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“Making a Difference”

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Making a Difference

By Nancy Kerns

Dennis Reis is a trainer who likes to help the average horse owner.

WHAT WOULD you think about a trainer who demonstrates the nature of his understanding with a barely halter-broke colt by standing on his back, no more than 40 minutes after approaching him for the first time?

At the very least, you'd probably say he's a little different.

Well, that's okay by him. California trainer Dennis Reis does this and more, and it really doesn't bother him if people think some of his training methods are different—as long as they realize why they are different.

"Standing on a horse's back isn't something I do for the horse," Reis explains, "it's only something I do once in a while to show people how far you can go with even a very green horse. Once a horse understands what he can expect and what he must accept from people, you can ask him for what might other-

wise seem to be unreasonable things, and he'll do them."

Most horses, says Reis, have areas where they shut down and refuse to accept pressure—such as being touched in their flanks, or being bridled, or getting into a trailer—anything that they can't handle. To ensure that a horse accepts anything and everything that his handler asks him to do, Reis starts out by teaching the horse several "games"—exercises that are reinforced every time the horse is worked with, to "change the horse's natural reactions into proper responses." Using these methods, Reis says, "You can get a horse through just about anything.

"With most people," says Reis, "when a horse won't do something, the person tries to get tough, and jumps all over the horse's case to get him to do it. But I would argue that just because you got him to do it that time, doesn't mean the horse understood what it was all about—and there's no guarantee that he'll ever do it again. When you put too much pressure on horses, sometimes they can't absorb or understand anything. Or rather, they can understand that this person is going crazy on top of them, but they don't have a clue as to why.

"I want to put the horse in a position where he can't help but win, where he can't help but make the right move, and do the right thing. I want to build situations where it's easy for him to be right, and difficult to be wrong," Reis says.

The work Reis does with the green and problem horses that are brought to his ranch (411 Highland Ave., Penn-grove, CA 94951) is dramatic to watch. But perhaps the most convincing thing is



Dennis Reis of Penngrove, California.



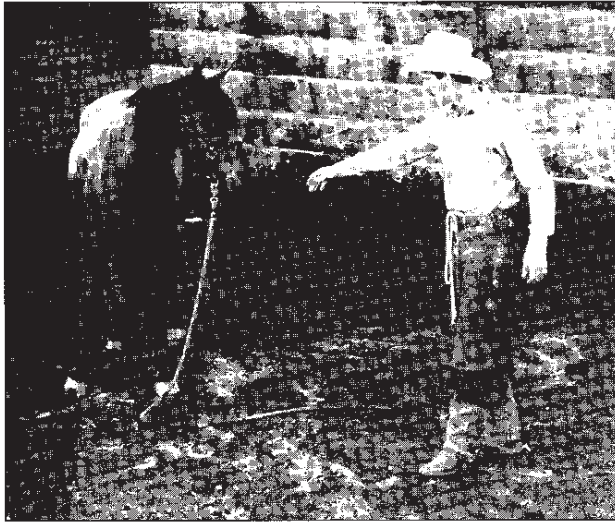
Dennis Reis rides a Thoroughbred/warmblood cross colt without a bridle about 2 hours after he first started handling it. The colt had never before been ridden.

the reaction from the horse owners who have brought their worst for him to ride.

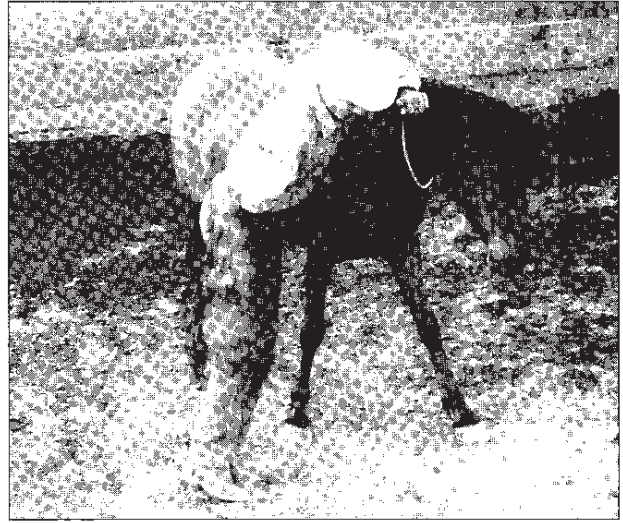
This reaction is precisely what Reis is after. Although this kind of work evokes an amazing change in horses, Reis sees the education that the horses' owners get out of his clinics and lessons as being as important, if not more important. After the owners realize that there is another, more successful way to develop a horse, and that the techniques are well within their abilities, Reis says it's critical that they learn the skills and knowledge to do everything that he has done with their horses themselves.

"What's the use in having a horse that only your trainer can work?" Reis asks. "I want my students to be able to do everything I can do with the horse."

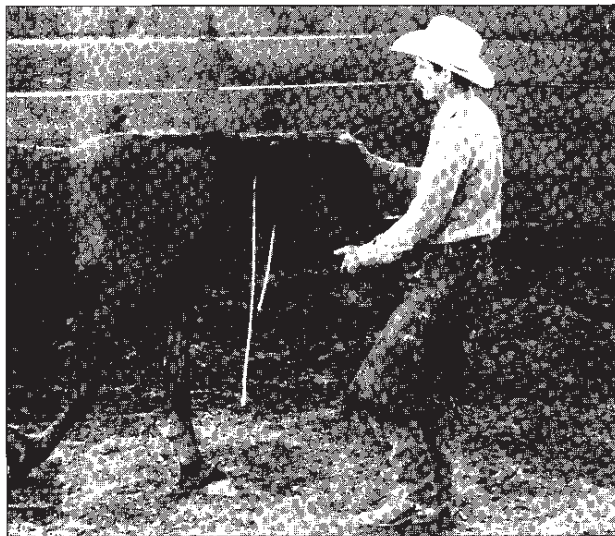
As part of that philosophy, Reis teaches his riders a formal procedure to follow when things start to fall apart. He instructs his riders to follow certain guidelines when their horses backslide into undesirable behavior. Riders are taught to work in a series of steps with their horses, mentally grading their horses' performance. If the horse doesn't perform each step of his task



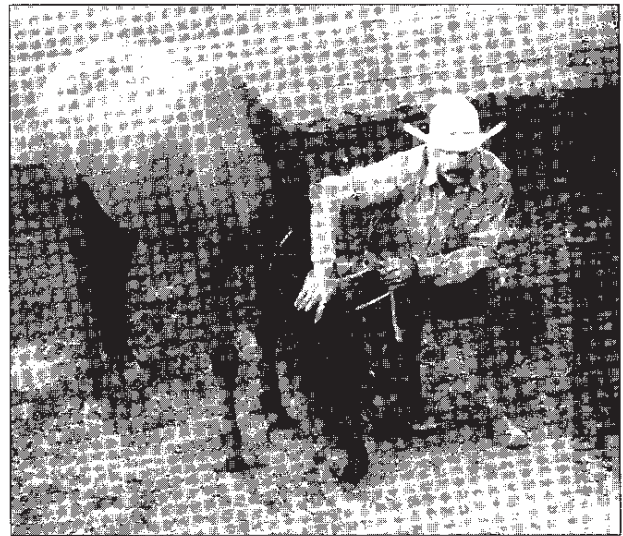
This 4-year-old mustang colt had previously been halter-broke, tied, and led a little. But when Reis approached it for the first time, it wouldn't accept any more handling than that.



Within about 30 minutes, Reis had the horse moving away from him in the direction he indicated, and following him around the pen.



After an hour, Reis demonstrated the colt's acceptance of what might be unacceptable to many trained, mature horses; here, being led by a gentle grasp on one ear.



Reis gently asks the colt to lower his head all the way to the ground, and the colt willingly participates in the task.

with at least a six on a scale of one to ten, then they don't proceed to the next step. Instead, they back up and work on the building blocks of that task. Reis wants to give his students the tools to cope with every situation that could come up on horseback—most importantly, the unexpected ones.

"What good is it," he asks, "if someone can only ride his horse under perfect conditions? Things happen all the time when you ride—dogs run up and bark, trucks go by, somebody's horse gets loose and gallops by. Why not be prepared ahead of time to deal with those situations confidently and safely?"

The students in Reis' classes practice exercises on horseback that are built on exercises they first taught their horses on the ground. When they can perform these movements in the safe environ-

ment of the arena, they are tested under increasingly challenging conditions. By dealing with exciting circumstances in a controlled atmosphere, the riders learn to deal with the unexpected in a positive, non-panicked fashion. The difference in the riders' attitudes (not to mention the difference in their aptitudes) after these drills is amazing.

Despite the enthusiastic efforts of a business manager who works overtime promoting Reis clinics and demonstrations, there are still many people who have never heard about the kinds of training methods that Reis employs. But once they get to a Reis clinic, they will get more information than they can absorb in one sitting.

Unlike many western trainers, Reis didn't get the majority of his horsemanship experience from riding horses in

the show ring; instead, most of his time horseback was spent in rodeo arenas. He competed in the National High School Rodeo Association from age 13, and rodeoed with the PRCA after his 18th birthday. After graduating from high school, he got a job riding horses for a local trainer, and eventually started shoeing horses.

Then he met the person who would have the biggest impact on his career, Pat Parelli. "I rodeoed with Pat for years, and liked him and respected his work for a long time. When I saw the things he was doing with horses at that time, I said, 'Man, he's doing some pretty neat stuff in that round corral,' yet it wasn't enough at that time to really hook me."

Four years later, he watched Parelli again. "The things he was doing with

horses just blew me away. I had to find out how his methods worked.”

When Parelli offered Reis the opportunity to accompany him on a clinic tour, Reis jumped at the chance. After helping Parelli with his clinics in Australia, Hawaii, Wyoming, and North Dakota, and working with him on a daily basis, Reis realized the work Parelli was doing was the kind Reis wanted to do full time.

Today, Reis is happy doing what he enjoys most: starting horses, conducting clinics and demonstrations, training, and riding for pleasure. He’s even happier that he doesn’t have to train horses for showing.

Reis feels strongly that he doesn’t

need to show to demonstrate his horsemanship abilities. “I enjoy working with my own horses,” he says earnestly. “I’ve got a nice mare that I can slide, spin, and work cows on, even without a bridle. I love that. But I have absolutely no desire to ride show horses.

“And anyway, 90 percent of the business out there is not with the top trainers and great horses, it’s with the backyard people with regular horses. For me, it’s far more rewarding to help people enjoy their horses more and make it safer for them. People get into horses to have fun, but often their horses are beyond them, and they end up missing the fun part. If I can give that back to them, then I’m happy.”