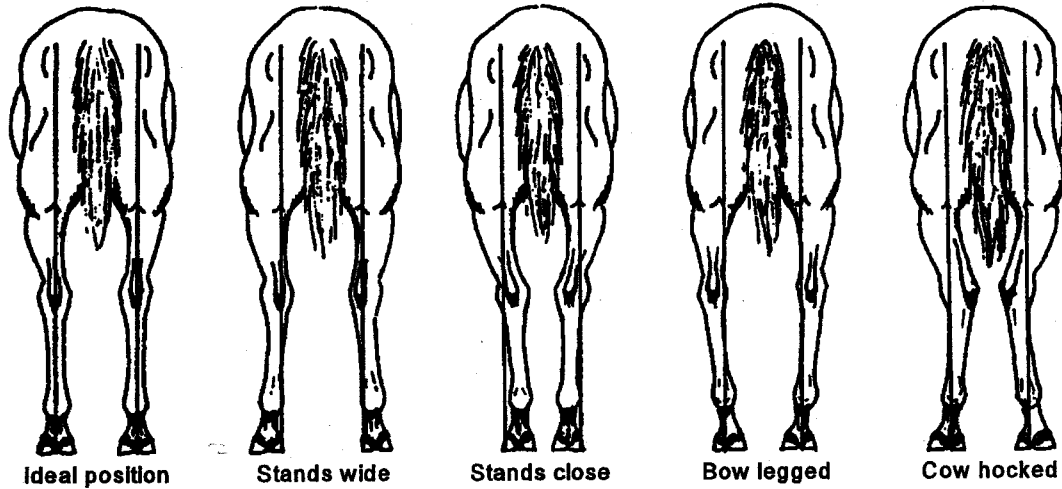


Figure 9. The hind legs from the rear. A vertical line from the point of the buttock should fall in the centers of the hock, cannon, pastern and foot.

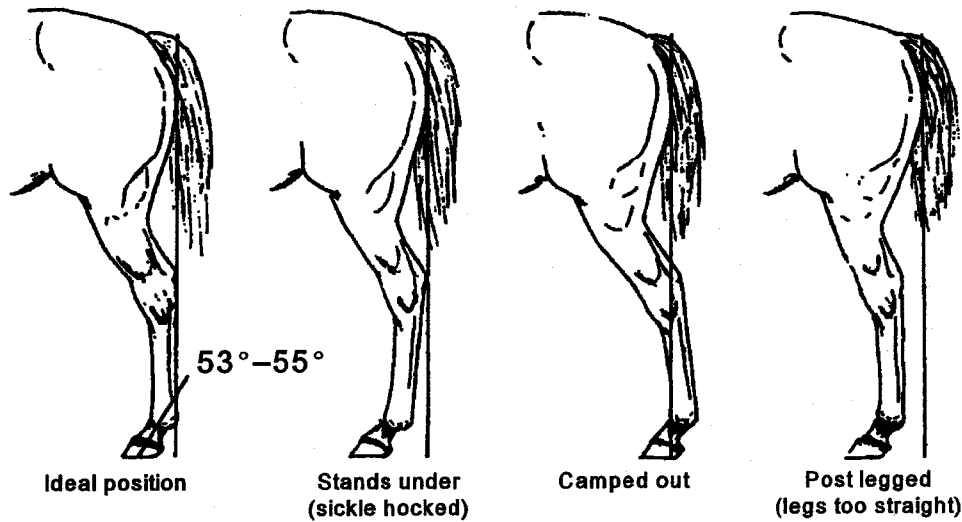


Figure 10. The hind legs from the side. The vertical line from the point of the buttock should touch the rear edge of the cannon from the hock to the fetlock and meet the ground behind the heel.



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The action of the horse should be straight and true. A horse may move in a crooked manner because of crooked feet and legs or because of being pulled off-balance as it is led. Watch how a horse moves to help determine if it has a straight action.

Since few horses move perfectly true, it's important to know which movements may be unsafe. A horse that *wings in* can be more unsafe than one that *wings out* because it may trip itself. Some travel close, others travel wide. Observe the difference and determine how much value to place.

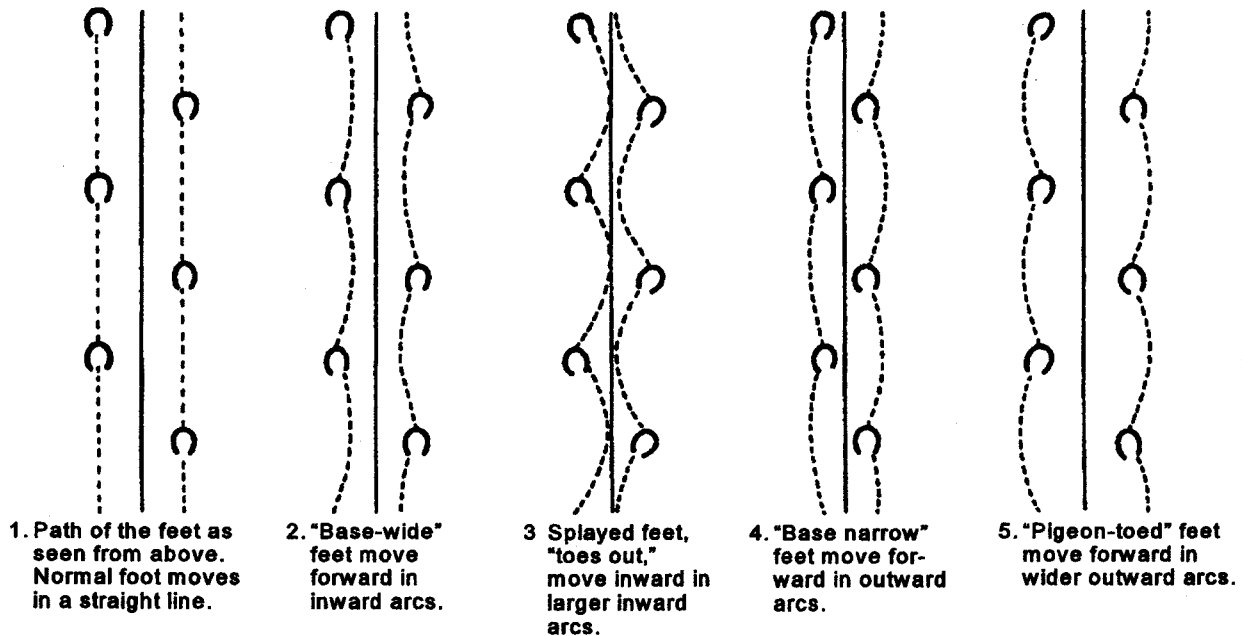


Figure 11. The path of flight each foot takes relates to the structure of the foot and leg. Example 1 shows normal path. Examples 2 and 3 *wing in*, while examples 4 and 5 *wing out*.

Figure 12 shows how the length and shape of the hoof affects the path of flight of the foot as the horse moves. Trimming and shoeing influence this. Keep the hoof in its natural shape to avoid leg strain. The correct structure of feet and legs is important because of the shock and strain on these parts when a horse moves. If the body structure is unsound, the horse may break down in use. Evaluation of inherited unsoundnesses in body structure is especially important in breeding classes.

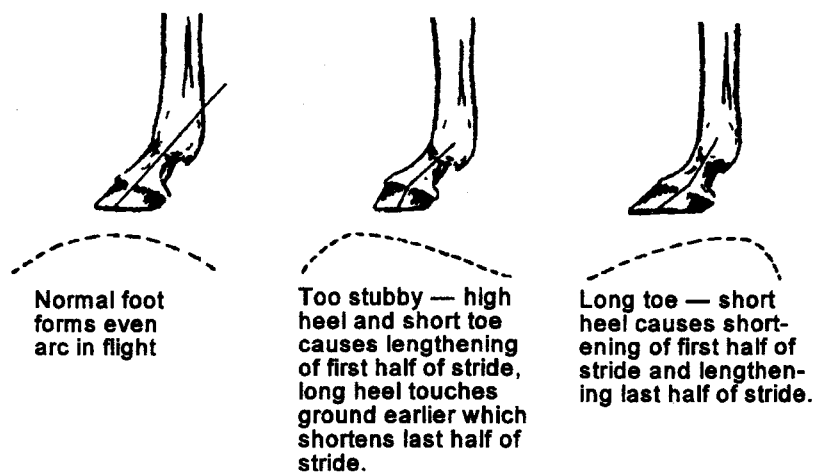


Figure 12. Length and shape of hoof affect the path of flight or the arc of the foot as it moves.



Blemishes, lameness and unsoundness

A horse that is unsound has imperfections that affect its ability to serve. Many unsound conditions are the result of weaknesses in body structure. These weaknesses will become worse when excess strain is placed on already weak parts. A horse that is lame is disabled so that movement, especially walking, is difficult and uncomfortable.

Blemishes are imperfections found on horses, but usually do not affect the horse's ability to serve. Old, healed-over wire cuts, rope burns and saddle marks are blemishes.

No horse is perfect. Understand common blemishes, lameness and unsoundness are judged on their importance in relation to the way you will use the horse.

Figure 13 shows a horse with the most commonly found unsoundnesses.

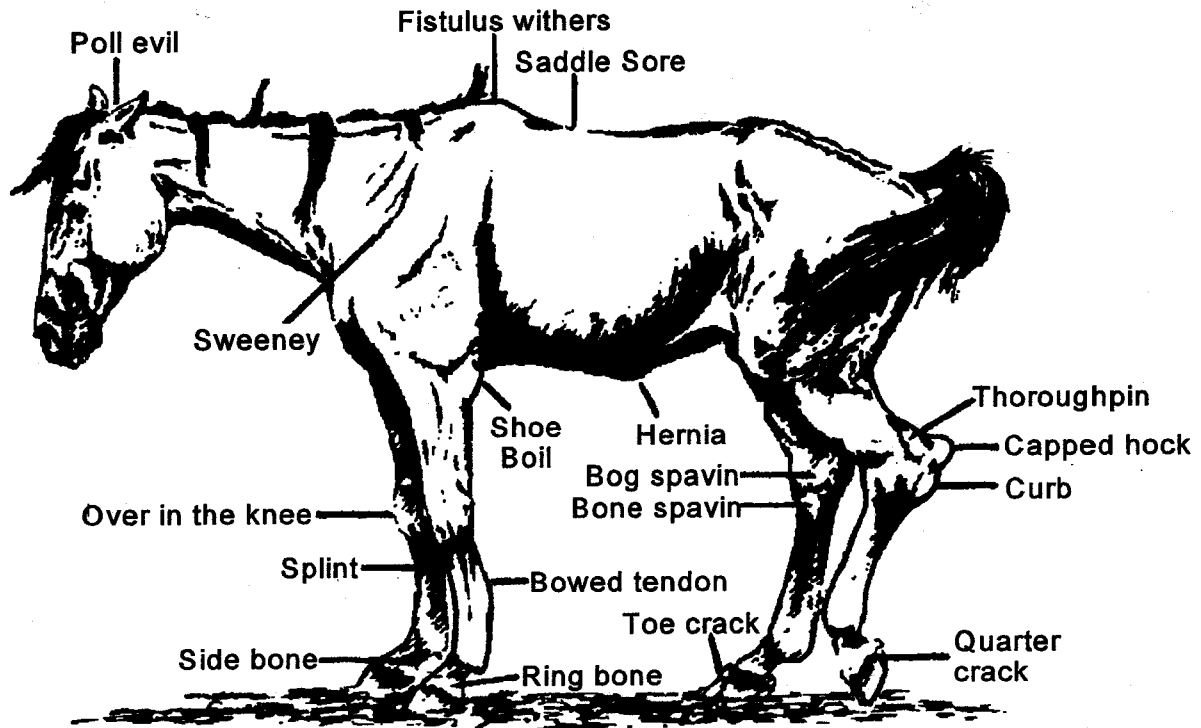


Figure 13. Unsoundnesses are weakness in body structure.



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Definitions of blemishes, lameness and unsoundness

Poll evil — inflamed swelling of poll between ears.

Fistulous withers — inflamed swelling of withers.

Saddle sore — inflammation caused by poor fitting tack.

Thoroughpin — puffy swelling on upper part of hock and in front of the large tendon.

Capped hock — enlargement on point of hock, depends on stage of development.

Curb — hard swelling on back surface of rear cannon about 4 inches below point of hock.

Quarter or sand crack — vertical split in the wall of the hoof.

Toe crack — vertical crack in the toe of the hoof, similar to a quarter crack.

Bone spavin or jack spavin — bony growth usually found on inside lower point of hock.

Bog spavin — meaty, soft swelling that occurs on inner front part of the hock.

Hernia — protrusion of internal organs through the wall of the body, umbilical or scrotal areas are most common.

Shoe boil or capped elbow — soft, flabby swelling at the point of elbow.

Bowed tendons — enlarged, stretched flexor tendons behind the cannon bones.

Ringbone — bony growth on either or both sides of the pastern.

Sidebone — ossified (hardened, bone-like formations) lateral cartilage, protruding above and toward the rear quarter of the hoof head.

Splint — capsule enlargement usually found inside upper part of front cannon.

Wind puff — puffy swelling that occurs on either side of tendons above fetlock.

Sweeney — atrophy or decrease in size of a single muscle or group of muscles, usually found in shoulder or hip.

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4-H judging

In 4-H, you can enroll in a horse judging project and judge both halter and performance horse classes.

Halter

Horses are judged on balance and quality, muscling, structural correctness, and breed and sex characteristics. The *4-H Horse Judging Guide* outlines rules. Ask your Colorado State Cooperative Extension agent how to become a member of a local team.

Performance

Horses are shown in classes such as western pleasure, horsemanship, western riding, reining, hunter under saddle, hunter hack and equitation.

Each class is placed by the ability of the rider and horse and the way the horse moves. When judging performance, be familiar with the rules of each class and, if applicable, how they are scored.

In a contest, you may judge two to four halter classes and four to seven performance classes. Classes consist of four horses. Each member is judged on how he or she placed that class. Four to six classes will be selected by officials for contestants to give *reasons*. *Reasons* are verbal explanations on why you placed the class as you did. Your reasons should:

- be accurate,
- emphasize major differences,
- include correct terms when describing the class, and
- flow in an organized sequence.

Your delivery of reasons should be convincing and bobble free. Your coach can help you reach this level of skill.