

Suppling the Western Horse

by Kristy Vanderwende

Top western pleasure trainers Bret and Candy Parrish, top reining trainer Craig Johnson, and top cutting and reining trainer Keli Hendricks compare and contrast their training techniques for suppling the western horse.

Have you ever watched a horse locked eye to eye with a cow? What about a horse galloping full speed down a straight line stopping so hard on cue it slides into the ground? Or the absolute grace of a western pleasure horse's lope on a fully draped rein? In the horse world fantastic performances occur, but at a show all you see is the finished product. Horse and rider completely collected, controlled, and pre-

pared to give one hundred percent. Yet, have you ever wondered what training goes into these horse's performances? A large part of any trainer's program involves their horses being supple. You may be surprised how similar techniques are incorporated in the training of different disciplines across the western world.

Western Pleasure

Depending on the discipline, trainers look for different characteristics in their horses. To Bret and Candy Parrish, the ideal western pleasure horse is one that looks natural, is balanced and has self carriage. "We want their legs to be correct in movement and match front to back while carrying their head and neck as close to level as possible," they say. The Parrishs also like a



Keli Hendricks works on suppling a two-year-old colt prior to working a cow.



Photo: Jak Wonderly

This colt demonstrates a supple turn with the cow.

good minded horse that has heart.

To Bret and Candy a "supple horse" is one that is soft in your hand and moves easily off your legs. "A horse that is supple will break his neck at the withers left or right, be soft at the pole and lift his rib cage and move it as asked off of your legs. A horse cannot perform at its maximum capability without being supple. For us to achieve the body position that we prefer in a finished western pleasure horse, we must be able to put the body parts in position to perform at the best of that horse's ability. We mostly use our legs to either lift or move each part; however, a horse also needs to be soft in your hands. We like to teach our horses to yield to pressure in a soft manner without abrupt movements."

Suppling exercises are started before the Parrishs ever get on their young horse's backs. "We begin with ground exercises in a halter. When it is time to get on, our horses already know how to give in to pressure. We continue to build on this process all the way to the completion of a finished horse."

Suppling exercises should be conducted at the needs of each individual horse. For each ride the Parrishs use a lot of trotting, bending, stopping, and backing up tailored to each individual horse's strengths and weaknesses.

Although the Parrishs focus their business on western plea-

sure horses, they feel a supple horse is absolutely key in the making of a truly broke horse no matter the discipline.

The Reining Horse

In a reining pattern horses must display an array of movements from large fast circles to small slow circles, from slowing on cue to lead changes, and from sliding stops to rollbacks. They also must conduct all these moves on a loose rein without resistance.

To Craig Johnson, the reining horse is the ultimate broke western horse. He has always been inspired by the challenge of creating a very broke horse. After watching reining greats like Dale Wilkinson, Bill Horn, Bob Loomis and Bob Anthony as a youth competitor at the All American Quarter Horse Congress

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in Columbus, Ohio, Johnson knew reining was the event he wanted to do.

"I watched them in amazement do spectacular things with their horses. It just hit me, reining was what I had to do. I went home and changed my barn from western pleasure horses to reining horses."

To Johnson the ideal reining horse is a quiet horse with strong physical capabilities, fast reflexes and a good attitude. The horse should also be a good mover who carries himself well. Craig feels a strong work ethic and the ability to retain information are key characteristics as well.

Suppling is the foundation of Craig's training. He best describes a supple horse as one who can be separated from head to tail using the rider's hands and legs. "Suppling is designed to control all four feet. You want to be able to handle the feet more than the body position. If you can make them go wherever you want you can conduct the seven basic maneuvers," he says.

These basic seven maneuvers include the ability to circle, stop, go left and right, back up, have speed control, and perform lead changes. From these foundation maneuvers Craig develops a reining horse, but he believes a rider can create any sport from them. "Reining is a spectacular way of training a horse. It is really above a sport. It is instead a form of training where you control the horse's mental and physical abilities."

Johnson teaches his young horses to give to pressure first. He then focuses on teaching his horses the seven basic maneuvers except for lead changes, which usually develop later in a horse's training. These maneuvers take a lot of consistent training to develop. "A person should focus on where he is going with his horse's training rather than how he gets there. Finesse develops later in the process."

A horse who is supple can make a decision quickly and be willingly guided with little or no resistance. "I usually do some suppling drills to teach horses to open up their minds," says Johnson. "I call it response riding where if a horse goes left I make it go right." This makes the horse think and listen to the

rider.

Johnson develops a program for each individual horse. "It really depends on the horse because some horses are way too supple and need to be tightened up to maintain a straight line. Some horses are way too stiff and need some bending drills."

Cutting

Keli Hendricks best describes the perfect cutting horse like the perfect man, UFOs, or Bigfoot. "Some people claim to have seen them, but these people are usually crazy," says Hendricks.

Ideally, Hendricks' perfect cutting horse would have good breeding, have a good disposition and be sound. It would be a beautiful mare or stallion with a lot of natural cow. It would be a pretty mover, light with a natural stop. It would be forward moving, sensitive to the leg, but not goosey, limber through its body, but strong. The horse would also collect itself and lower its head and neck.

Hendricks believes one of a trainer's main jobs is to keep their horses supple. Although she feels that reining horses need to be more supple than cutting horses, she believes in keeping her cutting horses supple as well. "Suppling a horse helps keep it sound, more comfortable to ride and easier to show."

The best way to know if you are doing a good job suppling your horse, according to Hendricks, is to ask yourself if your horse is nice to ride. "To understand what suppling does for a horse, think of a horse you have ridden that seemed completely oblivious to the bit when you took a hold of the reins. The same horse was unresponsive to your leg too. A stiff horse usually is not fun to ride. The gates are rough, and to the rider it feels like they have to use a lot of rein or leg for the horse to respond."

Just like any athlete, Hendricks believes reining or cutting show horses must be maintained to be supple after they have learned it. Hendricks conducts lots of different exercises to help her horses remain responsive. "Personally, I like walking and jogging a horse to warm them up before I begin working on suppling them. I like to supple a horse with forward motion, so

In this photo the colt is making a stiff turn to the right.



The Trainers

Bret and Candy Parrish

Bret and Candy Parrish live in Pavo, Georgia, with their sons Cody, 14 and Chase, 11. They have owned and operated Bret and Candy Parrish Quarter Horses since 1995. Both Bret and Candy come from successful horse families. Bret is the son of the late Quarter Horse trainer and AQHA (American Quarter Horse Association) judge, Kiff Parrish and Candy is the daughter of long-time AQHA trainer Darlene Trein of Seville, Ohio. The Parrishs have trained and shown many top NSBA (National Snaffle Bit Association) futurity champions and AQHA World and Congress Champion show horses including: RL Best of Sudden, Ona Good Impulse, Hot Little Mama, and Sweet Talking Jeannie.

Craig Johnson

A long-time Texas resident, Craig Johnson now primarily resides in Middletown, New York, at the beautiful Santa Hill Ranch with his wife of thirty years, Lyn. They have a daughter Sarah, 26. Craig grew up in Iowa with Quarter Horses. His dad was a cutting horse trainer and his mom

rode western pleasure horses. Craig showed in AQHA as a youth competitor in a variety of events. Craig is a \$1 million reining horse rider and has had 14 AQHA World Champions, shown at the Equestrian Games, and has two NRHA (National Reining Horse Association) Futurity titles. Some of his top horses include: Smart Chic Olena, Sparkles Roseanne and Lucky Bay Glow.

Keli Hendricks

Keli Hendricks lives in Petaluma, California, on her Rockin H Ranch with husband Dean. Keli went to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo and majored in animal science. She took advantage of their top-notch equine program and learned to break colts and exercise racehorses. It was there that she also became interested in cow horses. For the next several years, Keli learned from top reining and cow horse trainers throughout the country. Before deciding to open her own business, Keli was one of the NRCHA's (National Reining Cow Horse Association) top non-pros of the nineties. Now, she gives lessons, clinics, and trains on her ranch. ■

once they are warmed up I usually work on a horse breaking at the poll and relaxing their neck when I pick up the reins."

Hendricks also lopes circles with an exaggerated arc for a few laps each way. The suppling process continues throughout the horse's training from starting to maintaining them. As young horses, she does believe in biting them up for a few minutes each direction to teach them to give before stepping up on them. She does however warn not to leave your horse unattended while they are bitten up.

"I just try to be sure my horse is responding to my legs and reins before I ask it to work a cow or do any stops or spins or especially changes. As basic as these maneuvers sound they are the foundation for all training to come, so it really is advantageous to work with a trainer until you become confident of the feel you want and how to achieve it." ■



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