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Broncobusters Try New Tack: Tenderness

By DIRK JOHNSON
Special to The New York Times

GREYBULL, Wyo., Oct. 7 — At high noon in a crook of the Bighorn Mountains, the sorrel danced nervously inside the corral, as a lanky cowboy moved in to start breaking the colt, a practice as old as the Old West.

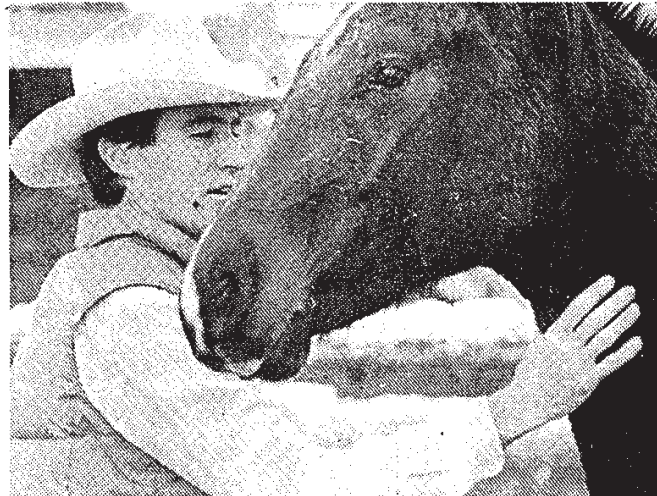
But this cowboy wore no spurs on his boots. He did not bark at the horse to show who was boss. He did not sneak around to throw a saddle on its back to climb aboard until it stopped bucking. Instead, he offered an outstretched hand, let the horse sniff it, and then gently stroked its neck and back.

"It's O.K., son," the blue-eyed cowboy, Tim Flitner, whispered to the bronc. "You're hard as a rock, I know, 'cause you don't trust me yet. But it's O.K."

Trying to Be Friends

In perhaps the biggest cultural change on ranches since the automobile, a new generation of cowboys is forsaking the traditional rough style of breaking horses in favor of "gentling" the colts, a method that shares more with the tenets of Zen philosophy than John Wayne bravado.

"You need to go to where the horse is mentally," said Mr. Flitner, 29, a fourth-generation cowboy on a cattle ranch west of Red Gulch Road here. "You want



Brian Brainerd for The New York Times

Forsaking the rough style, Tim Flitner used touch to break a horse.

to become his partner, his friend."

In the rugged mythology of the American West, there is no symbol more powerful than the tough cowboy astride a wildly bucking horse, an image emblazoned in blue silhouette on the Wyoming license plate and honored at every Saturday afternoon rodeo.

And not everybody is eager to see the old rituals vanish. The gentler method of breaking horses

has raised the skeptical eyebrows of some crusty ranchers, who say it sounds more befitting a New Age flower child than a snuff-chewing cowboy.

Dennis Reis, a 35-year-old former rodeo cowboy who conducts workshops and produces videotapes on the new method, said most people "learned from

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Brian Braumel for The New York Times

"You need to go to where the horse is mentally," said Tim Flitner, 29, a fourth-generation cowboy on a cattle ranch in Greybull, Wyo. He is among the new generation of cowboys that favor the "gentling" method of horse breaking. "You want to become his partner, his friend," he said.

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grandpa — and if it was good enough for grandpa, it's good enough for me."

"My buddies think I've gone off the deep end," said Mr. Reis, who incorporates yoga into his horsemanship. "They say, 'Dennis, you're a cowboy! What's with all this touchy-feely stuff?' And I know how they feel. I had to give myself a 'macho-ectomy.'"

"But I tell them: it's a lot less work."

Proponents of the gentler method say it is also much safer than the traditional way of breaking horses, where the frightened colts, who naturally resist being ridden, often respond with flying hooves and bared teeth, as they buck furiously or try to ram a rider into a fence. Every year, more than 50,000 people are injured in horse-related accidents, including about 200 who die, says Dr. Doris Bixby Hammett, the secretary for the American Medical Equestrian Association, which focuses on safety.

"A 'real man' might not do it this way," she said. "But a smart one will."

The new method is still not as common as the old style, but has grown mightily in recent years, says Dave Pauli, a director of the Humane Society in the Northern Rockies.

Book Brings Trend

"We think this is just wonderful," he said. "It's going to be generations before the old way dies out. But in the under-40 crowd, we've seen quite a change in the last five years."

Natural horsemanship, as it is sometimes called, became a hot topic around the stables after the publication of a book, "True Unity: Willing Communication Between Horse and Human" (Pioneer Publishing, Fresno, Calif., 1987).

The author, Tom Dorrance, an 83-year-old former rancher, said the method probably went "back as far as there were horses," but had never been widely used.

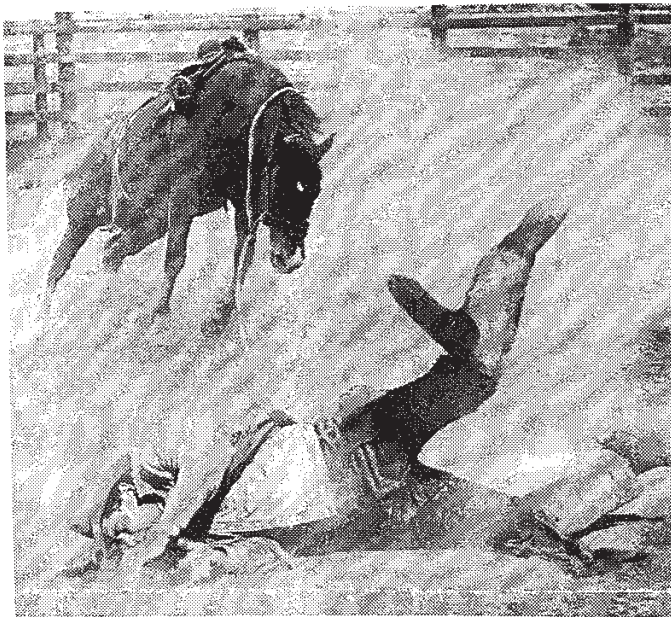
One of eight children on a family ranch in northeastern Oregon, Mr. Dorrance said he "learned the importance of cooperation" early. And as a small man — he did not weigh 130 pounds until he reached his 30's — he said he realized that he could not rely on brawn to get his way, but instead needed to communicate with the horses.

Understanding Horse's Fears

"I'm a person who wants to get along, who doesn't like to see trouble, whether it's in the Middle East or out in the pasture," Mr. Dorrance said. "And it bothered me the way people tried to force themselves on a horse tried to dominate them."

His teachings have prompted scores of other horse experts to produce videotapes, workshops and brochures. Some younger cowboys call him "the patron saint of horses;" others have dubbed him "the horse's lawyer."

"I wasn't out for fame or fortune,"



Movie Still Archives

Glenn Ford demonstrated the traditional rough-and-tumble style of breaking horses in a scene from the 1964 film "The Rounders."

Riders are better off winning a friend by not breaking a horse.

said Mr. Dorrance, who lives in a mobile home in Gustine, Calif. "My wife and I just like to get outside, be around the animals, where life is real."

Central to gentle horsemanship is the understanding of the instinctive fear that horses have for humans.

"We are predators," Mr. Reis said. "We have eyes in the middle of our head, and we smell like McDonalds. Horses are prey. They have eyes on the sides of the head and they smell like grass."

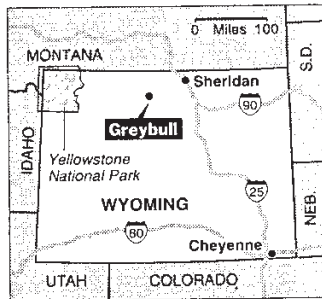
Meeting Halfway

Mr. Reis, who recently wrote about the method in the magazine, *Horse Illustrated*, advised that trainers should use a round pen, which keeps the horse close but gives it a sense of being free, since the animal can run in circles. Since there are no corners, the horse will not feel trapped.

In approaching the horse, the trainer should use the "universal horsemanship handshake," by extending a palm downward to simulate a horse's nose.

"Allow the horse to meet you halfway," he said. "Let it be its idea to touch or sniff your hand."

The trainer should gently rub the horse's forehead, he said, to demon-



The New York Times

On a Greybull ranch, Zen meets the mythology of the West.

strate that touching feels good. He recommends using the coiled halter and lead rope to brush the hide, so the horse associates them with pleasure. If the horse flinches at the touch on certain parts, the trainer should return to a more comfortable spot, then slowly work back. When changing sides on the horse, the trainer should "politely let the horse know," using words and a gesture.

"Horses are herd animals, they're looking for a leader," he said. "If you holler at the horse, or whip it, he'll think you're a bully. If you sneak around, he'll think you're a wimp. And he has no reason to follow or trust anybody like that."

Mr. Reis said he could sometimes take a wild mustang and be riding it in three hours. But he does not force the issue. "You've got to stop thinking in people time and start thinking in

horse time," he said. "And you have to stop trying to make the horse do something, and instead cause it to do something."

When he climbs in the saddle, he does not kick the horse to start it, but simply leans forward and "lets it feel the energy moving forward."

Each time he gets off, he tells the horse, "Thank you for the ride."

Mr. Reis, who alludes to "Zen masters" in discussing his approach, said he seeks to "become one with the horse, a Centaur," the half-man, half-horse of ancient mythology.

For Mr. Flitner, the Wyoming cowboy, the goal is simply to breed contented, well-mannered horses. He keeps some on the ranch to work cattle and sells others for riding or cutting horses, which sort herds of cattle.

"I can criticize the old way because we used to do it," he said. "We would tie its front legs to a post, then throw some blankets at it to get it spooked, then wait for it to stop quivering before we got on."

He added, "But it's no fun to ride a horse that doesn't like you, a horse that would just as soon put your head in a badger hole or run you through a fence."

He stroked the sorrel and made a kissing sound. Before long, the colt had started to relax. He walked away and returned with a pail of oats. "This is a reward for today's good work," he said. "I don't work for nothing. And I don't expect a horse to, either."

Big Changes on Ranches

Mr. Flitner, who graduated from the University of Wyoming with a degree in economics, said that horses come in as many shades of personality as people do. Both cowboys and horses have changed over the years, he said. A generation ago, "every ranch had a few hands that could ride anything."

"Nowadays," he added, "you could stop at four or five ranches before you found anybody who really knows much about horses." And the tough, "cold-blooded" broncs of a century ago, who could be ridden hard for 10 or 15 hours a day, no longer exist, since automobile travel has done away with the need. He said horses, like people, were shaped by their environments.

"I don't think a horse is born to be mean, just like a criminal ain't born to be bad," he said. "A criminal, he's probably been beaten down by poverty and frustrated with the way the world's treated him. And a mean horse is the same way."

But many handlers sometimes make the mistake of viewing horses as inanimate tools, he said, with each expected to meet the same standards. Not every horse is capable of top performance, he said, so he does not push them too hard.

"They're just like people," the cowboy said. "In every herd of 15, you've got maybe two with some real talent, and the rest are just wishful thinkers."