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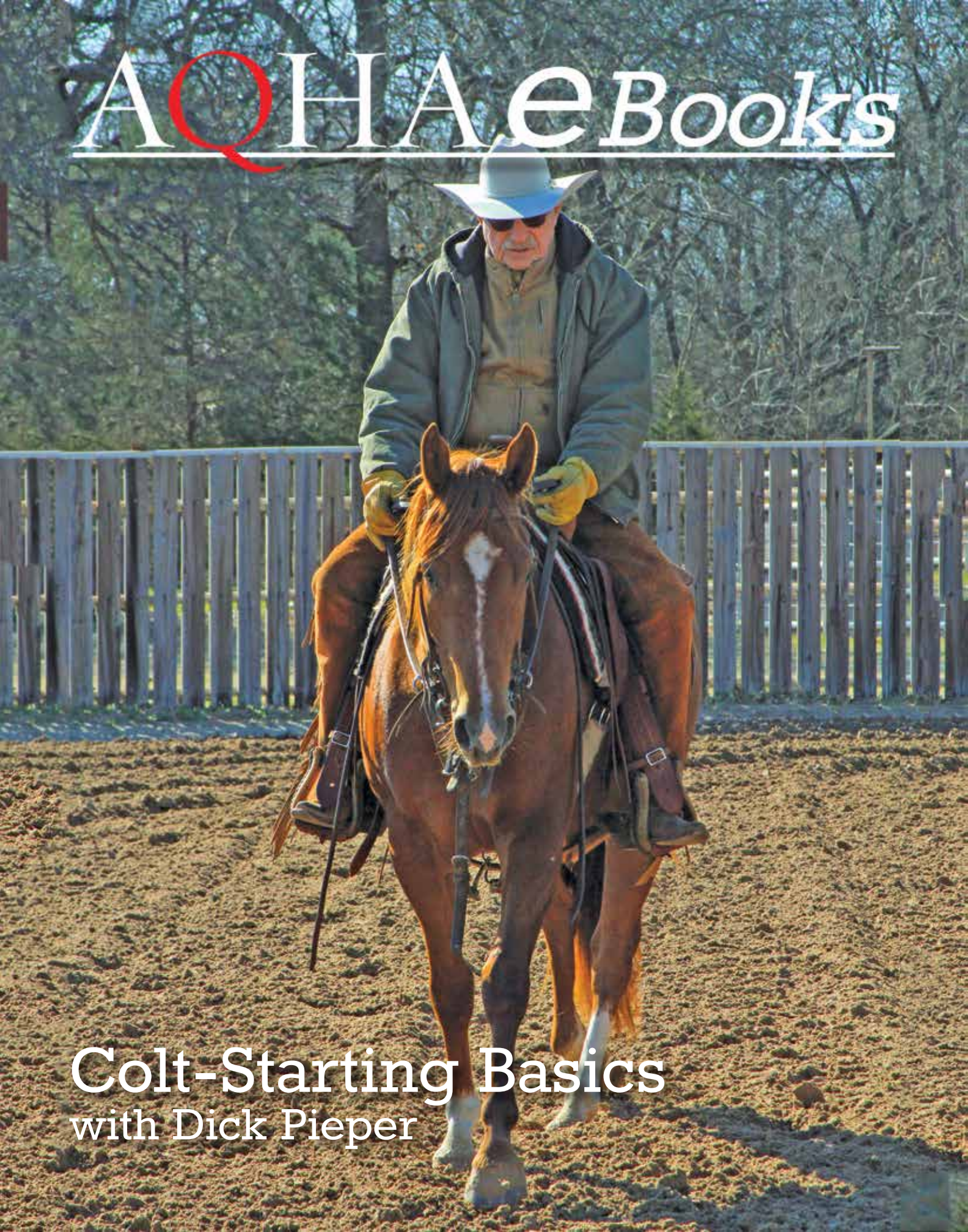

Colt-Starting Basics

with Dick Pieper

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In "Colt-Starting Basics," Dick Pieper explains how to get your colt started right.

Dick Pieper is internationally recognized as a horseman's horseman, and this iconic individual has influenced and developed the careers of riders and trainers for decades.

Dick's résumé in the performance horse industry is extensive. A multiple AQHA world champion, Dick is also a past president of the National Reining Horse Association, an NRHA Futurity champion and a member of the NRHA Hall of Fame.

Dick has been an approved judge in AQHA and NRHA, as well as the National Cutting Horse and National Reined Cow Horse associations. He currently serves on the board of directors for both the Ranch Horse Association of America and the American Stock Horse Association.

His success as a trainer and competitor is legendary, but perhaps Dick's biggest skill is his ability to communicate with people. His common-sense approach and his empathy for his equine partners resonate with riders of all skill levels. After his extensive career in the performance world, Dick now shares his wisdom and training techniques in a book, a series of training videos and clinics called "The Language of Horsemanship." More information is available at *www.pieperranch.com.*

His model for the photos is East Texas Kicker, a 2010 sorrel gelding by Texas Kicker and out of Playin Goldie by Freckles Playboy. Dick bred East Texas Kicker, and at the time these photos were taken, the horse had been in training for about nine months.

The Basics

Whether you want to ride a winning performance horse or simply train a nice horse that you can enjoy, you're going to need the basics.

In this book, after I talk about the basics, I'm going to move on to reining maneuvers and how you can use them to teach a horse to be handy whether he enters a show pen or not. But if you do decide you want to show, I want you to have your maneuvers so sharp that you plus them every time.

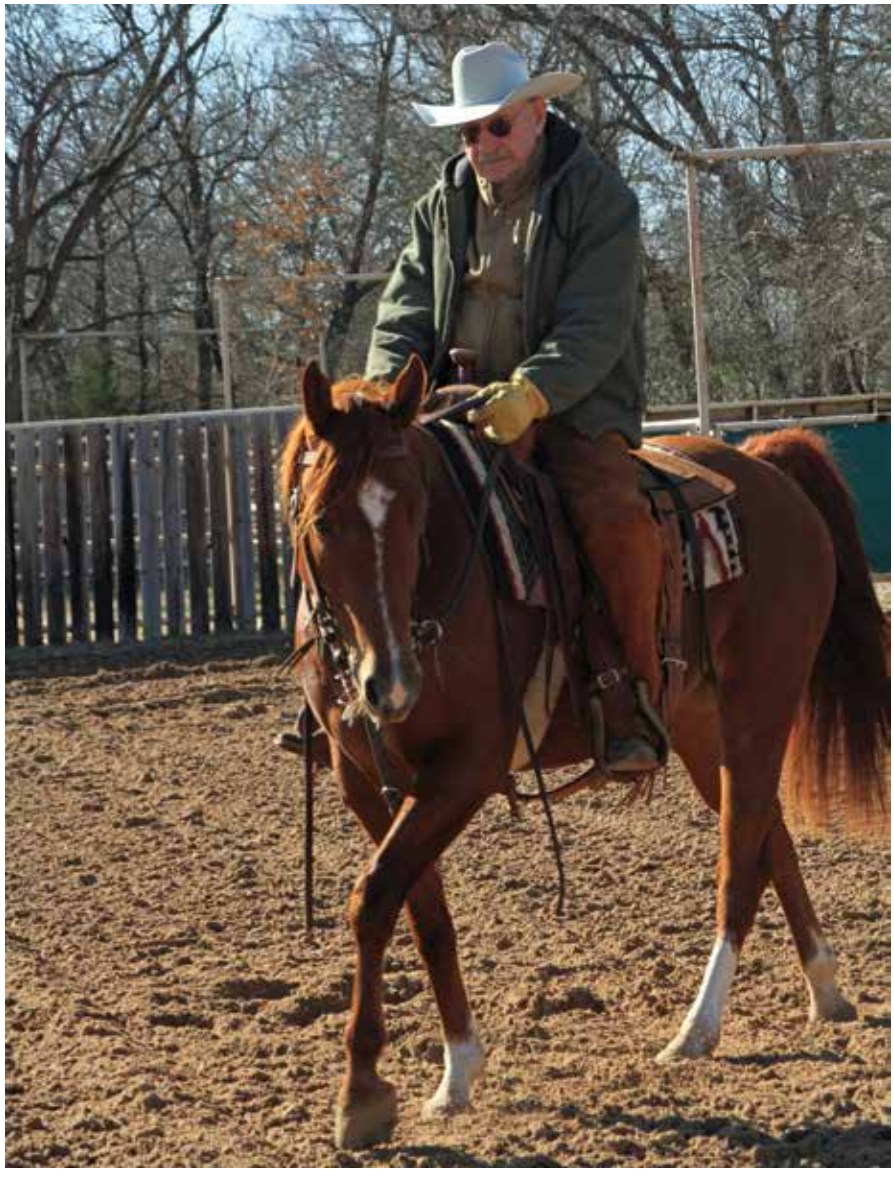
What I'm going to talk about isn't new. Xenophon talked about the basics of using your body correctly and teaching your horse to use his body correctly when he invented dressage in the 12th century.

I'm going to use his principles and work in order. I won't move forward until the horse has grasped each basic – lateral softness, collection and hip movement – thoroughly and completely. My goal is to produce a horse that is so conditioned to do what I ask that I could pull him out of the barn in the middle of a snowstorm in the middle of the night after a week off, and he would respond correctly to the cues I give him. I want him calm, with no distress, just an automatic response to my cues.

Here's how I get started with a 2-year-old, right after I have gotten him started in the round pen and he has quit trying to buck me off. I start with Basic No. 1, lateral softness.

Soft on the Reins

Ultimately, no matter where or how we're going to ride our horse, we



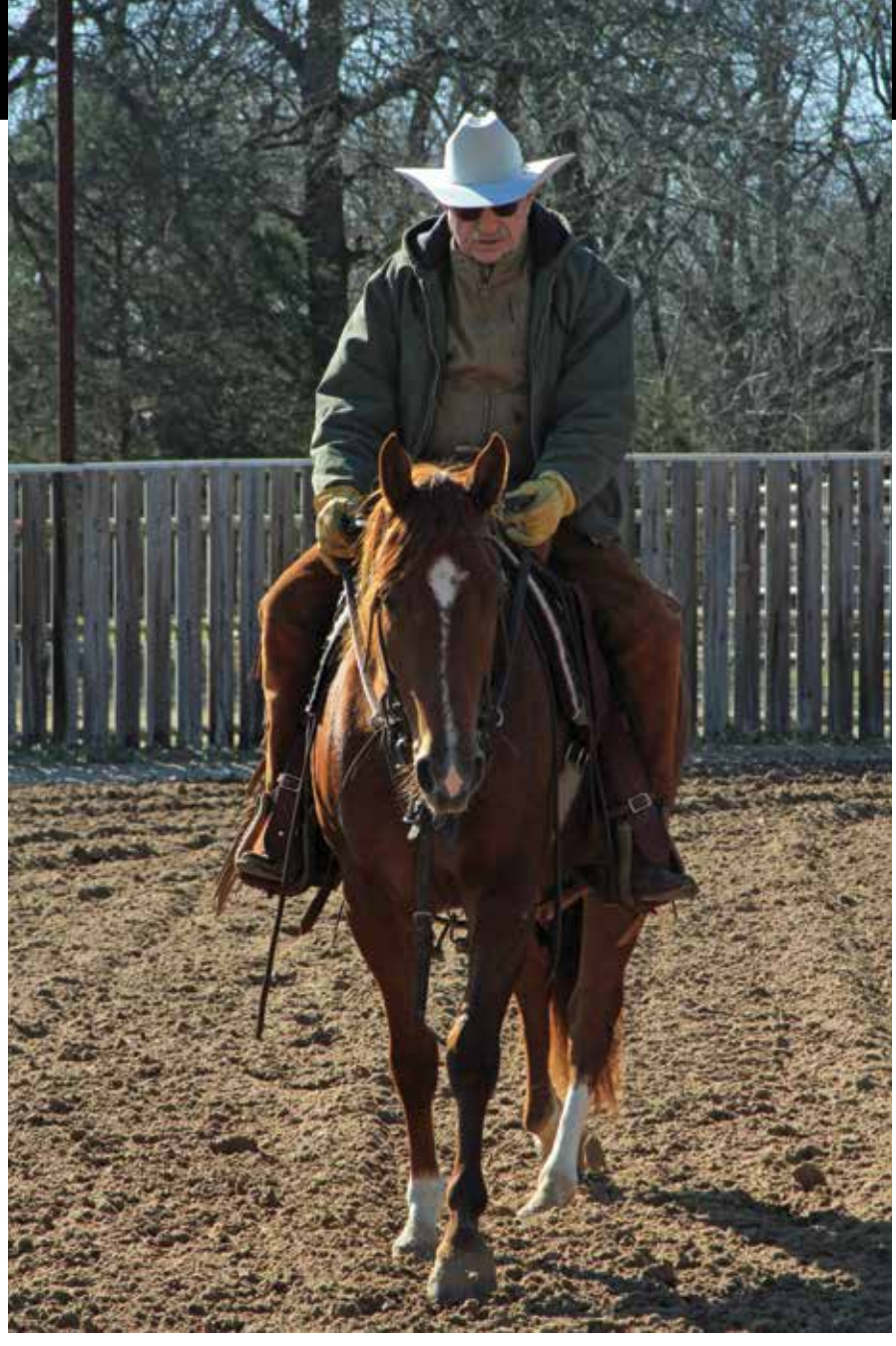
The purpose of gaining lateral flexion is teaching your horse to give to the rein every time you take the slack out of it. By making it his choice and not a fight, you take the resistance out of the situation.

want that horse to be soft on the reins.

I start by taking a position with my arms. I'm going to take just a little bit of slack out of one rein, then I'm going to put my elbow tight against my rib cage. If I'm going to be taking the slack out of the left rein, I'm sitting on my right hipbone. My right leg and right foot are against the horse's ribcage, and my left foot is away from the horse's body.

Then I'm going to wait as the horse walks around the pen. I'm not going to pull more, and I'm not going to pull less. I'm just taking a position and presenting an obstacle for the horse to think about.

Now when I first present this, the horse is going to try everything he can think of to get away from the pressure. He'll toss his head, put it in the air, drop his head down or shake it. He might try to go the other direction. He's going to try every option there is to get release from this constant, steady pressure.



Take a position by locking your elbow to your rib cage. If you're asking for flexion to the left, the right leg is on the horse, the weight is on the right hip and the right rein still has a little bit of slack in it. The left leg is not on the horse.

The minute he tips his nose in and gets a little soft on the rein – releasing the pressure on me – I give him a big reward: I drop all the slack to him, rub him on the neck and let him know he reacted the right way.

After a few minutes of walking around, I'll take hold again. The important thing is that I'm not pulling on the colt. I'm taking a position and holding it, and he's pulling on me. When he gives me the release and I give him back the slack, I make his reward big. I need to make sure he knows he did the correct thing.

The reason it's important not to pull on the horse is because if I pull on the horse and he pulls back, then I pull harder and then he pulls harder, then suddenly he gets soft – well, then the next day we'll have to do it all over again, and the horse will associate lifting the slack from the reins with having a fight. He'll also get hard in the mouth, which is something we don't want.

I want to make it a lifelong habit for the horse that when the slack is lifted from the reins, the horse gives to me.

I don't want the horse to stand flat-footed and do this. I want him moving. As long as he's moving forward, he's learning something that he's going to be able to use in maneuvers later on.

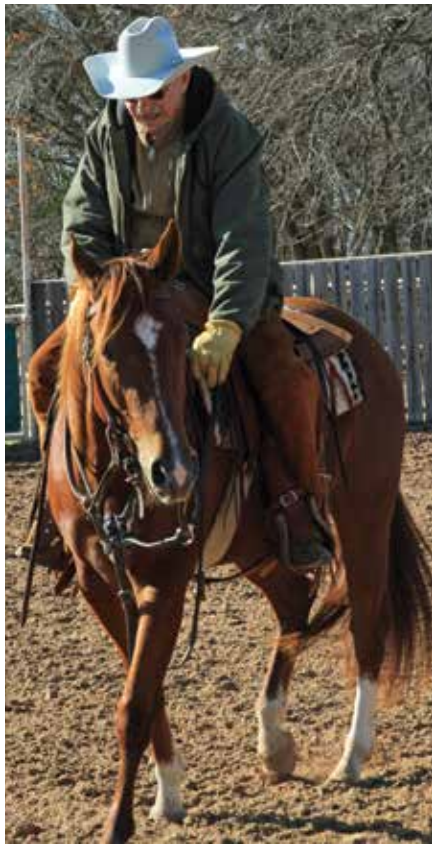
I work on one side of the horse for 10 to 15 minutes and then I work the other side. I don't like to switch sides back and forth. To the horse, that's something completely different, so you're trying to teach him two different things at the same time. As long as I make this a lesson in being soft on one side, he's going to pick it up and get the idea.

After he has the idea at the walk, I'll do it at a trot. It's the same idea: I trot along, and as we trot, I'll take the slack out of the reins and ask the horse to follow my hand.

After I get him really good at the trot, I do it at a lope.

Again, I don't move forward with anything else until my horse is completely solid in Basic No. 1. It could take a month, or it could take more time.

I want to take all the resistance out of a horse. I'm training a horse's body, but more importantly, I'm training a horse's mind. I like a horse that you can show in reining, you can rope on him, you can drag calves to the fire or you can take camping to a cabin in the woods. I like a horse that's going to be there for you tomorrow. A horse that is rock solid in the basics is halfway to being that horse.



When your horse gives even the tiniest bit, give him a big reward with a big release. Drop your hand below his withers and let the horse know he did well.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOU

The more efficient a rider you are, the faster the basics will fall into place for your horse.

By efficient, I mean your body is sitting squarely in the saddle and you give exactly the same cue in exactly the same way every single time. If you give a cue one way one time and a different way the next time, the horse will be confused. Confusion means it's going to take the horse longer to figure out what you want him to do. Confusion means he'll give you the wrong response and you'll get frustrated. Confusion is not good.

The rider needs to give the same cue every single time in exactly the same way. Don't vary it even a little bit.

It's just like with you – you wouldn't like it if one time when you drove up to a stoplight the green light meant go, and the next time you drove up to a stoplight, the green light meant stop.

Your body signals to your horse should be consistent. Help him learn to be a good horse faster by being efficient.

Collection

Now that we've mastered Basic No. 1, lateral flexion, let's move on to Basic No. 2, collection.

There's no deadline on a horse. The slower you go with a horse in the beginning, the faster you can teach a horse advanced maneuvers in the end, because he has a foundation to work from. If your 2-year-old is slow to learn Basic No. 1, that's OK. Just be patient with him. When you're winning in the show pen or your horse is taking you on a ride through the mountains after an elk, no one is going to care whether it took him four weeks or eight to learn the first basic.

When I introduce collection, I take a position and hold it. I don't pull more and I don't pull less.

Communication Is Key

I don't achieve collection by using rigs or bitting up a horse in a stall. I don't believe in it. As horsemen, we can achieve collection best by riding and communicating with the horse, letting him know when he has done well and rewarding him for it, not by using gadgets to force him into a position.

The process I use to teach collection is a lot like the one I use to teach Basic No. 1.

Once again, I start by setting a barrier with my hands while I hold the reins. This time, I'm doing it with both hands, with my elbows against my ribcage. My hands should be placed so there's no chance I'm going to release the reins accidentally. I'm not going to take up more slack, and I'm not going to give any out, either. I've got both legs on my horse to give him some impulsion to

The first time a horse feels me ask him for collection, he's not going to understand what I want. He'll try every possible way to get away from the pressure.

move forward.

When I say, "set a barrier," I don't mean pull his chin back to his chest. Essentially, all I'm doing is taking the slack out of the reins. I want to barely touch his mouth, just enough to get a feel of it.

He probably won't like it and will resist any way he can.

He's going to shake his head, pick it up, put it down and try every possible way to get away. Meanwhile, I'm still just holding, not pulling any harder, not pulling any less. I'm also continuing to nudge him forward with my legs.

When he softens the neck and releases me from the pressure, I'm going to take off both hands and both legs and drop the slack with my hands clear below the withers. I'm going to let the horse relax, and I'm going to rub his neck and tell him he was good.

Sometimes when I teach this in clinics, people are reluctant to give enough of a release. I try to make everything really black and white for him so he knows exactly what I want by dropping my hand clear below the withers. Don't be afraid to let your horse know he has done well. That's how we communicate with him.

Resculpting the Body

Collection uses muscles the horse hasn't used before. We're going to be reshaping a horse's muscles from his poll all the way across his topline and into his hocks. We can't do it all at once, so this is going to be a longer-term training process. If the horse is in the collected position for more than about five minutes, his neck is going to cramp, whether you release the pressure or not.

If you don't believe me, try walking

When the young horse gives even a bit, give a big reward so he knows he did well.

around with your chin on your chest for half an hour. You're going to have a sore neck.

I don't want the horse to be sore, because that's counterproductive. I want the horse to think about being ridden the way any worker thinks about going to a job every day – he might not love it, but he doesn't hate it, either. He just goes out and does it. If a horse is sore, he's going to dread being ridden. That's not good for either of us.

As I ask a horse to travel in a collected position with my hands and feet, I'm strengthening the muscles across his topline. He'll start to use his hindquarters more and reach up under himself with his hind feet. He's going to lift his withers and move along. He's going to lighten on the front end and build muscles behind.

Even if all you want a horse to do is lope a mile down the road, he'll do it better if he has learned how to travel in a collected manner. And if you want him to lope prettier circles in competition, those will look better if he has learned how to carry himself in a collected manner. With his shoulders elevated and his hindquarters engaged, reaching further underneath him, your horse will be in a better position to stop when you start teaching him that maneuver later on.

This is what I want. The horse is giving to the bit without fighting it. He's listening to me and using his muscles. As his body is resculpted with this exercise, he'll start to step under himself more and use his body better. He's not distressed by the work, just accepting it.

All the basics build. Just like a weightlifter doesn't start by lifting 200 pounds, I don't start by asking a young horse for 30 minutes of collection.

It takes about a year to reshape those muscles, so if you start in March of his 2-year-old year, by March of his 3-year-old year, he should be able to hold this collected position for quite a long time. In fact, you should be able to drape slack to him and he will naturally carry himself in a collected position most of the time, because his new muscles will support him as he does it. Best of all, you will have taught him how to achieve collection as opposed to fighting with him or forcing it on him.

With a 2-year-old, once I get a release, I give him an immediate reward. When he's collecting every single time – maybe a month later – I'll start to hold the collection just a little bit longer. I'll go around, maybe at a trot, and hold three to five steps before I give a release. I work up to 10 steps, then half a circle, then a full circle.

You'll be able to tell if you're asking too much because the horse will start to lean on the bit. If he does that, give him a break. Turn him loose and let his head drop.

Don't turn this into a fight. Horses that are unwilling don't last as long. I want to take the resistance out of the horse and shape his mind as well as his body.

Hip Movement

As I mentioned, in the previous chapters, starting a colt should always be done in a sequential order: Once Basics Nos. 1 and 2, lateral flexion and collection, are really, really solid, you can move forward to Basic No. 3, hip movement. Remember, it will take at least a year to resculpt your horse's muscles, but once he has the idea of collection, even if he can't hold it for very long, you can move ahead with hip movement.

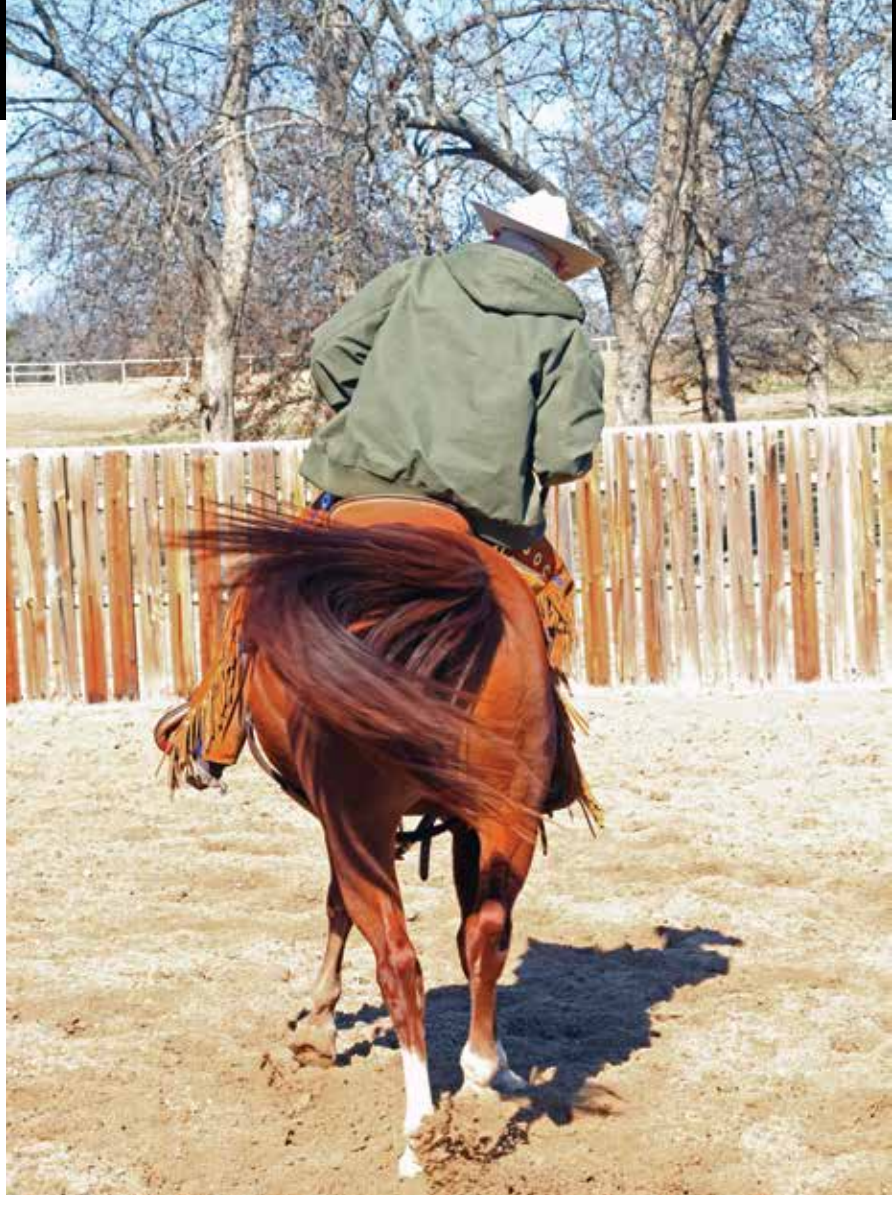
Moving the Hip

I really like this quote from Albert Einstein: "If you can't explain something simply, you don't understand it well enough."

In that spirit, I like to make my explanations to the horse really simple, and this basic is quite simple: We're going to ask the horse to move his hip.

I start by putting the horse in a collected position – which is why you can't move forward with Basic No. 3

When I introduce collection, I take a position and hold it. I don't pull more and I don't pull less.



Here, I'm exaggerating my leg position so you can see how I ask a horse to move his hip over. I want the hip to move to the left, so I have my right leg on the horse and have moved my own left leg out of the way.

until you have Basic No. 2 mastered – and then I take one leg off, and press a little with the other leg, asking him to move his hip over as he's moving forward.

Just like before, I'm waiting on the horse to figure out what I'm asking for, and again, at first, he'll probably figure it out accidentally. When the hindquarters move over just a little bit, I give him a release. This time, though, I'm not dropping my hands and giving him a release from the collection. This time, the release is from my request to move the hip over, meaning I take my leg off and relax my hands some.

I want the front end of the horse to stay in a straight line, so I set a goal that I'm riding toward, like a particular pole in the arena. I'm going to ride toward the target in a collected position. I want the front end to keep going toward the pole, but I want the hip to move sideways in what we call a two-track position as we continue to walk forward.

That's the position I want, but when the horse is just starting to learn, all I want is a little bit of try, one or two strides. When the horse starts responding instantly every time, I'll start asking him to hold it for a few more strides.

I work on one side at a time, asking the horse to hold it for a few steps at a time, before I let him relax and then work the other side. I continue to work at the walk until I'm sure the horse understands the question, then I'll try it at the trot and move on to the lope.

I don't need a trick pony. It's not necessary to move a horse into a two-track position and have him hold it clear across the arena, but I want my horse to move that hip, right then, right that minute, every time I ask, no matter what.

This basic is essential for teaching a horse to change leads, teaching him to turn around or move in a collected circle. It can be difficult for a horse, because instead of working on a horse's front end, as we have been since we started riding him, we're asking him to move his hindquarters.

Patience is the key. Wait on the horse to fully understand the question and to be able to answer you without confusion. You don't want

your horse confused.

I like to know that the first time I ask my horse to change leads, he's going to be able to do it easily and without a lot of drama. It shouldn't be a big deal to him, and it won't be if you have been quiet and tolerant as he learns to move his hip.

A Few More Notes

After I have my horse solid in the basics, I test them every day, and I practice them every day. When I get on my horse at the barn and ride to the arena, for instance, I'll lift the slack from the reins to see if the horse is soft left and right.

If I know the horse is usually soft, and for some reason he's stiff to one side, I know there's a problem and I have a chance to do something about it before I've ridden the horse for an hour and made him really sore.

When I get to the arena, I use my horse to open and close the gate every day, moving his hip, and I'm halfway to teaching a horse to change leads.

The basics aren't just for 2-year-olds. If you have an older horse that isn't responsive, you can take him all the way back to the beginning and restart him just as if he were a 2-year-old.

I can't emphasize enough that the basics must be absolutely solid before we move to the maneuvers we're going to teach in the next chapters.

No matter what job you intend for your horse to do, everyone wants a light, responsive horse. The basics are the foundation for getting that light, responsive horse, and they're essential to lifelong learning.

When I start teaching this, I reward even the smallest "try." As the horse begins to understand the concept, I'll ask for more steps.

THE TIMELINE

This timeline isn't a rulebook. It's to give you a general idea of how long it might take to teach most colts these skills.

- **Basic No. 1 (Lateral flexion)** – Mastering it takes about 30 days. Don't go any farther ahead until this basic is solid. Even if it takes your horse another couple of weeks to catch on – so what? A couple of weeks is a small amount of time in a horse's life. Getting a solid foundation is more important than the speed with which you get it.
- **Basic No. 2 (Collection)** – It takes about a year to completely reshape the horse's body. He should get the idea in about 30 days.
- **Basic No. 3 (Hip movement)** – Again, it takes about a month to teach this basic, and I reinforce it daily after the horse has learned it.

Spins

If your horse has mastered the basics – lateral flexion, collection and hip movement – it's time to start using those basics to learn some reining maneuvers.

Even if you don't intend to show, I think you'll enjoy having a handy horse that knows these skills. They're also good for helping your horse develop his muscles and athleticism.

If you do intend to show, you can use the basics to teach a horse well enough that he plusses his scores every time.

The One-Step Spin

Reining competitions have five maneuvers: stops, circles, spins, rollbacks and backing up. A good reining score comes from putting all those maneuvers together smoothly.

I like to teach a horse how to spin instead of forcing him into spinning. Once I've taught him how to spin, I can teach him more finesse, meaning if he's going to be a show reiner, I can teach him to drop his head and really pour on the speed. If he's going to be a working cow horse or a ranch horse, he can keep his poll level while he turns around.

But no matter where the horse is headed, I start the same way. All three basics come into play for this one, but the one you'll need most is Basic No. 1, lateral flexion.

I start out by walking the horse in a circle on a loose rein. I have a slight amount of tension in the left rein. I'm going to be sitting on my right hip. My right leg will be pressed against his belly. My left leg will be away from his body.

I said this before, but I think it's worth repeating. Make sure your own body position is correct and that you give your signals the same way every single time. Make things as easy on the horse and on yourself as you can.

I begin teaching a horse to spin by asking for decreasingly smaller circles.

So I'm on my horse, and we're walking in a circle, and as we walk, I want the horse to become grooved into that circle, almost like he's a little electric train going around a single track. I want him doing it almost by himself.

As we walk, I'm going to start to draw the circle down smaller, then a little smaller, then a little smaller, then a little smaller. I keep making the circle smaller until instead of taking a forward step with his left front foot, he takes a lateral step with it.

That's what you might call a one-step spin, and it's what I want. The minute the horse takes that lateral step, I release and let him move forward as a reward.

I'm teaching a form of a cross-over step. Before a horse can cross over, though, he needs to move the inside foot out of the way. This method teaches the horse to pick up his foot so he doesn't knock it with the other one.

After I've rewarded the horse for his lateral step by letting him move forward, I'll start walking the circle again. As long as he's moving forward, we're walking the circle. The instant he takes a lateral step, I'm going to move him forward out of the circle and release the pressure. I'm going to repeat the process eight to 10 times one direction before I start the other direction. Again, I'm working at a walk. And again, like with all my training, I'm going to repeat it until it's automatic conditioning.

A horse needs to move his inside leg out of the way before he can spin. I reward that first lateral step.

Every single time I draw my walking circle down, I want the horse to respond by taking a lateral step. When he has that mastered, and only after he has it mastered, I'll ask for two steps. When he gets two steps correct, I'll move him forward out of the circle. What I'm doing is putting the horse in a bind. It's not a tough situation, but he's in a little bit of a bind. When he takes the lateral step and I reward him, he gets out of the bind, and he has figured it out for himself.

When he gets two steps down, I'll ask for three, and so on. After he'll give me four steps, the horse is probably ready to give me a full turnaround, and we can start adding speed.

Rider Error

There's one bad habit that it's easy for riders to get into when they start asking for more speed in turnarounds, and I want to warn you about it. When I'm riding a turnaround, I don't do anything different

The reins are crossed over my horse's neck. Since I'm spinning to the left, I'm pulling with my left hand, just the same way I did when I was teaching Basic No. 1. The slight rub of the rein on the horse's neck will eventually cue him for neck reining.

with my hand. A lot of people, when they want the horse to speed up, will bury the rein in the horse's neck.

When they do that, it causes the horse to want to draw back and pick up his head a little bit, but when a horse is turning around, he needs his front feet right underneath his shoulders. Horses that draw back are more likely to step on their coronet bands or hit their knees together or injure themselves in other ways. Your horse needs to stay square. You need to stay square in the saddle.

Your hand is not the accelerator. Your leg is the accelerator. Your hand is the steering wheel. Just like you don't turn the car harder with your hands to make it go faster, don't move your reins more forcefully to get more speed in your turnarounds. Use your leg.

Pivot Foot Position

Every time I turn my horse around, I walk him out of it. As I increase speed, the horse will start balancing himself down on his rear end, something like a gyroscope, until he starts staying in one position as he spins.

I don't want my horse to spin on the inside pivot foot. I'm a rebel! I want my horse to have both hind feet in a box about 2 feet square, and I want him to use both of those feet to turn around.

If I'm turning my horse around and I keep fussing with his pivot foot and messing with him, when he finally figures out how to lock his pivot foot down, he won't be able to do a rollback when I ask for it later. He cannot physically do it.

The impulsion for a rollback comes from the outside foot, and if you harp on that inside foot, he'll plant it. I want the horse to feel free to use both feet, without restriction.

Changing Hands

When I'm spinning to the right, I always use my right hand. When I turn to the left, I'll use my left hand, so that I'm not reaching across my

body. When I change hands, I make sure that the horse gets exactly the same cue from both sides.

I have the reins crossed over the horse's neck and four fingers between the reins, gripping where they cross with my fist with the back of the hand up. When I change hands to the right, I'll reach over with my right hand and pick up with the same four fingers. The reins are in the same position so the horse gets exactly the same feel from both sides.

I have two goals here: 1) I want to teach the horse how to shut down, and 2) I want to teach him how to turn around from just a neck rein.

Well, to pick up my inside rein, I have to rub across his neck just a little bit with the outside rein.

When I was in the Army, I learned about preparatory commands, and commands of execution. For turning around, the preparatory command is the rub from the outside rein, and the command of execution is the pull from the inside rein.

So every day, I'm turning the horse around and pushing him out and turning around and pushing out, and if the horse is a normal horse, usually around the first of June of his 3-year-old year, when I'm turning him around, he'll figure out that he can turn around from the preparatory command and he doesn't have to wait for the command of execution.

He'll become more and more aware of starting the turn from the neck rub. Now, he's not going to be perfect. He might do it for a couple of days, and then you might ask him the third day and he's watching the dog outside the arena, so you'll have to give the command of execution. But soon, that rub becomes so ingrained that every time you sit on the outside hip and push with the outside leg and that rein rubs across his neck, he'll start turning around when he feels it.

Stopping the Spin

Before I start teaching a horse to shut down his spins, I want him to be at the stage where when I pick up the rein and rub, he starts his spin. When I want the horse to stop, I drop my hand and put it on his withers, going back to the basic of release that I've been teaching ever since I've been riding this horse. I like a lot of continuity in a training program so that the horse understands clearly when he has been rewarded and when he has done what I wanted.

Probably the first time I drop my hand, my horse isn't going to know that I want him to stop spinning. I give two distinct cues, both with my body position. When I'm going to turn the horse around and then push him out of the spin, the same way I've been rewarding him all along, I run my hand down his neck and lean forward and use my legs to encourage him to go forward.

When I want him to shut down, I drop my hand and sit deeply in the saddle. I take all impulsion away by moving my legs away from his body.

I keep those two cues distinct so he knows the difference and reacts with confidence. When I'm training a horse, two thirds of the time, I'll push him out of his turn, and one third of the time, I'll shut it down.

A horse quickly learns that when the hand is up, he's in motion, but when the hand is down, we're going to stop. A conventional way to stop the spin is by blocking with the other hand, but that can be a shock to the horse, and then when a rider picks up his hand again, the horse isn't sure whether to trust him – he's anticipating a block again.

When I just drop my hand, my horse wants to stop. It's the difference between making the horse do it and helping him make a choice. The key to teaching a horse to spin is being patient and not asking for more than the horse can do so he doesn't get to dreading the exercise. I want the horse to advance solidly, learning things without resentment. In every situation, I'm closing three doors and opening one door. Then, when the horse walks through that door, he gets a reward.

Stops and Rollbacks

Rollbacks are only used in reining. You don't see them in working cow horse classes. I like them, though, because they teach a horse to move his body across his hocks, and it's a good maneuver to use to teach a cutting horse when you start him on a cow. When the cow stops, the horse is basically performing a rollback to go the other direction. And every horse needs a good stop, whether he's bound for the show pen or not.

A Loping Stop

There's only one place in a horse's stride where he can stop correctly. If a horse is in the left lead, when that leading leg is on the ground, the other front foot is in the air and the shoulders are up. The horse's hind feet are in the air, being carried up toward his belly.

If at that exact moment, I ask the horse to stop and the message gets to his brain in time, he's in position so that all he has to do is drop his backside.

On the other hand, if he's loping along with both hind feet on the ground pushing and I say "Whoa," the only thing the horse can do is pick up his head, hollow his back and make a big plop on the ground – not to mention a big plop on the judge's score sheet.

I'd rather not gamble on saying "Whoa" at the single exact moment that is perfect for the horse. I don't want to surprise the horse by saying it quickly and then pulling hard with both hands. Horses don't like surprises.

Instead, I want to say "Wwhhhooooa," low and slow to give the horse plenty of time to think and react.

I start teaching the stop by loping the horse in a circle and then giving my "Whoa." The first time, the horse won't know what that means. He might have been taught to whoa on the ground, but horses' brains don't work like ours, and he won't connect the two situations.

So let's say the first time I say, "Whoa" and nothing happens, I've been loping on the right lead. In that case, I'll pick up my left rein and pull him around and kick him off the other way. It's going to be awkward and uncomfortable. He'll get side-

I say, "Whoooaaa," low and slow, and the horse stops. East Texas Kicker, the horse I'm riding in the picture, already knows this exercise, so he gives me a good stop. Often, if I get a good stop, I let the horse rest.

If I don't get a good stop, I use my left rein to pull the horse back over his hocks.

ways and a little discombobulated, but then he'll gather himself together, pick up the other lead and go on.

I don't like to pull with both hands, because that gives the horse something to brace against and fight, and I don't want to pick a fight with this horse.

I've taught him Basic No. 1 – lateral softness – so thoroughly that he doesn't think about fighting. I didn't give him enough to push back with, because I only pulled with one rein. He knows he's supposed to follow the rein, and he does.

I lope some more, and after two or three circles, I say, "Wwhhhooooa" again, low and slow. Again, nothing will happen, so I take the right rein and pull him around.

After a few times doing that each way, the horse will decide to trick me. He thinks, "When Dick says 'Whoa,' I'll stick my butt in the ground and keep my shoulders up, and that way, I can turn around a lot easier and get going the other way before he asks for it."

Horses don't like discomfort. They're creatures of habit, and soon, they'll figure out that sticking their rear ends in the ground and rolling back across their hocks will make their lives more pleasant. The first time a horse really sticks into the ground and makes a good effort to roll back across his hocks, I stop him and pet on him a little bit. I walk him around and then do it again.

Soon, I get a little more try as the horse gets more and more consistent.

Here's the key, though: You must only reward him when he makes some effort, and you must reward that effort every time. If the horse is trying, even if it is awkward, you let him stop and stand and catch his breath while you pet his neck.

If the horse is thinking about the bird in the rafters of the barn or what he might have for supper, you must pull him around and send him the other way. If it's uncomfortable for the horse when he loses focus, he'll start paying attention.

It's important to remain calm yourself. Rolling back isn't a punishment. You're just showing your horse the consequences of inattention.

Soon, your horse will hit the stop, and he'll hit it harder and harder.

Advanced Steps

This technique accomplishes a couple of goals: First, it teaches the horse to stop with his shoulders up, and second, it teaches him to stop on the word, "Whoa."

When I start teaching a horse to stop, I shoe him behind with little three-quarter-inch-wide slide plates, what I call baby slide plates. The branches extend just a little way back. If you choose to do that, make sure the nails are countersunk and the nail heads are rasped off. During

this learning process, you don't want anything getting in the way of that horse's efforts to stop.

After the baby stage is over, when the horse is stopping consistently and just melts into the ground every time I ask, I stop riding circles, and I start riding straight lines.

I also want him to show some advancement in his training. If he doesn't put some effort into his stop that I consider commensurate with his training level, I pull him around and send him the other way.

I absolutely cannot stand it if a horse stops, then takes a couple of walking steps. When a horse finishes a stop, he should be deep in the ground, and when he stands up, his hind feet don't move. That's a big marker to me on whether to move a horse to the next level of stopping.

When he's stopping correctly, I ask him to stop a little farther and then add more speed. If I feel like the horse is getting confused or worried, I back down to the previous speed and start building again.

Every once in a while, I get a colt that starts anticipating, and when I say "Whoa," he tries to turn ahead of me. When that happens, just straighten the colt up, then back him. Keep both hands steady and use your legs to direct the backup. When the horse is backing straight, release with the legs, drop the hands and pull him back across his hocks to go the other way. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen.

I find it usually takes the full summer of a horse's 3-year-old year to teach the stop. I want to feel the horse commit to the ground. When I pick up my hand, I just balance and hold him there. I want him to stop with confidence no matter what speed he's going.

It's a long process, but here's where low and slow "Whoa" pays off: When you're at the National Reining Horse Association Futurity with your 3-year-old, and you've already won both go-rounds, and you've got the best draw possible for the finals, and everything is perfect, and the crowd is roaring, and you get a little bit excited and say "Whoa" as the horse goes to the ground so you can score big at the wrong time – you want the horse to tell you, "Hey, can't do it right now, Dick." You want him to finish the stride and get deep into the ground so you can score big.

I'm using Basic No. 1 – lateral softness – to pull the horse to the left, but you can see from the slack in the left rein that this horse is ahead of the game. He knows what I want and is giving it to me without stress.

Or if you're riding out on the range after a cow and you don't see the cliff until it's almost too late, you want that horse to stop when you say "Whoa." Either way, you'll be a winner and your horse will be, too.

Keys to Success

1. Reward every effort by letting the horse rest.
2. Don't let the horse rest if he didn't make an effort.
3. Be consistent in the use of "Whoa" as a low, slow preparatory command.

Circles

Again, I rely on the basics that I talked about in the first three parts of this book to establish the foundation for riding good circles.

When I start a horse's formal education in circles, I have already been loping circles on him out in the pasture and in the arena. I start a horse on circles formally early in his 3-year-old year, or maybe at the end of his 2-year-old year if he's a fast learner.

I have three phases for teaching a horse how to lope circles: circle position, guiding and speed control.

I work in this order: First, I get circle position really good. Then I get guiding and circle position going together really well so I can move a horse in and out of a circle. Then I work on speed.

I like to introduce new things on Wednesdays, not Mondays. I make sure I've been riding the horse for a couple of days and everything is going good. I can work on the new idea on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, then the horse gets the weekend off, and we have something to come back to when we start work again.

Circle Position

Circle position is the first thing I want a horse to learn. I want to teach the horse how to lope round circles, how to let me use my legs to move him in and out of the circles, and how to be slightly bent.

Unlike other maneuvers, I teach circles from a lope.

I don't want to hold the horse in position. You can lock a horse in position all you want with your hands and body, but at some point, you're going to have to let go, and if you haven't taught your horse how to hold the position himself, he's not going to maintain it. If I let him make a mistake and then correct it, he'll learn not to make that mistake.

I don't want a horse bent like the letter C. I want him to be mostly straight, but I should be able to look down and see his eye on the inside. He should be traveling on the line of the circle, and I should be able to make a circle of any size or speed, and the horse will maintain the position.

Unlike all my other training, which I've started at the walk, I start this maneuver at the lope. I lope on a circle and put him in position, then turn his face loose. When I turn him loose, he'll probably pick his head up or look over at a tree he's passing and fade toward it or something like that. I'll just fix him, then turn him loose again.

In all your training of horses, you need to move your hands slowly, and that certainly applies to fixing a horse so he doesn't feel like he's being picked on. Also, by this point in the training, we've developed a relationship, and he knows I'm not going to hurt him while we're working. It's just work.

What I'm showing him is that we're going to lope circles, and he has to maintain position and speed. His poll has to be in the same position, he has to carry his neck the same way, and he has to make the same size circle as we go around.

I'm turning him loose to let him learn what his options are.

About the same time I start a horse's formal circle education, I introduce the concept of lead departures. When I work on circles, I want the horse to stand in a collected position. For the left lead, I'll take my left leg off and press harder with the right leg, then cluck. In the beginning, as long as he stays in a collected position with his back up and his chin in, I don't care if he feels compelled to trot two or three steps before he picks up the lope. As time goes on and he starts to understand more of what I want, he'll trot less and less. Finally, when I put him in a collected position, take one leg off and put the other on, he'll step up into the lope.

My thought is to help him get the idea rather than fighting to make him lope right off from a standstill the first time. I don't have any slack in the reins. I want to choose his departure style – collected. I don't want him to choose his own. But as soon as he lopes off, I'll turn him loose.

Guiding

Once the horse learns the circle position, I work on guiding, and that's something I like to take outdoors in a big, open field. I don't want fences to be a crutch or an obstacle. I want the horse dependent on my hands for his direction, and guiding is a step toward teaching the horse to neck rein.

Out in a field, I lope in a straight line, then I redirect the horse just slightly by picking up the slack in the rein and rubbing it against the horse's neck. I'm not looking for a big bend from the horse. I just want him to change direction a little bit. For instance, if I'm riding toward one tree, I might redirect toward the tree next to it.

The most important thing to remember is to fix what you want to fix, and then turn the horse loose. Don't keep picking.

Out in a big field, I lope in a straight line, then I guide the horse to a slightly different direction, then ride in a straight line, then I guide again.

If you've made three redirects in the same direction, and the horse wants to start leaning in, I'll guide the other direction, almost to a counter-canter.

After I've done this a while, the horse starts thinking, "I have no idea where this idiot is going to go, so I'm

going to wait for him to tell me."

That attitude is exactly what I want. I want the horse to wait on me and let me do the guiding.

Speed Control

I start loping two or three nice-size circles. In the beginning, I don't work much on the concept of small, slow circles or large, fast circles. I lope big, slow circles and big, fast circles.

I want my horse to lope in a nice rhythmic cadence. I don't want him speeding up and slowing down within a single circle. Once I set the pace, I want the horse to maintain it. I might have to fix him, but then I turn him loose so that he can learn it for himself.

This skill is an important one for a horse to have inside or outside of the show pen. If you're riding across a pasture, you don't want the horse to speed up and slow down randomly. You want to set a pace and be able to think about other things, like your rope.

A horse is in correct circle position when his body is mostly straight but I can see his inside

Whether the horse is heading for the show pen or to be a comfortable ride, he needs a steady speed and to let his rider be the one who picks the speed. He doesn't need to do it himself.

Generally speaking, when you're loping circles, the minute you slow a horse down, he starts wanting to dive into the center of the circle. I don't want him to do that, so every once in a while, I'll guide the horse in, almost like I'm baiting him. The first time he takes a step inward when I haven't told him to do that, I push him back out to a big, slow circle.

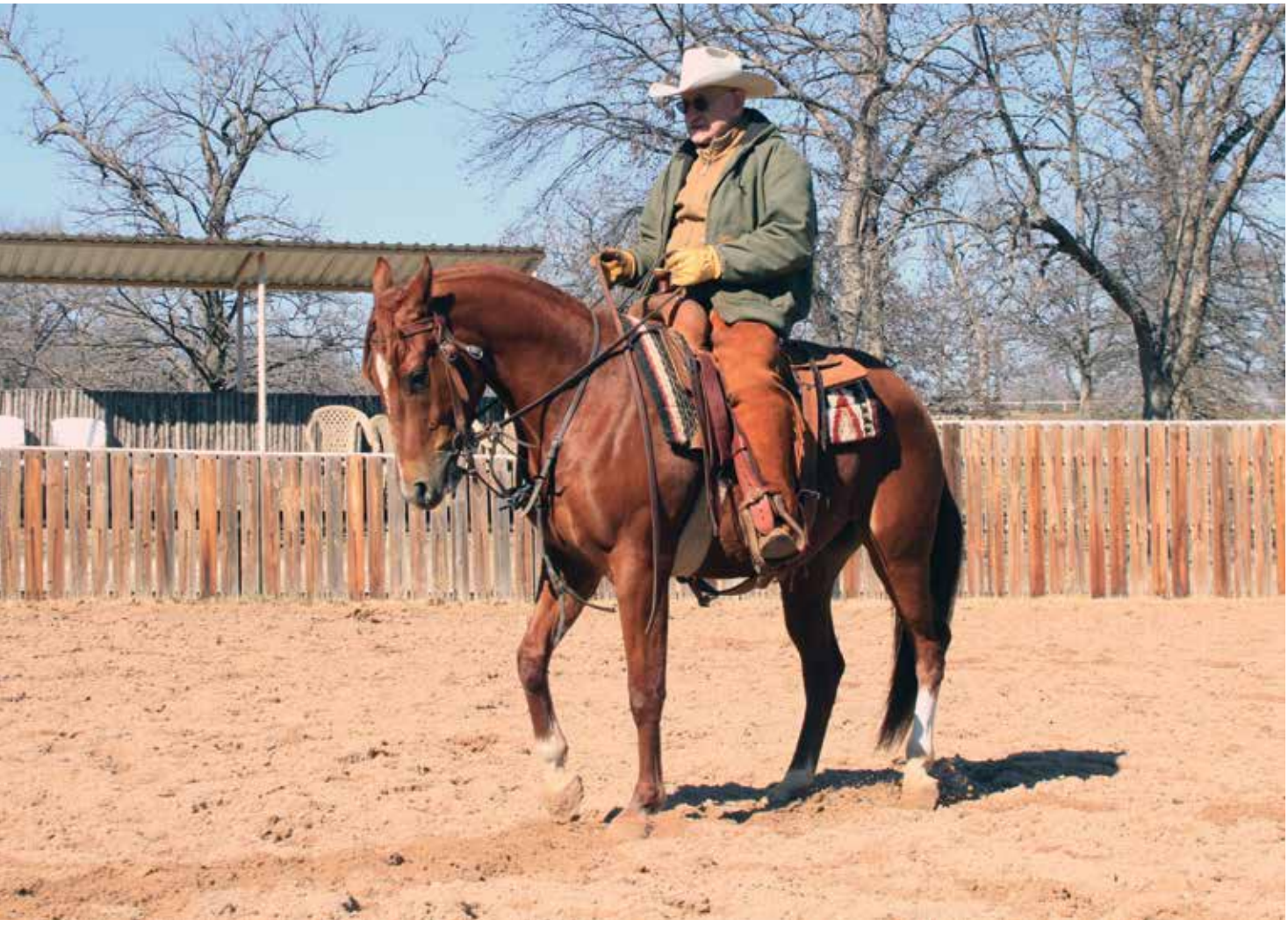
It's like you're sending the horse to school, showing him where he made mistakes and helping him fix his homework. There's no need to get mad when he does something wrong. This isn't a test. It's homework, and it's intended to help him learn.

Backing

I start teaching a horse to back up early in his education, sometimes a little bit while he's in the round pen.

I don't pull on a horse to get him to back up. Instead, I set my barrier, just like I'm planning to ride forward in a collected position, then I use my legs and bump. Instead of riding forward, I ride backward.

In the beginning, of course, the



I'm not pulling with my hands as I ask this horse to back. I've set the barrier, and I'm using my legs to provide impulsion and direction. In essence, I'm riding the horse backward instead of forward. His ears are back watching me, and he's not distressed. He's just moving backward.

horse isn't going to understand what you want. But I maintain my barrier. I don't pull harder and harder. I set a barrier, and when the horse finally chooses to take a step backward, I give a release. Then I take another step back and give another release.

I like to always back two or three steps before I go forward again, because I don't want the horse to think his job is finished if he backs one step. I want him to have the idea that he might need to go back several steps.

As the backing training goes on, I expect the backing to go a little faster, a little more rhythmically by building slowly and letting him go his own pace. But in a finished horse, I expect that when I lift slack from reins and set the barrier, he will back up almost on a loose rein until I drop my hand and release the barrier. That's the cue to stop.

In a slight variation of Basic No. 3, hip movement, I use my legs to give him the direction that I want him to back rather than trying to use my hands. If I'm backing him with my hands and suddenly I change, he'll get confused and won't know what I want him to do.

If I start to back and he's backing to the right, I put my right leg on him and move him over to a straight line. After a young horse gets the idea, then I'll practice backing little circles or S's, moving his hindquarters. If you can back an S or wavy line, surely you can back up straight.

It's almost like having a steering wheel in his back end. I want to be completely sure that my horse understands that my hands are for backing and my legs are to alter directions.

Know Your Horse

Every horse learns at his own pace. It's not a race. If a horse isn't ready to learn something new, I don't push it, but I'm exposing him to concepts every day. I also like to intersperse the lessons with different things. After I finish a lesson, I might ride off to a different pasture, check the fence then come back again to the arena where I'll spend 10-15 minutes on something else.

As I've said before, I want a horse to have a workmanlike attitude about what I'm asking him to do. He doesn't have to love it – no one loves their job every single day – but it shouldn't be stressful for him, and he shouldn't get worried about being asked to try new things. My goal is that my horses learn that I won't punish them harshly for being wrong, and I'll probably reward them for being right. That keeps them trying new things.

In the early months of a horse's 3-year-old year, you have to make a decision on whether a horse is capable of advanced movement for end-of-year futurities, because the payments start building in March. I like to have my horses far enough along that I can tell whether a colt is talented enough to go on and be good enough to be a performance horse or whether he's just going to make a really nice ranch horse.

If a horse is a futurity horse, I want to plan my program so we can keep steadily moving forward and be ready by the end of November.

But if I have a horse that's a little bit behind or slow at one maneuver, I'll wait until almost the end to push, like October. The slower you go in the beginning, the faster you can go at the end. I like to keep that in mind.

It's always important to be aware of what your horse's mental attitude is. If you start to do something and he's nervous or worried, back off and go back and secure his foundation and then build him back up to that level. If you push ahead, even when he's nervous, and force him, you might be able to make him do it, but your end product won't be as good. I want a horse that's well-mannered, quiet and still but has the athleticism, training and ability to do all the hard stuff, whether I compete with him or not.

And who doesn't want to ride that horse?