

Horse Breeds in Medieval Role-playing Games

Throughout the Middle Ages the horse was a powerful symbol of social differences but also a tool for the farmer, merchant and fighting classes. While the species varied considerably, as did their names, here is a summary of the main types encountered across Medieval Europe.

Great Horse - largest (15-16 hands) and heaviest (1.5-2t) of horses, these giants were the only ones capable of bearing a knight in full plate armour. However such horses lacked speed and endurance. Thus they were usually reserved for tourneys and jousts. Modern equivalent would be a «shire horse».

Mules - commonly used as a beast of burden (to carry heavy loads or pull wagons) but also occasionally as a mount. As mules are often both calmer and hardier than horses, they were particularly useful for strenuous support tasks, such as hauling supplies over difficult terrain.

Hobby - a tall (13-14 hands) but lightweight horse which is quick and agile. Developed in Ireland from Spanish or Libyan (Barb) bloodstock. This type of quick and agile horse was popular for skirmishing, and was often ridden by light cavalry. Apparently capable of covering 60-70 miles a single day.

Sumpter or packhorse - a small but heavier horse with excellent endurance. Used to carry baggage, this horse could be ridden albeit uncomfortably. The modern equivalent would be a “cob” (2-3 mark?).

Rouncy - a smaller and well-rounded horse that was both good for riding and carrying baggage. Its widespread availability ensured it remained relatively affordable (10-20 marks?) compared to other types of steed. As such it was commonly used by squires, men-at-arms or poorer knights, often referred to as “Hackneys” or “Hack Horses”.

Palfrey - a smaller (12-14 hands) but well-bred horse with an ambling, comfortable gait allows riders to long distances quickly in relative comfort. Good speed and excellent endurance. Their quiet and dependable nature, as well as size, made them popular as riding horses for ladies, usually from Western Araby. A well-bred palfrey could equal a destrier in price.

Courser - a steady, long winded horse bred for endurance and speed, again usually from Araby. Though lacking the training and refinement of a destrier, their consistency made them the most common horse on the battlefield as well as among messengers and hunters. Modern equivalent would be a ranch horse. Coursers are thought to cost x4-8 less than a destrier (15-25 marks?).

Destrier - a tall (15-16 hands) and majestic horse with great strength which was ridden by knights in battle, typically a stallion. These horses were deep-chested and heavy-boned yet quick on their feet. With powerful hindquarters, they could easily coil and spring to stop, spin, turn or sprint forward. The most prized were often from Western Europe, usually Spain. In all cases they were worth a fortune, costing almost 100 marks. Consequently such steeds were rare and much coveted.

Warhorses or chargers - describe horses trained for war. Undoubtedly the most famous were destriers but by far the most common were coursers, even rounceys that were trained for war. Months of training were required to overcome the horse's natural instinct to flee from noise, the smell of blood, and the confusion of combat. They also learned to accept any sudden or unusual movements of humans while using a weapon or avoiding one. Horses used in close combat may have been taught, or at least permitted, to kick, strike, and even bite, thus becoming weapons themselves for the warriors they carried. Naturally this considerable training came at a price; warhorses were worth triple or more than their untrained counterparts, e.g. a destrier warhorse could cost 500-1000 marks (a veritable king's ransom).

1 mark = 2/3 £ = 13s 4d and 10 marks = 1 pound of silver
In terms of WFRP, 1 mark = 5 Gold Crowns

Great expectations

Knights were expected to provide their own steeds, with most according mounts to their squires and man-at-arms. Consequently 5+ horses was quite common, e.g.

- Destrier for knight in battle
- Palfrey for knight travelling
- Rouncy for squire
- Rouncy for 1+ man-at-arms (sergeant, yeomen and/or page)
- Sumpter as a packhorse

Gaits

Almost all horses instinctively possess 4 different gaits. Others exist but they're either very rare or unnatural, i.e. trained by man. For the sake of simplicity we'll focus on the 4 major gaits:

- Walk – a slow pace (4 mph) only adopted by horses when they are tired, relaxed or injured. Riders would require this pace when working a horse (ploughing, hauling, etc.), resting a horse, leading a horse or riding as quietly as possible. The rider enjoys a smooth ride with a slight swaying motion from the hind quarters.
- Trot (Amble) – this is a horse's most common gait when travelling as it is twice as fast as a walk (8 mph) but hardly more taxing. For riders too, the trot is a safe and efficient gait. While the bouncing motion is a little rougher, horse and rider should be able to maintain a trot for several hours without breaking a sweat.
- Canter – this fast (15 mph) pace varies considerably between horses and breeds (10-17). Comparable to a fast jog for humans, this is a much harder pace for both horse and rider. Most horses can maintain a canter for half of an hour; the most enduring can manage an hour.
- Gallop – this is the fastest (28 mph) gait, with most reaching speeds of 25-30 mph. Specially bred horses, can gallop much faster at 35, 40 or even 50 mph! The gallop is a break-neck speed for both horse and rider. Not only is it very tiring (1-3 miles or 5-10 minutes at the most) but it is also very risky, especially on hard ground. Injuries or even death or not uncommon.

WFRP mechanics

Breed	Mov	Str	Price (GCs)
Draft (Shire)	6	4	25
Mule	6	2	30
Hobby (Pony)	7	2	50
Sumpter (Pack)	7	3	30-50
Rouncy (Hack)	7	3	80-160*
Courser (Quarter)	9	3	150-280*
Palfrey	8	3	300-480*
Destrier	8	4	500-1000*

* x3-5 if trained for war (25 GCs & D4+2 months),
i.e. the horse gains +1 **Str**, +5 **W**, +1 **A** & +10 **Cool**

References

[Wikipedia article on Horses in the Middle Ages](#)

[Medieval Horses - Breeds and Type](#)

[Wikipedia article on Horses Gaits](#)

[Medieval Horse Guild - Medieval Horse Breeds](#)

[WFRP price list](#)

WFRP1 (239 & 296) & WFRP2 (119 & 232) rulebooks

