Get Knockout Boxing Scores
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Reined cow horse competition ranks high on the adrenaline scale for its fast-paced action, split-second reactions, precision and unpredictability. It is a sport that combines various elements into a one-on-one, man versus cow competition. To say it is thrilling would be an understatement.

The competition requires one horse-and-rider team to demonstrate skill in two areas. In the “dry work” phase, which is also called reined work, competitors execute one of eight approved reining patterns. Next, in the “fence work” phase, also called cow work, competitors must demonstrate their cow-savvy skills by boxing a cow, turning it on the fence and circling it, in that order. After running the cow down the fence line, the rider and horse cut it off and force it to change direction. They turn the cow by pushing it off the rail and moving it in a small, clockwise circle. This is the phase of the competition that can really get the adrenaline pumping.
and rider to exhibit considerable expertise and cow sense – a concept that takes a lot of practice to grasp.

“It sounds very simple, but a lot of people don’t understand that you don’t want to just follow the cow back and forth,” says veteran trainer and competitor Ron Emmons of Ion, Calif. Emmons trains working cow horses and is an NRCHA judge. He won the Magnificent 7 All-Around Stock Horse Championship in 2005 and the 2007 AQHA world championship in Open Junior cow horse. “Sure, you can just follow the cow and maybe get by, but to really score points, you have to demonstrate that you can move the cow, stop it and move it the other direction; [to show] that you are controlling the cow.”

According to Emmons, the horse also needs to demonstrate natural cow sense without excessive reining or spurring from the rider. “There is no time limit, and there are no boundaries,” he says. “If I have a wild cow that’s running across the pen pretty hard, and I have to hustle to get it stopped, I will make five or six passes across the fence, until I take the edge off [the cow] a little and get it respecting my horse. On a sleepy cow, I might just stop it one time on each side.” A rider should continue boxing a cow until he or she feels confident that the horse’s ability to hold the cow has been demonstrated.

You can probably work it pretty easy.”

It is possible for a cow to be too wild or too sleepy, and the judges usually give the competitor the benefit of the doubt. If a cow bolts past the rider, the judges will decide if it was because the rider didn’t hold it or if it would not have been possible. If they decide the latter, then the competitor gets another cow. This is referred to as getting “whistled off.” The judges can also give a competitor a new cow if the one they have simply won’t budge.

Keli Hendricks of Petaluma, Calif., has been training reining and working cow horses for ten years. Prior to training professionally, she competed as an Amateur and Non-pro, winning numerous championships. She now focuses on offering private clinics at her Rockin’ H Ranch. One of the first skills she teaches her students is how to read the cow. “The fundamental concept of boxing is control of the cow. In order to do that, the first thing you want to do after the cow is released is to have both of your eyes and your horse’s eyes on that cow,” explains Hendricks. “Your distance from the cow depends... each cow can be a little different. With some, you have to be farther away, and with others you have to get right up on them to get them to move.”

When the cow’s temperament calls for the horse and rider to back

Reading the Cow

So how do you know just how wild or sleepy your cow will be? This requires being able to read the cow the second it is released into the arena.

“If a cow comes out of the gate with its head up and its tail over its back lookin’ for you, you know it’s going to be a little tough to hold, but you can potentially score bigger with that kind of cow because of the degree of difficulty,” says Emmons. “With those cows you are either going to be a champ or a chump. If the cow comes out slow and easy, smelling the ground and meandering around, you know...
off slightly and work it from a greater distance than they would a quieter cow, this is called “giving ground.” Knowing when to move in on a quiet cow and when to give ground to a rowdier one is part of reading the cow correctly.

The rider should initiate the movement of the cow by approaching it slowly. “You aren’t going to just jump up there,” says Hendricks. “You want [to approach] slowly. Then, when the cow moves, you move.”

Mirror, Mirror


Creating that mirror image of the cow requires maintaining absolute focus and position. If you are too far behind the cow, which is called being “short,” the cow can bolt away. If you are too far ahead of the cow, it can stop short and sneak out behind you. This is called being “long.” Keep the horse’s head even with the neck of the cow. “This means that, as you move laterally across the pen, your horse’s head is even with the neck of the cow, looking at it,” explains Hendricks.

Hendricks teaches her students to judge if they are short, correct or long by where they are looking relative to their shoulder. “When you are looking at that cow, you should be looking comfortably off your shoulder. If you are looking ahead of your shoulder, then you are short. If you are looking back over your shoulder, then you are long. It’s sometimes hard for riders to grasp the concept of short or long, so I break it down into really easy terms.

“You have to stay even with the cow,” adds Hendricks. “So if you are long. Sit and signal your horse to slow down by bringing your hands back toward your body. If you are short, you need to use your legs and ride forward.”

Be Square

Several exercises that Hendricks has her students practice don’t require a cow. In fact, she prefers to introduce the basic skills of cow work without using cattle. One exercise she teaches reinforces how important it is for the horse to stop squarely before he turns. “The horse has to stop on his butt before he turns, otherwise he can’t make
an efficient turn,” says Hendricks. “A good exercise is to ride your horse forward, stop him square on his hocks, back a couple of steps, and then roll back through a turn,” she says. When applying this to cow work, the rider should stop square and then change direction. “This is the most efficient way to hold a line,” says Hendricks, meaning to restrict a cow to a given area.

A common mistake that riders make is to try to help the horse turn by using their body. As the cow turns, the rider will turn his or her body with the cow and try to pull the horse into the turn.

“You want…. your hips square with the horse’s shoulder, and only your head and eyes on the cow,” says Hendricks. “Let the cow turn the horse. You want to give the horse direction with your rein, but you don’t want to physically pull the horse through the turn.”

Another common mistake that riders make is to take their eyes off the cow or look at the horse’s head instead of at the cow. Hendricks has her students practice looking at their destination. “A horse will go where your eyes look, so a good skill to practice, without a cow, that will help you when you [start working a cow], is to look where you want your horse to go, not where the horse is taking you,” says Hendricks.

When these skills are combined – stopping square without turning the upper body, and focusing on the cow – riders learn to move their eyes and their head to follow the cow without moving their body.

**Making the Match**

Reined cow horse competition isn’t for the novice rider. It requires more than basic equestrian skills to achieve a degree of understanding of its concepts and to develop the more advanced skills required. Although it’s easy to get addicted to this exciting sport, it’s also easy to get frustrated. Often, this is what happens when an inexperienced rider goes it alone on an inexperienced horse.

“In an ideal situation, a green rider should be mounted on a seasoned horse and have the assistance of an [experienced] instructor,” advises Hendricks. “It’s not a skill you can learn on your own. It’s like someone just picking up a golf club and saying, “I’m going to teach myself how to play golf.”

Emmons agrees. “If someone with a ranching background wants to get involved in the sport, he or she needs to [train] with a professional to learn the strategic aspect of reined cow horse [competition]. If you have [riders] coming in from reining who know how to show a horse, then they need to learn how to read a cow.”

Ultimately, this is an exciting sport to participate in. And while boxing might not be the most thrilling element of the competition, mastering its techniques can prove to be the most rewarding.