The Western Performance Horse

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As the western discipline becomes more popular, professional competition increases, and horsemen ask and expect more from their mounts, equine practitioners must keep up with the latest management techniques of these athletes. Author’s address: 12603 Radenz Rd., Houston, TX 77066. © 1997 AAEP.

I believe there is a common thread among the four disciplines discussed in this seminar. The requirement for a horse to work at high speed while being prepared for an instantaneous change in direction or an abrupt stop is unique. Because of this unique requirement, the versatility and athleticism of the western performance horse is unequaled in the equine world.

I believe the common thread among these horses is the stop. Throughout the disciplines of cutting, reining, team roping, barrel racing, calf roping, team penning, working cow horse, and others, the horse is required to run at all-out speed while being in control enough to execute some form of a stop when called on to do so. A good stop requires a combination of fitness, timing, and experience. The ideal body position for a good stop is essentially the same for all western performance horses. The top line is dorsiflexed, the hindquarters are dropped, and the hindfeet dig into the ground and slide. Reining horses have exploited the slide to a higher level. The longer the slide the better, with the front feet just tapping the ground. Special sliding tracks are built for these stops. Cutting and roping horse stops are different in that they should not slide a great distance and usually one or both front feet brace so that the horse can immediately turn back over its hocks (as in cutting) or back up at the completion of the stop (roping). Distance of the slide is not the object. The object is to stop, stay in the ground, and control the animal. If a cutting horse slides, he will go past the cow and lose his working advantage. If a calf horse slides too far underneath himself, it is very difficult to raise his hindend and start to back up.

The causes for a poor stop in my mind are numerous. There are other areas that cause problems in stopping other than soreness or lameness stemming from the hocks. The entire horse must be examined. Several things come to my mind when trying to diagnose the cause of a poor stop.

1. Conformation. The horse has to have a good hindleg. This includes a short loin and a good tail set, extensive stifle muscle, the often neglected inside gaskin muscle, low hocks, and good bone. This should be put together in a gentle curve to the hindleg that sets the feet just under the butt, but not so they are sickled hocked. This form carries the semitendinosus, semimembranosus, and biceps femoris down low and into the gaskin. This produces an individual that can gather quickly and be easily collected. Collection is not only about a flexed head set. Collection is about putting the motor (i.e., hindleg) in a compressed area closer to the center of
gravity. An individual whose withers are lower than the croup (riding downhill) is at a disadvantage. Likewise, individuals with poor muscle development in the croup and hindlegs cannot withstand stopping with weight applied at the end of the rope.

One misconception is the length of the croup and the set of the hocks. Most horsemen like a long croup and a good set to the hocks (good angulation). This is not true in all cases. Many hard-stopping performance horses are shorter in the croup, (so-called apple butted) and straighter in the hock joint. I feel the important criterion in judging the quality of the hock is the distance from the point of the hock to the ground. The optimal distance is 22–23 in. (~57 cm). The length of the cannon bone being 9 in. (~23 cm) is ideal. It may be of interest that in 1973, Jim Reno, a very well-known artist and horseman, was commissioned to do a sculpture of Secretariat to scale. Jim has done sculptures of many Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses. Take into consideration that Secretariat was 66 in. tall (16.2 hands) and that most Quarter Horses are 14.2–15.2 hands tall. Secretariat’s hocks were 22 in. from the ground. His cannon bone was 9 in. long. Two very famous and high-money-earning calf horses have the following measurements: Whitt, hocks are 23 in. and the cannon bone is 9 in.; Sonita’s Wonder, hocks are 23 in. and the cannon bone is 9 in.

2. Poor training. Mental capacity and trainability are helpful. The bit has not been made that will result in a ground-crunching stop in 30 days in every horse. A response is necessary when a slight removal of slack from the reins is taken. Training is essentially accomplished with a point of contact and repetition of this contact.

3. Poor riding. With reference to roping horses: This includes continual riding on a tight rein, hard pulls when the front feet are on the ground that cause the back to invert, taking bad throws, and roping out of position that causes weight from the jerk to be off to the side rather than in front. With reference to cutting horses: This includes being asked to stop out of position, the incorrect use of the leg aid, and the body position of the rider being ahead of the stop.

4. Poor size, shape, and management of the front feet. This is shoeing short.

5. Back soreness. This can be caused by a poorly fitting saddle, or not using the flank girth (very important). Flank girths are necessary to hold the back of the tree snug, preventing the front of the tree from putting pressure on the shoulders and the withers. It also supports the belly muscles, much like a lifting belt.

6. Poor shoeing behind. Too steep of an angle and too low of an angle will cause burning of the heel bulbs and ankles. Shoeing too short will prevent protection of the heel bulbs. I personally do not like long trailers, as they allow the horse to slide too far under himself, putting strain on the flexor tendon area, hamstring, and lower back.

7. Poor strength of stomach muscles. This is caused by asking for numerous, hard stops before the animal is fit, causing fatigue and an inability to round the back.

8. Lameness. This is usually from the hocks, but other things seen are curbs, suspensories, tendons, burning of the back of the ankles or heels, poor shoeing, and muscle injury (i.e., fibrotic myopathy).

My favorite interest is calf-roping horses. They are primarily Quarter Horses with breeding specific for cattle events. These horses have bloodlines known for cattle work crossed with some bloodlines known for speed. They must have the speed necessary to catch the calves and the ability to work while the cowboy or competitor is not on their back. Such a horse should stay straight, looking down the rope and keeping it tight. For a roper to be successful with calf horses, there are five things that are necessary.

1. The horses must score. This means they must stand flat footed in the corner of the box and leave when released flat on the ground. The best scoring horses leave off your hand and not your hand and feet, i.e., kicking them off.

2. They must possess quick speed. Smart, experienced horses may know the short cut to rapidly put a roper in a position to throw. Nevertheless, speed is essential.

3. They must stop.

4. They must work the rope or keep the ropetight from the saddle horn to the calf. Ropers call this the pull. If one states the horse is not pulling, this means he is not backing up or keeping the rope tight.

5. They must have the mental makeup to withstand hauling, eating, drinking, and working in different places. These animals must be able to relax and rest whenever the chance arises. They must be ready to work at different times of the day or night and adjust to all types of arena surfaces.

Now you will recall that I said these five things are necessary. Horses that possess all five qualities are few and far between. A roper can get by on a horse that lacks one of these elements but cannot if the horse lacks two of the elements.

When examining a performance horse, you must take into consideration his job description, his tack, and his rider. Many times one or more of the above-described causes may be influencing the way the horse works or stops. Professional competition and professional horsemens will be asking and expecting more from their mounts than the weekend amateur. However, the weekend amateur may require more riding and preparation, and this should also be taken into consideration.

The amount of money that the performance horse can earn has become so great that it makes these individuals every bit as valuable as a Stakes horse. Cutting horses winning in excess of $100,000.00 is becoming more prevalent in today’s competition. Top Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association calf horses, barrel horses, team roping horses, and bull
Dogging teams have earned over $500,000.00 for their riders. The career life for these animals has been extended with good management and good team work among the rider, the veterinarian, and the farrier. To achieve the goals of the rider, it is necessary to establish a good communication system, with the needs of the horse being the primary concern.

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