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Racking Horse Lovers Come To Town

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*By Annabeth Miller,
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Cars and trucks at the Stoddard County Fairgrounds on Saturday gave the right-of-way to a four-legged form of transportation, as the 34th Annual Missouri State Racking Horse Championship returned to Dexter.

Exhibitors, owners, riders and trainers from throughout the Mid South descended upon town Saturday for annual quest for the best of the racking horse breed in the Show Me State. Close to 100 entries made their way around the show ring at the fairgrounds. The annual show is hosted by the Dexter Chamber of Commerce, which handles all the logistics for the show.

This spring's floods, storms and the tough economy didn't deter the exhibitors, who came from Tennessee, Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, Illinois as well as Missouri for the show. Competitors show in a total of 22 classes – from Pleasure Racking for amateur young people to the Racking Horse Stake class.

For Joe Dan Carter of Martin, Tenn., this was his 34th time to attend the show in Dexter – that's every year since the very first racking horse championship in Dexter.

"I've been here every year that had a show," the bigger-than-life Carter said. Carter stood near the grandstand Saturday evening, talking to his friend State Rep. Billy Pat Wright and keeping a sharp eye on the show ring where one of his horses competed in a pleasure racking class.

"What's so special about the racking horse? I don't know – I just grew up on a gaited horse and I never have liked a trotting horse," the veteran horseman said. He concedes its personal preference, but he likes the racking horse. "There's good ones and bad ones in every breed!"

So for 34 years Carter has made the trek to Dexter for this annual show. This year he brought seven horses; other years there have been more. But he enjoys the show and showing his animals in Southeast Missouri.

"It's always been real nice over here," he said. "The people are nice. It's a good show."

What is a racking horse? Well, the racking horse dates back to Southern plantations before the War Between the States, when the horse could be ridden comfortably for hours on end before of its smooth, natural gait.

The Racking Horse is attractive and gracefully built with a long sloping neck, full flanks, well-boned, smooth legs, and finely textured hair. The Racking Horse is considered a "light" horse in comparison with other breeds, averaging 15.2 hands high (a "hand" is considered to be four inches) and weighing 1,000 pounds. Colors may be black, bay, sorrel, chestnut, brown, gray, yellow, cremello, buckskin, dun, palomino, roan, champagne, and even spotted.

The "rack" of the Racking Horse is a bi-lateral four-beat gait, which is neither a pace nor a trot. It is often called a "single-foot" because only one foot strikes the ground at a time. The Racking Horse comes by this gait as naturally as walking or striking a bold trot comes to other breeds. He is not to be confused with other breeds, with which the "rack" is an artificially achieved gait resulting from special training. Though he may be shown under saddle, in hand or in harness, and may be flat shod or shown with pads, he still performs the smooth, collected gait that made him famous as a pleasure mount.

The Racking Horse is similar to the Tennessee walking horse, and aficionados of both will debate the virtues of their favorite breed. The Racking Horse was derived from the Tennessee walking horse, and USDA officially recognized it in 1978. It is known for a distinctive single-foot gait.

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