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Guide to
Barrel Horse Training

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COVER PHOTO

Stevi Hillman and 2017 AQHA-WPRA Horse of the Year runner-up MCM Imasharguy, aka "Sharpie"

Photo by Dan Hubbell



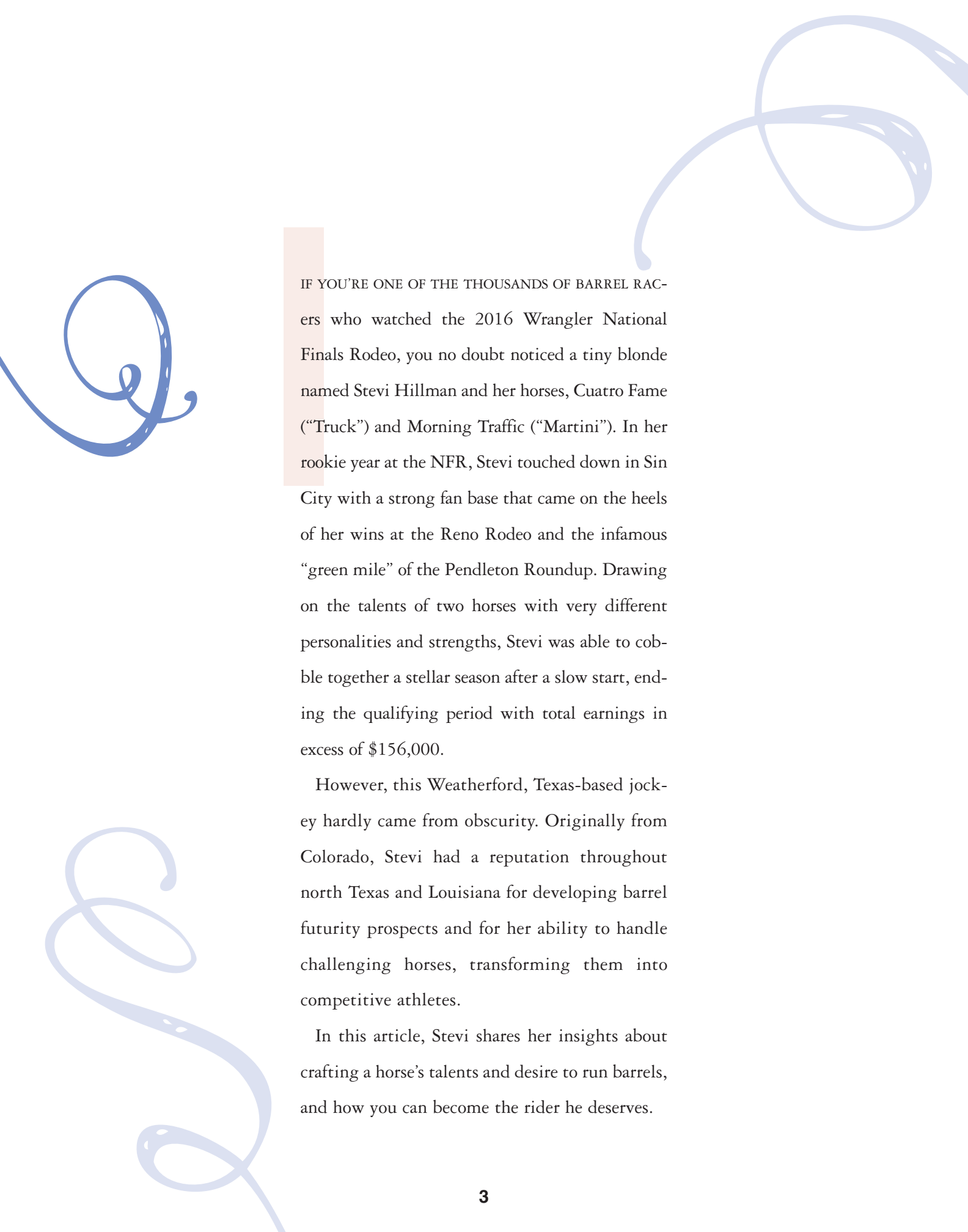
CREATING Romance

Barrel horses who learn to love their job run through the in-gate seeking the object of their desire. Here's how top rookie Stevi Hillman keeps her horses' infatuation alive.

**By Stevi Hillman
with Julie J. Bryant**

Stevi Hillman strives for correctness in her barrel turns. The mare's inside hind leg is driving her forward as she reaches with her shoulders and bends through the ribcage. Remember, the power comes from behind.



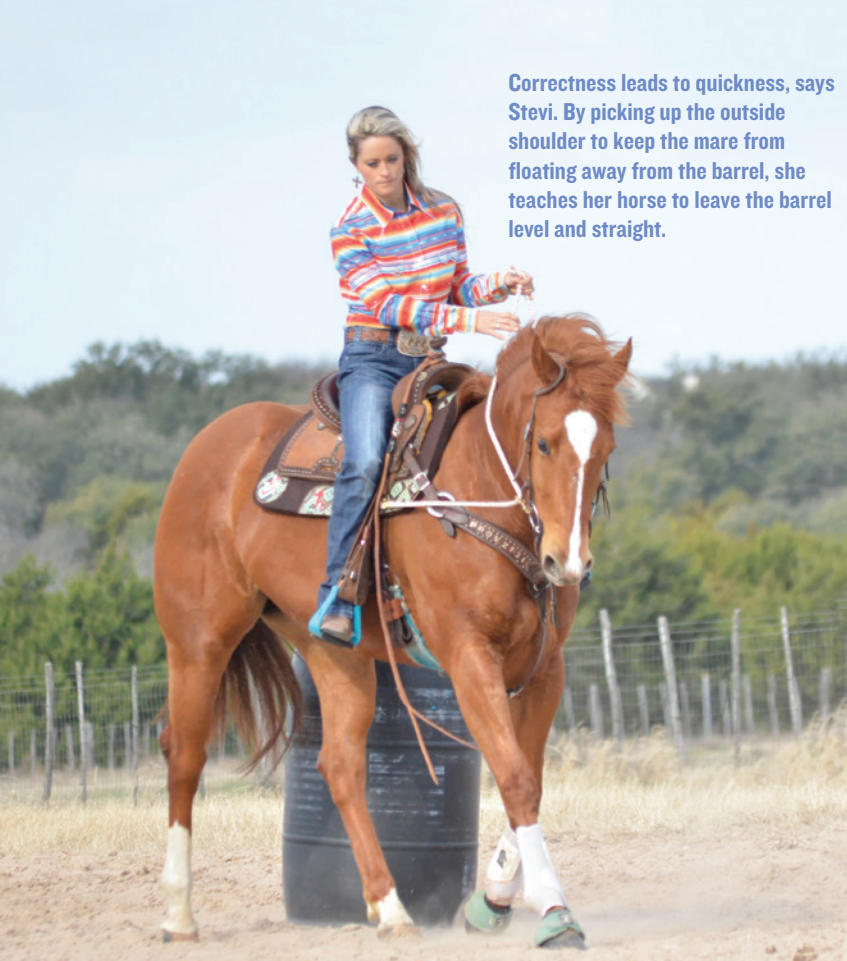


IF YOU'RE ONE OF THE THOUSANDS OF BARREL RACERS who watched the 2016 Wrangler National Finals Rodeo, you no doubt noticed a tiny blonde named Stevi Hillman and her horses, Cuatro Fame ("Truck") and Morning Traffic ("Martini"). In her rookie year at the NFR, Stevi touched down in Sin City with a strong fan base that came on the heels of her wins at the Reno Rodeo and the infamous "green mile" of the Pendleton Roundup. Drawing on the talents of two horses with very different personalities and strengths, Stevi was able to cobble together a stellar season after a slow start, ending the qualifying period with total earnings in excess of \$156,000.

However, this Weatherford, Texas-based jockey hardly came from obscurity. Originally from Colorado, Stevi had a reputation throughout north Texas and Louisiana for developing barrel futurity prospects and for her ability to handle challenging horses, transforming them into competitive athletes.

In this article, Stevi shares her insights about crafting a horse's talents and desire to run barrels, and how you can become the rider he deserves.

Correctness leads to quickness, says Stevi. By picking up the outside shoulder to keep the mare from floating away from the barrel, she teaches her horse to leave the barrel level and straight.



JULIE BRAVANT PHOTOS

When it comes to training, the best approach is to recognize that the horse is as much an athlete as the person in the saddle. He needs the same care and compassion that a human athlete needs. The most important thing is to build discipline, trust and confidence. Without them, a horse cannot give you his absolute best. He might be good – but he could be great.

I am a firm believer in knowing my horses inside and out – all the things they like and don't like. Horses can't talk, but they can communicate with us in different ways. What has worked well for me is being able to put the horse's personality and happiness ahead of my training techniques. I then employ a communication strategy that combines the horse's buttons with mine.

Some might view my training facility as "bare bones." I don't ride in a fenced arena, and I see this as a benefit. When I am teaching my horse to hunt for the barrel, there's no fence for the horse to look at or think about. There is just the barrel. That's his focus, his goal. When we go to an event, I want my horse to run down the alley truly seeking the barrel – no matter what the arena setup, pattern size or surroundings.

My horse's job is to listen to me, mostly through my hands and how I shift my weight in the saddle. There are no distractions when I work my horses at home, but there are plenty when we get on the road. My purpose is to make sure the horse knows his goal and his job.

Meeting In the Middle

TRAINING IS NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL. EVEN THE TIPS I AM sharing here might not work with every horse. I've had the opportunity to ride everything – polo ponies, reining horses, cutting horses, barrel horses. What that diverse riding background has confirmed for me is that a horse does his best when you actually know him.

For example, Cuatro Fame – I call him "Truck" – is a horse many people can relate to, especially if they've taken on a horse trained by someone else. We all have our own training styles, and Truck had a different feel than what I was used to riding.

He can be a handful, which I found out when I got him in 2015. Truck was stiffer through his ribcage and had a "roll-back" style. It took about six months for me to learn his buttons and for him to learn mine. I worked on getting him to bend in the ribcage and move forward in his turns. I wasn't re-training him – just getting him to understand what I wanted and why. When I pull, he's got to relax and give.

I also had to understand Truck's style and meet him in the middle. He's a more aggressive horse in his run, and I didn't want to take that out of him. And he'll always be pushy and bossy. It's not right or wrong. But now we have an understanding and we communicate a lot better than we used to.

A horse needs to understand what is absolutely required of him. You need to decide what is acceptable to you. When it comes to personality, I want my horses to be who they are naturally. Sometimes that means putting up with some quirks – if those quirks don't get in the way of what I'm trying to accomplish. It's all about clear communication. If your

Rider position is important. Stevi keeps her weight on her outside hip and her inside shoulder back, which encourages her mare to keep her own shoulders up as she comes around the barrel.



horse doesn't understand what you're asking, he won't be able to do his job. Spending time and paying attention creates that communication.

It is important to learn what keeps a horse happy. I realized that Truck's muscles get tight when we're hauling on long trips, so massaging and stretching make him happy. He also likes to have another horse, or his pony, with him. Making him happy doesn't mean letting him get away with everything. But if I've tried to get my horse over certain things and it's a continual fight, I can think outside the box, try to help my horse out and figure out another way to meet him in the middle.

I also take into consideration the advice of others who work with my horse, such as my farrier, veterinarian or equine chiropractor. Professionals spend time working with horses every day, and they likely know your horse. They often have insights into areas that might be causing pain or discomfort and can suggest how to address potential problems. Teamwork!

I also learn a lot from my horse's eyes and ears. Those are the two most expressive parts. Since horses cannot speak, I often know if my horse is happy or hurting, uncomfortable or scared, by paying attention to his eyes and ears, because that's how he communicates.

If you decide to move from futurities and stand-alone barrel races to rodeo, there's a big difference in the environments. At jackpots and futurities, everything is much more suited to barrel racing. With rodeo, you're never sure what the ground will be like, and your horse will be around bulls, sheep, the carnival and who knows what else before – or even while – he

runs down the alley. Sometimes there is nowhere to warm up.

Your communication skills will be a valuable tool. You have to do your job and make sure the horse is listening to and focusing on you and not what's going on around him. With Truck, I "shh-shh" to him as we go down the alley to bring him back to me and make sure he's listening. All of this is very individual to the horse. Some horses will need that verbal reassurance and some won't. With my other horse, "Martini," I just sit quietly, because she is a bit of a diva and likes the spotlight. She's eager to get in there and get to work. That's what you have to figure out.

Stretching, Ahhh ...

BECAUSE TRUCK GETS TIGHT, GETTING IN A GOOD STRETCH before we run is crucial. Truck had back surgery for "kissing spine" (a condition where the bones of the spine are touching) and stretching makes him feel a lot better.

My horses get so they love stretching, and I love doing it for them. It's part of the routine as we get ready to work in the practice pen or at the rodeo. Even if a horse doesn't have muscular issues, stretching is a good idea. It's fun and the horse gets the idea that you're there for him and begins to look forward to the workout.

Not everybody stretches a horse the way I do it. Manipulating a 1,200-pound animal can seem daunting, especially if you're someone around my size. I'm barely over 100 pounds and a little over 5 feet tall. I started with the help of my chiropractor and some cookies, and pretty soon, we had our technique down.

Cuatro Fame, aka "Truck," loves to stretch. He had back surgery for "kissing spine" and stretching keeps him limber and eager to run. The key is to take it slow.

JULIE BRYANT



When working from the horse's left side, I put my right shoulder into the horse's girth area for support. Then I place my left hand on the horse's knee while pulling up the lower leg with my right hand to slowly lower the horse to his knee. To get the horse to stretch his neck, I have someone help me by holding the halter as my horse lowers. I sometimes use a treat to encourage the horse. I have him stay down for 10 to 15 seconds and then repeat the process on the other side.

Truck has gotten to where he actually extends his nose and gives his neck a good stretch. He loves it and I think it puts him in a good frame of mind before we get started.

After he gets up, I pull his nose toward me while I'm still standing at the girth.

Other stretches include picking up the horse's foot and stretching it toward me as I stand in front. I stretch the back leg by picking it up like I do when I'm cleaning the hoof and rotate the horse's hip backward for a stretch through the hip. I just make sure I do this slowly and carefully. My horse tells me how deep of a stretch he can handle.

It's not all that different from what you would do for yourself prior to a run or exercise. You need to stretch the muscles prior to working and it's a great way to get to know your horse. It might just give you an edge that could shave a hundredth of a second off your run. With the competition you see in this sport, that could mean a difference of thousands of dollars.

The Buttons

WHEN IT COMES TO BARREL HORSES, BROKE AND LIGHT IS WHAT works for me. But if you were to watch me with Truck, you definitely wouldn't think "broke and light." Truck can be very heavy on the front end, so I use what I call a "Yes, ma'am, bit" when he is getting strong in practice or on the road to remind him to pay attention to me. This bit has a fairly low port and a chain, so it's not severe. It is just enough to keep him focused and to bring him back to my hand. It's an example of how I might adjust what I'm doing to do what is best for the horse.

There are buttons I use to keep my horses light and to position their feet to spend as little time as possible in the actual turn around the barrel. This is more "feel" than an instructional how-to. You have to start away from the barrels, teaching your horse how to move his feet quickly and correctly, but not rushed.

I always want the front feet moving forward, but only with the hind feet driving them. I don't want the hind end planted in the ground and the front feet moving. I want all parts moving and working together. It's as simple as turning a tight circle. I want those shoulders up, front feet grabbing, allowing the hind end to push them. It's like dancing, everything should be fluid and smooth. I don't want the shoulders falling in and the hind end flinging around.

I work on one goal at a time so I am communicating clearly what I need from my horse that day. I'm not confusing him with several different things. Plus, I'm more likely to see improvement when I'm working on that one area, and I'll know when it's time to quit for the day. It's really no different than the way you teach children. You work on the ABCs, and when they get that, you start forming small words, then short sentences. We let them breathe and think between each point and get to a place where we can work on a few things together.

The horse should work from the shoulder, the ribs, the hip. Leaning forward and grabbing hold of the horse's face to "steer" might feel natural to some riders, but the power comes from

Stevi got Truck in 2015. The Dash Ta Fame gelding tends to be stiff and pushy, so his rider kindly reminds him to give to her hands during practice.



the back, so you need to sit back and drive that power forward through the horse's shoulder, letting the motor drive the front end while you guide the horse's face and shoulders.

As I work around the barrel, I teach my horse where to place his feet so that he is both quick and correct. Correct equals quick. You don't want to rush a horse on the backside of the barrel, and it's easy to do without realizing it. A *correct* turn ends up being faster and creates the snappy turn many people see in my horses. They're quick, but they don't hurry. When I see horses that just seem to be scrambling to get around the barrel, it's usually because they are trying to hurry. Hurry and quickness are not the same. Quickness comes from the horse being confident about where to put his feet and becoming efficient in his movements around the barrel.

When training, I don't just come out and turn around the barrel over and over. Correct body position is important, so I make sure my horse is straight coming into the barrel, not leaning with his shoulder, but rather turning through the ribs and driving with the hip.

As we approach the barrel, I show my horse where to begin the turn. I sit my weight down in the saddle, and ask him to rate his speed and prepare for the turn. Then I engage his hip. I'm still seated on his hind end, but I'm pushing forward, allowing my horse's shoulders to grab and move forward into the turn, leading with the inside shoulder closest to the barrel and forming a pocket. Keep in mind, this is all one fluid movement.

As we leave the barrel, I pick up the outside shoulder. As I'm picking up the shoulder, I'm squeezing with my outside leg so my horse straightens as he crosses over with the other foot as he leaves the barrel. My job is to be sitting square and balanced in the saddle, so my weight doesn't cause my horse to lean into the barrel, hurry or get out of position.

I work on one goal at a time so I am communicating clearly what I need from my horse that day

– Stevi Hillman

Lasting Love

I TRY TO TEACH A HORSE TO CRAVE BARREL RACING, TO REALLY enjoy it and have fun. I know it's working when my horse really starts hunting the barrel coming into the alleyway in anticipation of the run.

This is a perfect example of the "hunt" Stevi Hillman strives for in her horses – Truck is looking for the barrel. Note the position of Stevi's hands and seat. She's not leaning forward, but helping to drive that hip.



JACKIE JENSEN/COURTESY OF STEVI HILLMAN



Morning Traffic is completely enjoying the pattern at Pendleton, says Stevi. "Martini," a Frenchmans Guy daughter, is expressing a tremendous amount of speed, but is completely relaxed while running.

Most horses will continue to enjoy barrel racing as long as we pay attention to their health and make sure they feel good. We don't need to focus as much on speed during practice. That comes in time as horses become correct and efficient in their movements, which, in turn, builds confidence and allows horses to gain speed without falling apart.

As a horse learns to hunt the barrel, he'll use it as a place of security. He knows what his job is when he comes into the arena. Horses do have bad days. I accept that and move on. If things don't improve, I start looking for hidden signs of injury or other reasons the horse is off. With an older, experienced horse, I try to figure out whether he's simply a little rusty and needs to be reminded of the basics, or if there's an underlying problem. With older horses, the challenge is often boredom, fatigue or a loss of fitness.

On Being Me

I AM TRULY BLESSED TO BE INVOLVED IN A SPORT THAT I LOVE AS much as I do. And I hope you enjoy barrel racing as much as I do – and that you'll work at it. I compete with many gifted barrel racers, and I continue to learn from them. But I stay who I am as a rider and work with horses in the way I believe is best for them. My horses are my partners, and I try to treat them with the respect and care they deserve so they can do the job I'm asking of them. I never forget that. 🐾

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Truck carried Stevi Hillman to a Women's Professional Rodeo Association Rookie of the Year title, but they had to develop a mutual "understanding," one that required compromise.

Fleet of Foot

Although a few quick changes have helped barrel racer Sue Smith win major events, she has a simple shoeing program that promotes balance and speed.

By Breanne Hill

SUE SMITH AND HER QUARTER HORSE, REAL CLAIM TO Fame (“Claimer”), were preparing for the 2012 Calgary Stampede barrel racing semi-finals when a relentless rain began to fall.

“It was light rain at first,” the two-time Wrangler National Finals Rodeo qualifier describes, “and then it just kept coming.”

Soon, Calgary’s outdoor arena was a shallow pond, and Sue had to figure out how she could keep Claimer safe running in those conditions while retaining her chance to win the rodeo’s \$100,000 purse.

“During the semi-finals, Claimer handled the ground pretty good,” Sue recalls, “but as I was pulling him up, I felt him sliding and slipping a little bit. I knew it would just get worse because it was going to continue to rain – and I still had the short-go to run that same day.”



Putting mud nails in Real Claim To Fame's shoes prior to her final run at the Calgary Stampede gave Idaho cowgirl Sue Smith the confidence to make a huge splash in a rain-soaked pen.

Luckily, Sue had an ace up her sleeve. This champion trainer is also an experienced farrier, one who is accustomed to navigating tricky ground at high speeds. She took Claimer back to his stall and reshod him using mud nails. Mud nails stick farther out of the shoe than regular nails, providing extra digging power.

“Back in Idaho, we run chariot horses, and we sometimes run them on ice with those nails,” Sue explains. “That was where I was coming from. I knew even if the arena was a lake, I would get traction with those nails.”

The decision paid off. Sue and Claimer earned the prestigious Calgary Stampede victory, with their final time of 17.53 besting second-place finishers Tammy Fischer and Easy Dash Oak, who ran a 17.81, and third-place team Carlee Pierce and Rare Dillion, who came in at 18.74 seconds.

“I don’t know if the mud nails actually helped, or if I just thought they helped,” Sue says. “But because I felt confident that I had covered all my bases, I just made a run. I didn’t safety-up just because the ground was greasy.”

“I don’t know if the mud nails actually helped. But because I felt confident... I didn’t safety-up just because the ground was greasy.”

– Sue Smith

“I know that confidence helped me,” she confirms.

With so little time to make adjustments during a run, barrel racers must have confidence in their preparation, and as Sue can attest, well-thought-out hoof care and shoeing can help win the race before it’s even started.

“You have to educate yourself about hoof care for your horse’s sake,” she advises. “Pay attention to your horse’s feet and know what works best for him.”

The Basics

DESPITE HER IMPRESSIVE QUICK change at Calgary, Sue is really a creature of habit when it comes to hoof care. She has figured out what works best for her and her barrel horses. She’s not interested in complicated routines.

“I think it’s best to keep it simple,” she says. “Sometimes I think people do too much, and it creates problems. If a horse is balanced and he’s moving right, you’re not going to have much trouble.”

Sue formed her opinions about trimming and shoeing speed horses at an early age, while working at a racetrack for a journeyman farrier.

“This farrier taught me about the industry, and I just always had a real interest in farrier work. It’s intriguing to me,” Sue says. “I think it’s an art. I love looking at a horse’s feet when they’re shod right. You know, I appreciate that. I think it takes talent to be able to shoe a horse correct and level.”

Balance is at the heart of Sue’s entire hoof care program. She shoes all of her own horses at home, but works with her veterinarian to make sure each horse’s weight is evenly distributed over its hooves.

“I regularly go to my vet and have him X-ray my horses’ feet to make sure the balance is correct,” she says. “No foot, no horse. So it’s a big deal to do it right. I’ll always go the extra mile to make sure it is done right.”

To Sue, “doing it right” means getting as close to a horse’s natural hoof length as possible, while giving him the extra help that allows him to stand up around the barrels.

“If a horse is barefoot, he’ll create a natural balance in his feet,” she says. “You want that also when you shoe him. You want decent break-over, where a horse comes over himself just right.”

“Break-over,” meaning the way in which a horse’s foot rotates when it takes a step, affects mobility and speed. The length of a horse’s toe and heel can impact its ability to break over evenly and move around the barrels in an efficient manner.

Because of this, Sue is an advocate of trimmed-back toes and level heels in competitive horses.

“It’s a fine line to walk because you want to trim that toe up, but you don’t want it to be too fancy or unnatural,” Sue says. “Horses actually get traction from their toes when they break over. If you pull that toe back too far, they lose that and it messes up their stride.

“But if you have too much toe out there, it creates pressure and slows you down.”

Having too much heel on a horse can also create pressure, only in the opposite direction.

“A balanced foot that is trimmed right will sit down

COURTESY OF THE CALGARY STAMPEDE



Because she didn’t “safety up,” Sue Smith won the biggest check of her career on “Claimer” at the iconic rodeo held in Alberta.

easily,” Sue says. “That toe will break over easily. So there’s a fine line for what’s going to help a horse and what’s going to get in his way. That’s why I believe in X-raying to make sure you’re getting that balance just right.”

Once her horses are trimmed evenly, with their weight distributed correctly, Sue wants them fully shod before she competes on them.

“I don’t get by with my horses barefoot,” she says. “I don’t feel like the horse can stand up as well. I’ve tried barefoot, but I like lots of support, and I’ve had really good luck as far as keeping my horses sound and balanced with the shoes on.”

Sue doesn’t choose anything too exotic. Most of her barrel horses wear light-rimmed shoes, which she says work well on almost any type of ground.

“Most of the futurity grounds are a little better than the rodeo grounds,” she says. “A lot of times at a rodeo, they’re not dragging between runners. At a futurity, you might not go more than five horses without dragging. It makes the ground better, definitely.”

“But our rodeo circuit, the Wilderness Circuit, is also really good about trying to get the ground correct for us, so those light-rimmed shoes pretty much work for anything we want to do.”

And when it comes to creating just the right amount of hold, Sue claims any arena can provide her with the final ingredient she needs.

“The best traction on dirt is dirt,” explains Sue. “When the dirt gets in the rim of those shoes, it’s going to give you a little more traction – unless you get in an unusual situation.”

Getting into the arena with your horse to check out the ground before you run is the best way to make sure you’re making the right shoeing and safety decisions – and provides the opportunity to get the rims dirty.

When to Make a Change

INCLUDING CALGARY, SUE HAS CHANGED A HORSE’S SHOES ON A moment’s notice just a handful of times. She replaced Claimer’s nails between rounds at the Ellensburg Rodeo when the ground became “skate-y” and she needed more traction. She also reshod her step-daughter’s horse during a high school rodeo finals when the ground proved slick.

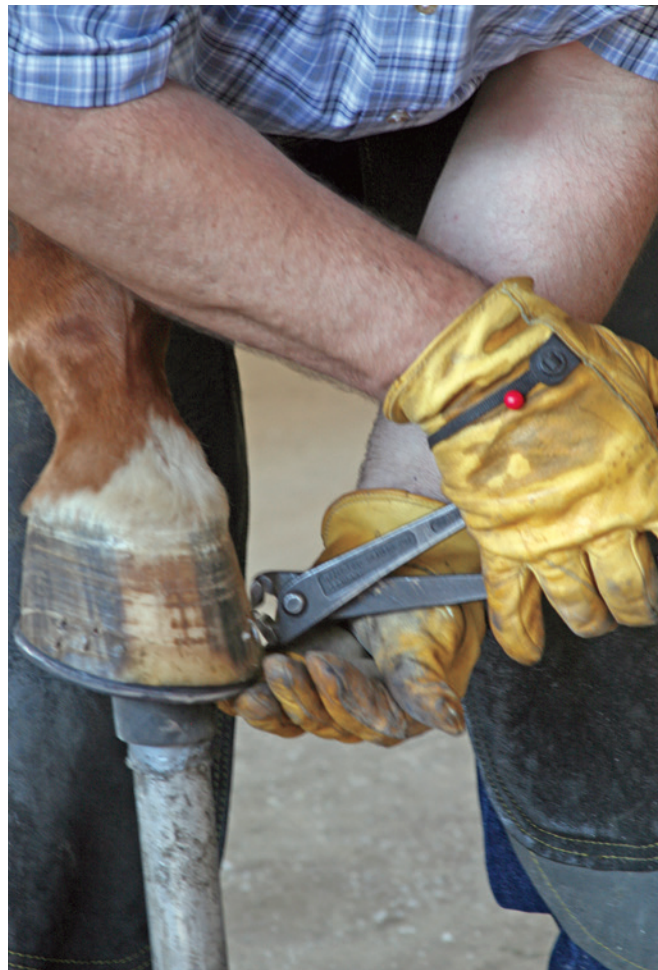
“We put some racehorse shoes on her horse that had big, old stickers, and I told her to just go for it,” Sue recalls. “She outran everybody by two seconds because everyone was just struggling to stand up. They were just loping, and she ran.”

Ground conditions are a major factor in determining whether a barrel racer needs to change his or her shoe game. Ideally, Sue says barrel racing ground will be fast, yet provides the horse with traction. On the other hand, runners can get into trouble on ground that is worked on top, but is hard-pan underneath.

“When we have to run on that type of ground, sometimes our horses start slipping,” Sue says. “We start running by barrels.”

“I don’t want to take a chance that my horse is going to get hurt running on that type of bad ground in the wrong shoes.”

Not only does Sue check out the footing before she runs,



Not every barrel racer can shoe her own horse, but working with a trusted farrier and adhering to a strict schedule to maintain perfectly balanced feet is critical to speed and soundness.

she also tries to watch the other riders who go before her to see how their horses handle the ground. But in the end, changing shoes or nails depends on how much time she has before it is her turn to go.

“If you’re in the chute, and you’re watching the people right in front of you, obviously, you can’t do much,” she says. “You can’t change anything. At that point, your shoes aren’t a factor. You have to adjust your riding, not push your horse as hard.”

If you do have time, however, and you see other horses slipping and sliding, Sue says it’s not a bad idea to call in the farrier.

“There are exceptional conditions where you need extra traction, or it rained. That’s when a shoe change wouldn’t be out of order – if you have a farrier you trust,” she amends. “But in general, do I change my horse’s shoes for the ground conditions? No. You can’t be obsessive about it – and you can’t always do something about it – even if the ground is terrible.”

“There are exceptional conditions where you need extra traction, or it rained. That’s when a shoe change wouldn’t be out of order – if you have a farrier you trust.”

– Sue Smith

Special Considerations

NOT ALL SHOE CHANGES ARE DUE TO BAD GROUND, HOWEVER. There are times when a hoof care routine needs to be updated due to a horse's age or special needs. For example, as Claimer has gotten older, Sue has given his heels a lift using wedged shoes.

"He has a little bit of arthritis in his ankle," Sue notes. "We use that wedge on his heels to take pressure off of his ankles and give him room to break over. He didn't run on anything but a simple, steel-rimmed shoe when he was younger, but that was all he needed then. His needs have changed."

Speaking of heels, Sue also pays special attention to whether her horses are dragging or burning the backs of their feet. While she stresses that she doesn't want sliding shoes on her barrel horses, she will use shoes that completely cover the heel bulbs as needed.

"Barrel horses have to really run in there and sit back on the ground. They kind of have to drag their heels at points," she says. "I don't want them burning that heel ball." Injury is another reason Sue may change a horse's hoof care routine, if only for a short time.

"As with heel sores," she says, "you may have to put a harder shoe on for a period of time, but that doesn't mean you have to keep it that way forever. I don't want to leave a shoe like that on for an extended amount of time. I just want to get them past the injury, then back to normal shoes."

Working With a Farrier

NOT EVERY BARREL RACER CAN BE HIS OR HER OWN FARRIER. Sue acknowledges that it's difficult, physical work, and even she no longer wants to attempt shoeing a horse if it isn't on its best behavior.

"They have to be good, or I won't crawl up underneath them," she jokes.

Therefore, finding a professional and developing a good relationship with that person is key for any horse owner.

"The best thing you can do is get a good farrier who knows what he's doing, is consistent and shows up all the time," Sue says.

The sport of barrel racing is full of hills and valleys. Sue says a real partnership with your farrier can help you make the most of the good times, as well as the learning experiences.

At outdoor venues, Mother Nature has a say in ground conditions, but they rarely require shoe alterations, says Sue. At the 2016 Colorado Classic, she and Dashes Centerfold were futurity champs, winning the second go and the slot race.



“You want someone who is willing to work with you through your struggles,” she advises. “You want someone who listens to your opinion and doesn’t get an attitude.”

Sue points out that you can’t expect your farrier to read your mind if you’re unhappy, nor can you assume that you know more than he or she does.

“You can’t just tell your shoer what to do,” Sue says. “I’m a professional trainer, and I don’t want people telling me how to ride their horses. If they like my style, they’ll be good with what I do. That’s what I expect.”

“If you go to a good doctor, you expect them to treat you right. So, I don’t expect to have to watch over a farrier. You should have confidence in your farrier to know his business and do the right thing.”

Sue wants barrel racers to remember that nothing is more important than their horses’ good health and hoof care. They need to work with the most talented people they can find to achieve the most substantial results.

“If you want your horse to stay healthy and to win, you always want the great shoer – even if they’re not the most social person or your best friend. You can work with someone

you don’t personally hit it off with, as long as he cares about your horse and does a great job.”

Breanne Hill is a special contributor to AQHA’s The American Quarter Horse Journal. She lives near Bowlegs, Oklahoma. To comment on this article, send an email to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



SUE SMITH, of Blackfoot, Idaho, is a professional barrel racer, trainer and clinician. She has qualified for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo twice and won the 2012 Calgary Stampede.

Sue also trains and competes on the barrel futurity circuit. Last year, she campaigned Dashes Centerfold to be the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association world champion futurity horse and Equi-Stat’s futurity horse of the year. According to Sue, Dashes Centerfold set a record by doing that as a 5-year-old because the mare was eligible to run at some of the \$100,000 slot races. This year, Sue has been running Teena Turner, who won the first go at the Southwest Desert Classic in Salina, Utah.

Sue says she has a weakness for futurity and derby horses with Dash Ta Fame breeding. Not surprising, her famous rodeo horse, Real Claim To Fame, known to barrel racing fans as “Claimer,” is also by Dash Ta Fame (Sudden Fame-First Down Dash), who was featured in the October-November 2016 *Performance Horse Journal*.

Teena Turner’s simple, but well-balanced shoes gave her the traction she needed to win the first go at the Southwest Desert Classic this year.



PIXELWORK

Lucky Clover

Ashley begins the four-barrel drill by loping circles in the middle of the barrels until Justa French Chick, aka "Lainee," relaxes and becomes more responsive to her body language.

This spiraling exercise uses a fourth barrel to increase a horse's reach and fluidity and puts the rider in better position to cue the horse.

Story by Ashley Schafer with Maesa Kummer
Photos by Betsy Lynch

W E CANNOT MAKE A HORSE INTO SOMETHING IT IS NOT. However, in barrel racing, we can help each horse achieve its highest potential. Horses have strengths and weaknesses, but one thing I strive for is getting all my horses to extend their reach in their turns. I want to feel them driving with their hind ends and reaching with their front ends. I also want to achieve fluent forward motion.

Something that helps me achieve these goals is a four-barrel drill I learned from the great Sue Smith. It has become one of my favorite training exercises and it might become one of yours, too.

It's simple. You set four barrels in a square 25-30 feet apart. Start by riding circles in the center of them, and then circle each barrel (sometimes more than one time), always moving in the same direction. You'll ride from one barrel to the next through the inside of the box, and begin the next barrel by circling around it toward the outside of the square. You won't change directions until you've gone around all four barrels and are ready to work on your other side.

If this sounds confusing, rest assured, the pictures and diagram will help. I'll also give you a link so you can watch the exercise online. But before you go saddle your horse, I want to explain the goals.

Body Language

WHEN I'M ASKING MY HORSE TO RUN, RATE AND TURN A BARREL, I always ask with my body first. I use my lower legs and hands second. I've found that my horses are less likely to brace or elevate when I am not pulling on them. I'm simply asking them to move away from pressure.

To accomplish this, I use my shoulders, hips and thighs to get a horse to go the direction I want to go. For example, on the backside of my turn, I remain seated while turning my upper body to look at my next "spot." When I turn, my shoulders and hips naturally rotate in the direction I want my horse to go.

As I am turning, I also push my weight slightly to my outside hip pocket. This causes my outside thigh to close and my inside

thigh to open. In effect, I am blocking my horse's ribcage from floating out and I am opening the door for his front end to step across. This allows my horse to finish the turn sharply.

When a horse is square leaving his turn, he can push off hard and save time. In contrast, if his ribcage floats away from the barrel as he comes around it, he loses momentum and forward motion.

If you've ever said, "My horse cheated me," or "No matter how hard I try to hold him off, he shoulders in," you are not alone. We have all been there. But I want to encourage riders to start assuming a little more responsibility for what happens in the pattern.

My good friend and fellow barrel futurity trainer Joy Wargo is the queen of making me assume responsibility, and for this I am grateful. Joy has helped me become a better trainer and jockey. Although we don't always want to blame ourselves, the truth is, we are the teachers and our horses are our students. If they are doing something wrong, we are generally responsible.

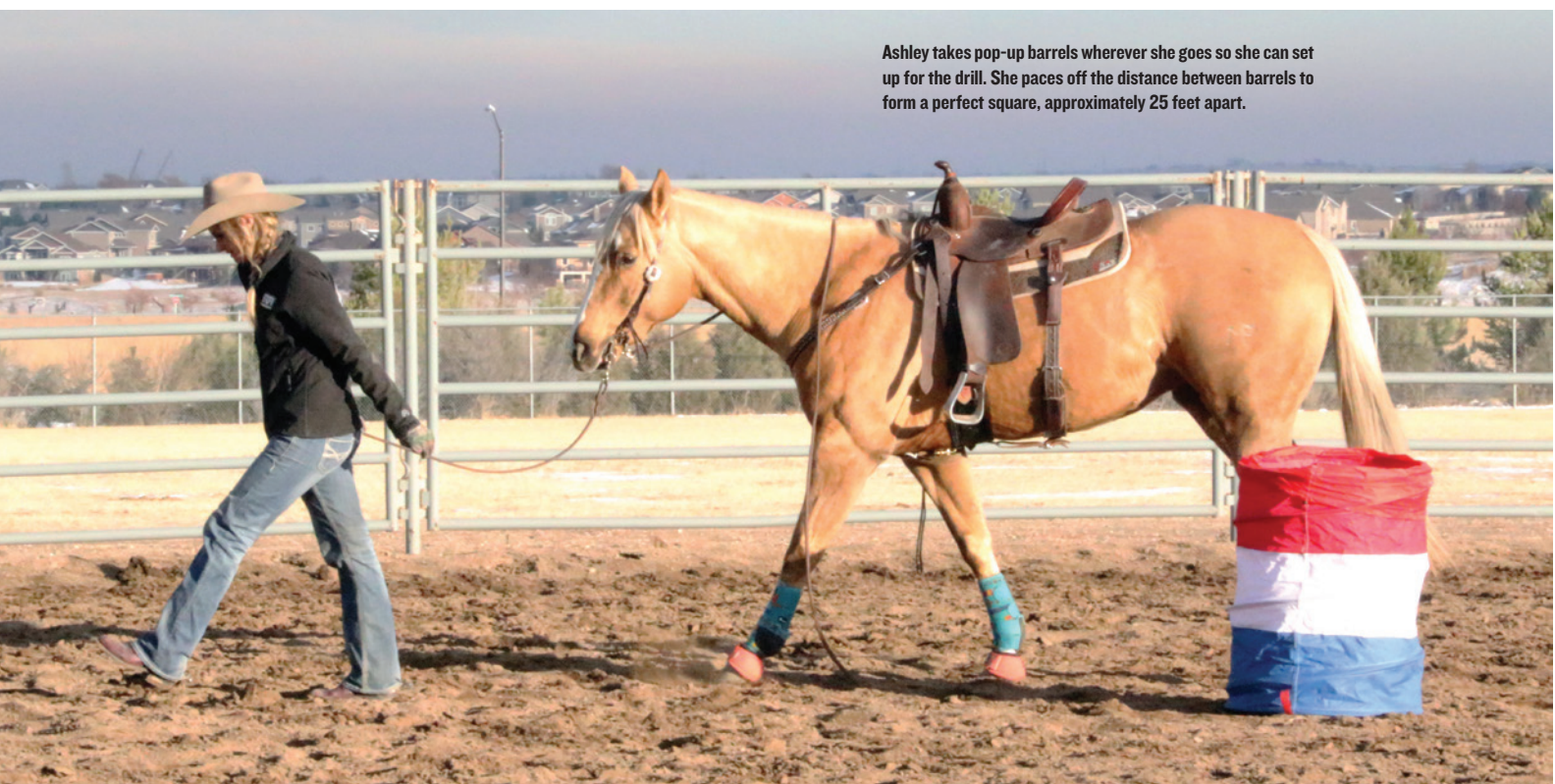
When I am riding squarely and looking at the correct spot, my horse should run honestly to that spot. If I am riding defensively and trying to prevent my horse from doing things that haven't happened yet, often times my hands are saying "No" but my thigh pressure is saying "Turn." In most cases, your body has much more influence than your hands.

Keep It Fun

THE FOUR-BARREL DRILL IS HELPFUL BECAUSE IT IS COMPLETELY different than the barrel pattern. It is set up symmetrically, with the four barrels placed an equal distance apart. This allows me to work on specific placement of the horse's feet. I can leave one barrel and go to the next and the horse becomes confident about where his front feet should be in relationship to the barrel each time he sets up for the next turn.

I want my horse to listen to my cues through four phases: 1) as I ask him to open up for the turn, 2) move forward and

Ashley takes pop-up barrels wherever she goes so she can set up for the drill. She paces off the distance between barrels to form a perfect square, approximately 25 feet apart.



reach through the turn, 3) set his inside hind leg up underneath his body, and 4) bring his front end across so he leaves the turn sharply. These are the main components of a fast, smooth, efficient turn.

Although I'm using a pattern that is different than the three-barrel cloverleaf we run in competition, I'm working on the same movements that I use during a run. It's important to keep the barrel pattern fun for the horse. I want that to be the easy part of the ride so that my horse begins to crave it.

Opening Up the Turn

WHEN RUNNING THE PATTERN, MANY TIMES A BARREL HORSE WILL anticipate and start a turn too early. As I slow things down during practice, I can lay my inside rein and leg on my horse and counter-arc off the barrel and then move on to the next. This teaches my horse to open up for his turn and conditions him to be more responsive to my inside leg and rein pressure. This is the correct set-up to help the horse leave his turn sharply.

Reach

TO ACHIEVE THE REACH THAT I DESIRE, I RIDE THE HINDQUARTERS. This means I position my own center of gravity toward the back-end of my horse. When my horse is driving with his hindquarters, he starts to extend his stride. And if I'm getting even a few more inches of stride length around the barrels, my time is going to be faster.

Fluent forward motion is the key. As soon as I get the reach within the stride I am looking for, I go on to the next barrel. It is important to reward a horse by releasing when he correctly does what you are asking. When horses are rewarded, they gain confidence and try even harder, which will eventually make the runs feel effortless.

Focus

WHEN I RIDE, I AM ALWAYS LOOKING AT THE GROUND IN FRONT of me, just where I want my horse to go. My mom, Kathy Leonard Johnson, always told us to look where we are going because we are our horses' eyes. This makes sense to me for several reasons, but the main reason it's so crucial is that our bodies turn when our heads turn.

When I am on the backside of my turn, I look to the inside of the next barrel and just past it to the spot that I want my horse's front feet to run to. When I turn to look, my shoulders and hips turn as well. This will cause my inside thigh to open up and my outside thigh to tighten. The horse feels this and will move away from the pressure, which enables him to leave the turn sharply.

Anticipating the Turns

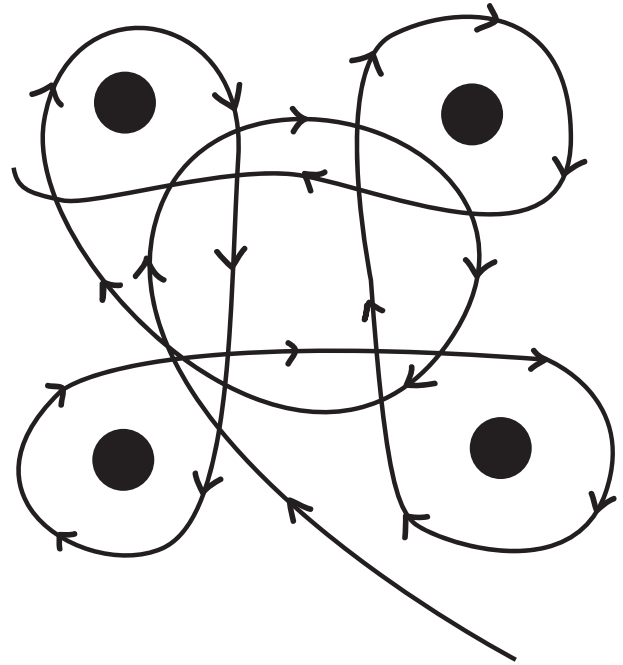
EARLIER I SAID THAT, IN MOST CASES, THE RIDER'S BODY HAS much more influence than her hands. My hands may be saying "No," but my thigh pressure is saying "Turn." This can be the root cause of the horse "cheating" or "shouldering-in" or "anticipating" the turn. Learning to automatically close the outside door and open the inside door with your upper body, hips and thighs is the key to success in a barrel run. The four-barrel exercise gives you plenty of opportunity to practice your body position in each direction and get in sync with your horse. You'll turn a four-barrel drill into an efficient barrel pattern.



4-Barrel Step By Step

1. Set up four barrels in a square, approximately 25-30 feet apart. Experiment with the distance between the barrels, depending on the size, stride and training level of the horse you're riding. Young or inexperienced horses may need additional space between the barrels.
2. Begin by loping your horse in a circle within the boundary of the four barrels. Work on being relaxed and making perfect circles.
3. Choose a barrel and lope around it in the same direction you were traveling while circling inside the four-barrel boundary (left large circle, left small circle).
4. Try to maintain the same distance around the barrel on all sides. (Remember, some horses will need a bigger or smaller path around the barrel, depending on their stage of training.)
5. Keep your circles smooth and the speed consistent. This takes a certain amount of "feel" and awareness of what your body is doing along with your horse's body position and movements. Your goals are to sit deep, drive with your lower body and maintain collection while keeping the horse's ribcage slightly rounded. Lope a circle around the barrel until the correct turn is achieved.
6. Once you have achieved the turn you want, go on to the next barrel.
7. Work on driving your horse with your lower body to the "rate spot," which is usually when your leg is just past the barrel. This is where your horse will shorten his stride and collect himself to make the turn.
8. Look just ahead at the path you want to travel. Keep in mind where your focus is and how it affects the horse's direction.
9. Remember, fluid forward motion, collection and control are the goals, so if at any time, you aren't achieving these goals, readjust to make bigger or smaller circles. 🐾

Maesa Kummer is a barrel racer and host of the barrel racing video website Sweetruns.com. She lives in Platteville, Colorado. To comment on this article, send your email to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



To watch Ashley demonstrate the four-barrel drill, go to her Facebook page (www.facebook.com/SchaferPerformanceHorses/videos).

To keep her horse from drifting away from the barrel, Ashley applies and releases pressure with her thighs to open and close an imaginary "gate" through the turn. She also shifts her weight to her outside seat pocket.

Working the opposite way now, Ashley again lopes circles to the inside of the barrels to set the direction and speed for the drill.



The pace is slow and relaxed, but notice how Lainee has stiffened coming around this barrel. Ashley will circle it more than once to round out the rough edges before heading to the next barrel. Ashley sits back and picks up the inside rein, and Lainee visibly lengthens her stride.



As Ashley and Lainee progress through the exercise, you can see how Lainee is reaching further beneath her body with her inside hind leg. She also has more bend as she circles this barrel.

ASHLEY SCHAFER'S CAREER ACCELERATES



Ashley Schafer trains barrel futurity horses from her home base in Yoder, Wyoming. Her demonstration horse, Justa French Chick, is owned by Joe and Carla Spitz and Shali Lord.

“Three barrels, two hearts, one dream.” It’s a cheesy saying that some might use to describe barrel racing. For Ashley Schafer, the math gets much more complicated than the $3 + 2 + 1$ equation. Start with two people, Ashley and her husband, Seth, two kids – Payson and Oakley – add more than 30 head of horses in training, plus thousands of travel miles toting a fully loaded trailer, and multiply that by countless hours in the saddle. You can see how it becomes a daunting equation.

For the Schafers, it’s their life’s dream.

Ashley’s love of horses started early. Her goal to become a barrel horse trainer took her from Iowa to Oklahoma in 2009, where she was employed by the Jud Little Ranch in Ardmore. She went from loping open horses to becoming trainer Jolene Montgomery’s right-hand gal.

What Ashley lacked in experience, she made up for in work ethic. Relying on Jolene’s guidance, and learning invaluable lessons from the experience of riding well-bred trainees all day, every day, Ashley developed a training and riding style that is serving her well in the barrel racing futurities and, more recently, on the Elite Rodeo Athletes circuit. Ashley’s barrel earnings total approximately \$375,000, with the bulk accumulated in the past few years.

Ashley’s first notable win was aboard the Jud Little Ranch stallion JL Dash Ta Heaven, whom she set the arena record, 14.881 seconds, on at the Better Barrel Races World Finals in Oklahoma City. The stallion was trained and campaigned by Ashley’s mentor, Jolene.

Working for Jud Little was a great opportunity that led to life-long connections. It’s where she met Seth, who was working at the ranch starting colts. After they married, they moved to Seth’s hometown of Yoder, Wyoming, to start their own business, Schafer Performance Horses. Among their first clients were Joe and Carla Spitz of Lamar, Colorado.

“Brian and Lisa Fulton gave Joe my name,” Ashley explains. “My husband used to ride for Brian and Lisa, so I got to know them through him.

“Joe called and asked if I could take some horses. I said I could probably take three. He said, ‘How about four?’ And that’s what he brought. We hit it off right from the start. Joe and Carla are very down-to-earth, straightforward people. When he brought the horses, Joe told me to treat them like they were my own and to send him the bill. They have always trusted my ability to do what’s best for their horses.”

The partnership with Spitz Quarter Horses has produced some impressive results.

Freckles Ta Fame (Dash Ta Fame-Frenchmans Freckles by Frenchmans Guy) was the first horse Ashley ran for the Spitzes in 2013. The Spitzes’ homebred stallion had a great futurity year and won approximately \$27,000. He missed half the season due to injury, but he placed at nearly every futurity where he ran. Freckles Ta Fame is still running and winning for both Shali Lord and Ashley at Women’s Professional Rodeo Association and ERA barrel races and has amassed more than \$100,000 in earnings.

In 2014, Ashley campaigned Guys Girl Power (Frenchmans Guy-Handfulla Dash by Power Train) and they won \$20,000 in the first four months before the mare was sold to Busby Quarter Horses.

KR Last Fling (A Streak of Fling-Sancee Bug by Shawnee Bug) has had the highest earnings out of the partnership so far. Ashley and this blue roan mare had an outstanding futurity year in 2015 and accumulated more than \$103,000 by making great runs at the Diamonds & Dirt Barrel Horse Classic Futurity, The American, the Sand Cup Futurity, the WPRA Futurity and the JB Quarter Horse Futurity, among others.

In 2015, Vanilas Sudden Fame (Dash Ta Fame-SX Frenchmans Vanilla by Frenchmans Guy), owned by Butch and Stephanie Webb of Isabel, South Dakota, was another futurity standout whom Ashley jockeyed to more than \$100,000 in futurity earnings. Vanilas Sudden Fame was also the horse she rode to the reserve champion honors at The Diamonds & Dirt Barrel Horse Classic Slot Race.

Ashley’s current roster includes Famed French Kiss, another Spitz Quarter Horse star. This full sister to Freckles Ta Fame already has \$40,000 on her record.

With an effective riding and training style that translates into noticeable results, Ashley has garnered well-deserved respect from her training peers and fellow competitors. □

Speed is a Given

*When \$1.5 million barrel futurity winner
Jolene Montgomery takes on a prospect, it's
her four other criteria she's keen to develop.*

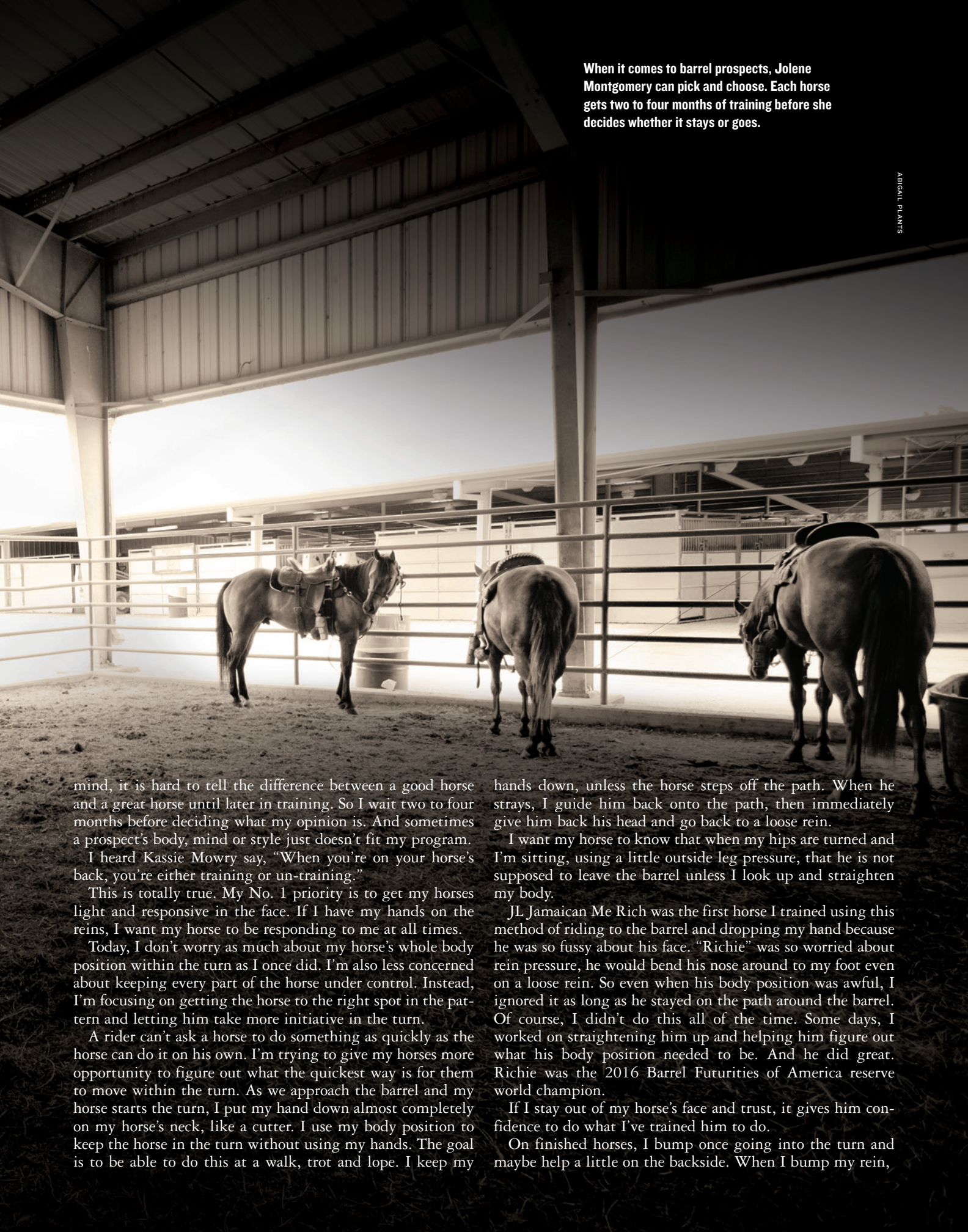
**By Jolene Montgomery
with Maesa Kummer**

I USUALLY GET FUTURITY PROSPECTS FOR TRAINING THE MIDDLE of their 2-year-old year to the spring of their 3-year-old year. Most have already been started, but I don't rush these young horses right into barrel work. I give them a couple of weeks to adjust to me. I am open-minded as far as barrel horse bloodlines go, but I believe great mares are key to getting top futurity prospects. If a mare was a great barrel horse, the odds of her offspring becoming great are increased by 50 to 75 percent.

People worry about speed, but most of the horses I get are bred to be fast. In fact, there are very few that aren't fast enough. Success is more about a horse's ability to turn. When evaluating futurity prospects, there are five traits I look for:

- Willingness
- Athletic ability (talent)
- Heart (grittiness)
- Trainability
- Speed

I need to see at least three of these traits to continue the training process. There are a few horses that stand out right away, of course, because of their natural athletic ability and good minds, but I try to make a fair evaluation. Keep in



When it comes to barrel prospects, Jolene Montgomery can pick and choose. Each horse gets two to four months of training before she decides whether it stays or goes.

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mind, it is hard to tell the difference between a good horse and a great horse until later in training. So I wait two to four months before deciding what my opinion is. And sometimes a prospect's body, mind or style just doesn't fit my program.

I heard Kassie Mowry say, "When you're on your horse's back, you're either training or un-training."

This is totally true. My No. 1 priority is to get my horses light and responsive in the face. If I have my hands on the reins, I want my horse to be responding to me at all times.

Today, I don't worry as much about my horse's whole body position within the turn as I once did. I'm also less concerned about keeping every part of the horse under control. Instead, I'm focusing on getting the horse to the right spot in the pattern and letting him take more initiative in the turn.

A rider can't ask a horse to do something as quickly as the horse can do it on his own. I'm trying to give my horses more opportunity to figure out what the quickest way is for them to move within the turn. As we approach the barrel and my horse starts the turn, I put my hand down almost completely on my horse's neck, like a cutter. I use my body position to keep the horse in the turn without using my hands. The goal is to be able to do this at a walk, trot and lope. I keep my

hands down, unless the horse steps off the path. When he strays, I guide him back onto the path, then immediately give him back his head and go back to a loose rein.

I want my horse to know that when my hips are turned and I'm sitting, using a little outside leg pressure, that he is not supposed to leave the barrel unless I look up and straighten my body.

JL Jamaican Me Rich was the first horse I trained using this method of riding to the barrel and dropping my hand because he was so fussy about his face. "Richie" was so worried about rein pressure, he would bend his nose around to my foot even on a loose rein. So even when his body position was awful, I ignored it as long as he stayed on the path around the barrel. Of course, I didn't do this all of the time. Some days, I worked on straightening him up and helping him figure out what his body position needed to be. And he did great. Richie was the 2016 Barrel Futurities of America reserve world champion.

If I stay out of my horse's face and trust, it gives him confidence to do what I've trained him to do.

On finished horses, I bump once going into the turn and maybe help a little on the backside. When I bump my rein,

I want the horse to give to it real quick. Then I give it right back. I hardly ever have contact with the reins all the way around the turn. I pick a straight line to my point (just off the barrel). When I get to the spot where I lightly check the reins, I don't shape the horse. I want my horse to come all the way around the barrel on his own. Then, on the backside of the turn, I bump again.

When it works, it's very fast.

I strive to keep the horse's hind end driving up underneath his body. That lifts his shoulders. I want my horse collected and light in the face, so it's easy to move the shoulders sideways. When I'm training, I want to be able to use my inside foot and counter arc and have the horse move his shoulders immediately. I work to keep the horse responsive, quick and collected.

During training, I lope the pattern and go around each barrel a couple of times, with each circle being a little bit bigger than when we are in a run. I strive for the same, perfect circle before going on to the next barrel.

In the past, I did more random movements within the pattern with the mindset that, "Wherever I put you is where I want you." But I'm leaning more toward keeping things simple so my horses know exactly where they are supposed to go in the barrel pattern. My goals are to keep them smooth, relaxed, collected and light at all speeds.

When you look at the summer and fall futurities, almost always, the winning colts' times are beating the open horses. If I have one that is just outside the bubble – over a half-second off – I will take him to the local barrel races and season him there.

I try to ride 12 to 15 horses per day when the weather cooperates. If I'm going to a big futurity, I start with those horses, then move on to the open or derby horses, and then the 2- and 3-year-olds. I finish with the horses I own. If I have to haul to a barn to get my riding done, I bring what fits in the six-horse trailer.

Picking One Thing

IN MY TRAINING PROGRAM, WHEN I GET on, we get right to work. I start by softening the face. I do counter-arcs and lope circles both ways, but I don't spend a lot of time on those things if my horse is doing them correctly. I'll go right to loping the barrel pattern.

On the 4-year-olds, most days I do lope the barrels – maybe high lope – and work on a couple points if they need sharpening. Once a week, I run them through the pattern and make sure we're on track.

There is a big variation among the 3-year-olds. I have some that are loping the pattern well, and some that are still working on loping a circle well. I work for steady progress. Most times, it's two steps forward and one step back. But I make my horses work hard.

Some days, I pick just one thing to work on – for instance, forward motion in the turn. I won't worry about headset, leads or anything else. Sometimes, we just can't get it all right at the same time, so it helps the horse to break things down and work

on accomplishing that one goal. If we get it, then we can go on to the next skill.

Each day, I hope my horses will be a little better than they were yesterday. But I don't know how any futurity trainer can get arrogant. It's a very humbling discipline. As a professional, I like to end my training sessions on a good note. However, sometimes, if things aren't going as planned and the horse is hot and tired and I'm getting frustrated – I find the best thing to do is just quit for the day and start again tomorrow. Sometimes I'm off and so are my horses. This can go on for several days, and then it will completely turn around. It will feel like my horses are all working really well! But every day is not necessarily going to be better than the previous day.

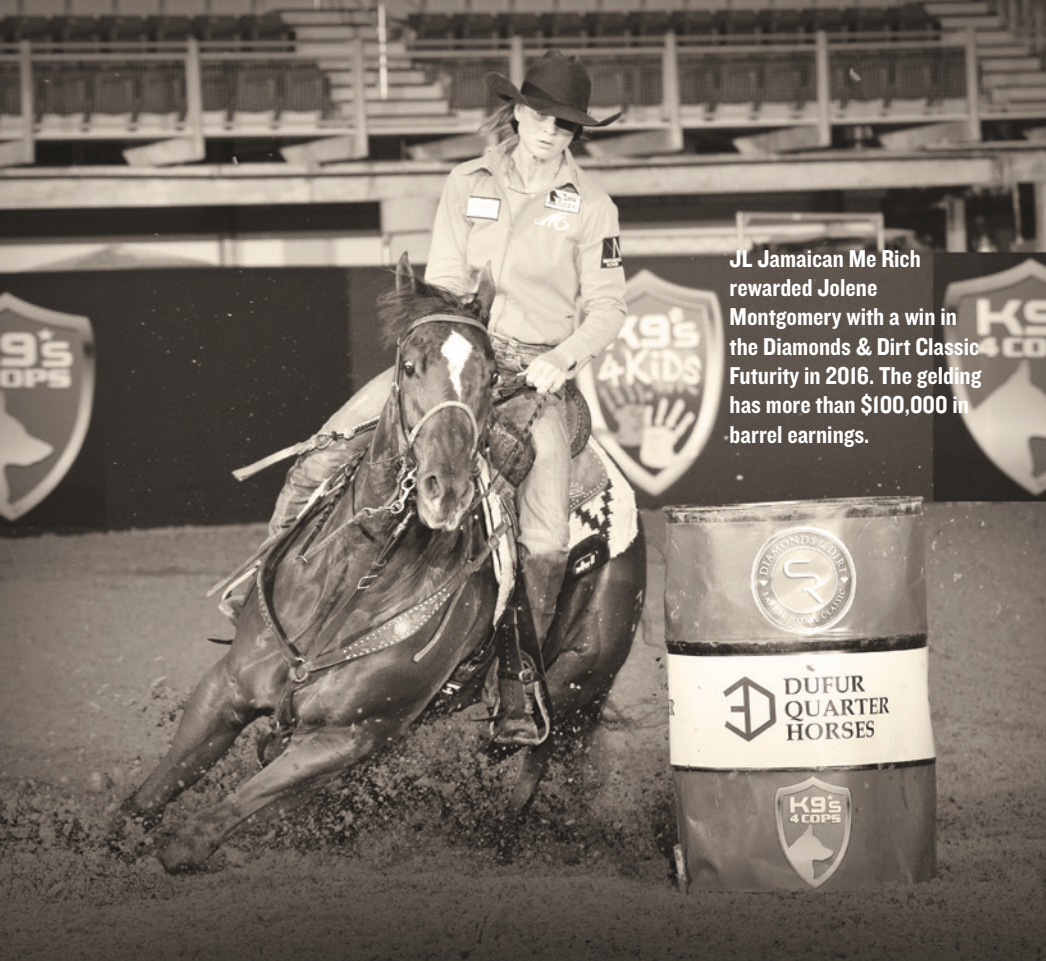
It's a day-to-day challenge to decide whether to back off or push a little harder. If you really pay attention to every cue

“If you really pay attention to every cue you're giving and strive to use as little pressure as possible to get the desired response – and you keep this in mind every time you ride – it will pay off.”

– Jolene Montgomery



Trust is a two-way street. JL Jamaican Me Rich was fussy about his mouth, so Jolene Montgomery changed her training strategy so he'd worry less.



JL Jamaican Me Rich rewarded Jolene Montgomery with a win in the Diamonds & Dirt Classic Futurity in 2016. The gelding has more than \$100,000 in barrel earnings.

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the futurity year, when he isn't performing or progressing as fast as one might expect of a 5- or 6-year-old. People tend to jump to the conclusion that the horse is a "blown up" futurity horse. I want people to be aware that it takes time for a horse to transition to new owners with new expectations.

Whenever I sell a horse, new dynamics always come into play. Sometimes it takes a while to achieve a good fit between horse and rider. Individual needs have to be addressed.

Futurities are typically run indoors with great ground and few distractions. "Exhibitioning" – getting into the arena to work the pattern before the official run – is standard operating procedure so young horses can get acclimated to the setup. Barrel races at rodeos usually run in big outdoor pens with variable ground and lots of distractions – the crowd, bucking stock, traffic, etc. If there is any way to get my horse into the rodeo arena before the performance, that is ideal. I get on early and walk

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you're giving and strive to use as little pressure as possible to get the desired response – and you keep this in mind every time you ride – it will pay off.

Analyze & Evolve

I LEARNED HOW TO WIN WHEN I WORKED FOR JUD LITTLE riding Cash Not Credit horses. Any successful trainer will advise you not to completely change the core of your training program. It's a constantly evolving process. To improve, I watch and analyze my own videos and try to figure out what's going on with the horse or me. I also watch other trainers' runs and clinics online.

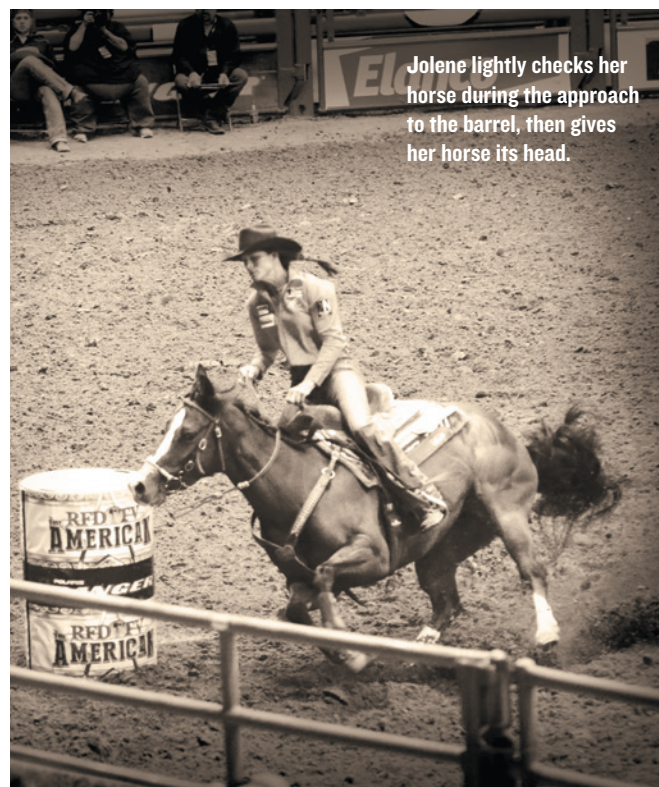
I gain the most benefit when I get together with trainer friends and we work colts. We watch each other, ask questions and ride each others' horses. It's very beneficial. Sometimes a completely new perspective is just what I need.

When I'm trying to work through an issue, I slow it all down and work away from the barrels. I might ride the horse in the pasture. I walk around and just think about the difficulty for a while. Sometimes, when I am giving someone else training tips, I realize I need to be taking my own advice. I rely a lot on muscle memory, and when I have to break it down and explain it, I really have to think about it.

When I've been working hard for months, there are times after the BFA or the Fort Smith Futurity & Super Derby that I'm so tired I don't feel like even looking at a horse. Yet I rarely take more than a two- to three-day break. Occasionally, I do take a week of vacation where I completely leave it all behind – no phones, no internet, no horses – because I think it's so important to rejuvenate.

There can be a time in a barrel horse's career, usually after

around the grounds so my horse gets accustomed to all that is going on. I also don't come running full speed into the arena from the back 40. I ride slowly up through the alley and try to let my horse see the pen. I let him pick the speed to the first barrel without hustling.



Jolene lightly checks her horse during the approach to the barrel, then gives her horse its head.

SHELBY MCCAMEY

STANDOUT HORSES AND WHAT THEY'VE TAUGHT ME ...

Sooner Superstar (Cash Not Credit-Star Eyed Money by Denvers First Mate), owned by Jud Little, was my first big winner. Her dam was Jud's kids' horse. She was tiny, just 14.2 and 850 pounds, and the plan was to get her started and sell her because of her size. I had just started working for Jud, and I trained Sooner Superstar very correctly and quietly. She took everything really well. She was smooth and trainable, and things were easy for her.

A couple of people came to look at her, but they weren't impressed, so we went on with her training. She was a little behind, but toward the fall, we started to add speed and I noticed she was pretty gritty. So I told Jud, "You might want to ask a little more for her," because I think he only had her priced at \$5,000.

By December of her 3-year-old year, we'd been exhibiting her and she was getting gritty and quick. By then, I was suggesting, "We might want to keep her!" The mare just got better and better. I think it was partly that we had very little expectations and no pressure. It was just fun. We'd done everything correctly and she just really took to it. "Sooner" won the Gold Cup Futurity, the BFA world championship and several smaller futurities. She was my first very successful futurity horse.

Sooner helped me realize that in the years prior, I had been trying way too hard to make it happen. When I got to the Jud Little Ranch, I made the decision to just enjoy the process because it truly was what I wanted to do. Training this "puny and plain" 3-year-old showed me the value of relaxing and enjoying what I was doing. We won approximately \$90K in futurity earnings. Enjoyment actually helps you win.

Return Of The Bully (Bully Bowlan Bug-Less Return by Dashing Investment), owned by Jud Little, was the best futurity horse I've ever had. Jud's ranch manager paired us up because I mentioned

I wanted to start one and do the whole process myself. I did absolutely everything on that mare, and I'm glad I did. I don't know if she would've worked out if I hadn't because she was fragile.

"Sidney" was good-minded and really sweet. She was one of my favorite horses of all time, but conformationally, she wasn't made well. She looked like a 7-year-old, broken-down Thoroughbred gelding. She was rangy-looking, triangle-hipped, high-hocked and long-backed, not pretty. Sidney wouldn't eat on the road, so she was usually sucked up. Yet she had a pretty face and she was super-sweet. I just loved her.

No one else ever sat on her back because I did all the work. She was smooth and moved really well with a lot of feel. I was attentive to that mare and spent a lot of time moving cows with her and working the pole pattern. Despite all my efforts, though, she never did stop very well. When we took her to the vet, he checked her and asked me how long she had had that hairline fracture in her hock. I was astonished. There was never a time when she acted like she was in pain. By that time, the fracture was 80 percent healed, so we gave her more than a month off to completely heal.

When we got her back in shape and went to a futurity, she won the first round. Then we went to the BFA Juvenile and she won the first round with a 15.3, which had never been done before. Eventually, Sidney went on to win seven futurities. She was absolutely amazing – but fragile and quirky – so I never got after her for anything. She always gave me everything she had. I barely had to do anything when she was making a run.

What I learned from Sidney is, if you have one that is sensitive and fragile, take your time and be attentive. Realize your horse is trying to do what you are asking, and be careful how you correct him or her. All horses have flaws, but instead of trying to make everything perfect, work with them through the flaws.

Sadly, Sidney fell during a run at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in October of her 4-year-old year and never ran the same after that. That fall on the third barrel just ruined her confidence. It frightened her, so she never gave it her all after that. Even so, she won approximately \$125,000 in futurity earnings.

JL Dash Ta Heaven (Dash Ta Fame-Dynas Plain Special by Special Feelins) is a stallion owned and standing at the Jud Little Ranch, and he is the best horse I've ever ridden. Phil Haugen broke him and when we got him back, Phil told me, "This horse is very talented, but he's very studdy and not necessarily on your side."

As a young stallion, he wasn't mean. He just had other things on his mind. JL Dash Ta Heaven was just kind of ornery and "feely." When I put a leg in him to move, he'd over-exaggerate, but he could move his body in ways that I'd never felt before – so quick and insanely talented. He just floated across the ground.

During his 2-year-old year, he chipped his ankle so he had to be on stall rest. That did not help his orneriness. I had to be very careful around mares because he would squeal and rear. It took forever to

Jolene Montgomery is the barrel industry's highest-earning futurity contestant. She loves what she does and modifies her approach to meet the needs of individual horses and the riders who will take over the reins.



KENNETH SPRINGER

get him trained because he was so distracted. He was super-talented on the barrels, but we never ran him at the BFA Juvenile because he wasn't quite ready.

When we started hauling JL Dash Ta Heaven in January of his 4-year-old year, his runs were pretty awful because he was paying attention to everything but the barrels. We looked stupid for a very long time. I could not get him to focus, so I started working the poles on him – and he just loved it! That fast-paced lead change every 20 feet just kept his attention. He actually made a really good pole horse, and we won the AQHA World Championship Show in junior pole bending in 2009.

Then, within the span of a couple weeks, he also decided to start focusing on his barrel pattern. We started to win some things. During the fall of his futurity year, JL Dash Ta Heaven started to just win and win – often winning big by breaking arena records.

I learned perseverance and creativity in my training with Dash Ta Heaven. We had to switch to pole bending to get to our goal of barrel racing winner. We did derbies and rodeos on him and he was winning money at all the places we were taking him. Since I prefer the futurities, Benette Little rodeoed on him and eventually made the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. JL Dash Ta Heaven has barrel earnings in excess of \$200,000.

KN Fabs Mist Of Fame (Frenchmans Fabulous-Mistys Dash Of Fame by Dash Ta Fame). I got this mare, owned by Robin Weaver, in the spring of her 3-year-old year. When she arrived, they told me what mare she was out of and I got excited because her dam is such a great producer.

"Misty" is one of the most arrogant horses I've ever started. She wasn't too interested in doing things my way. She didn't like breaking at the poll. She had no attention span. But I knew I liked her right away because she was so athletic. For a very long time, I loped big circles around the barrels on her because she wanted to "attack" the barrels too much. She just really wanted to do things her way.

Like most of my biggest winners, Misty didn't run in the BFA Juvenile. Early in her 4-year-old year, we went from loping the barrels to running them. She could roll back through herself on the back side of the barrels so quick that I probably dragged down more than \$50,000 worth of barrels during the beginning of her futurity year.

It took forever, but I finally learned that I couldn't ride her like my other horses. I couldn't ask Misty to break at the poll and get really collected because she didn't need that. When I warmed her up, I left her uncollected and strung out because she was so naturally collected and quick during the run that if I did anything to accentuate that, I wouldn't leave the barrels up. She was so athletic, I just let her keep her head up wherever she wanted it and rode her around like a pony.

I'm used to riding really square with my hands down by my hips.



Jolene has five criteria to evaluate barrel prospects, but says with the way today's barrel futurity horses are bred, lack of speed is rarely an issue. Her trainees are always teaching her something new.

I needed to ride Misty completely different in the run, with my rein hand up between her ears. I had to ride like I knew nothing about training horses. It was hard for me to adapt to her style, and I had to get really good at lifting my leg on the back side of the barrels. I had to take the trainer in me out. She was the first horse that made me completely change to fit her. She taught me that if you have that good of a horse, you make yourself change to fit them. She has been amazing. Misty has won with everyone who has ridden her through the years, with more than \$100,000 in barrel earnings.

Dashin Czar (Tres Seis-Dashin La Jolla by Streakin La Jolla) is a mare owned by Matt and Bendi Dunn. They bought "Tracy" at the Heritage Place sale. She was a small, shapey mare around 14.3 hands, who had seven outs on the track. She taught me that horses off the track can make very nice barrel horses if they have the right bloodlines and a good mind.

I didn't get her in until April of her 3-year-old year. Since Dashin Czar was off the track, we started out pretty slow and easy. For quite a while, she didn't really impress me. Tracy didn't like to break at the poll, yet she was soft in the face. She had been loping barrels, but when it came time to ask for speed, she was ready to do it.

It was amazing to me how fast she came on, and how confident and smart she was about things. Normally, it takes me at least a year to train a barrel horse, but horses that come off the track have been seasoned to going different places, being stalled and seeing the sights. Tracy wasn't scared of anything. She wasn't any different when I took her places than she was at home. I think that's the main reason she came along so fast. She has barrel earnings of more than \$100,000.

“A rider can’t ask a horse to do something as quickly as the horse can do it on his own.”

– Jolene Montgomery

A deep understanding of horsemanship is extremely important if someone wants to win at the highest level. I’m not necessarily going out to win the rodeo at the first places I take my futurity graduates. My goal is to give them a good experience. I don’t “blast” them. I try to help my horses handle the ground by encouraging them to stand up. They figure out they need to keep their feet underneath themselves to keep from slipping.

Be Mindful

I TRY TO PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT I’M COMMUNICATING TO MY horse and how it’s affecting him. For instance, if my horse is getting tense, I work on relaxing my shoulders. I sit relaxed in my saddle, let my body go limp, and notice my hand position. I never want to have full contact with both reins unless I’m specifically asking my horse to do something. If I have full contact with both reins, I want my horse to slow down or collect. Too often, I see people at barrel races loping around with their reins tight. The horse isn’t collected or breaking at the poll and the rider is just hanging on the horse’s face. That’s not good.

I like to get my horses breaking at the poll and staying bridled because it helps with collection, stride length and speed control. It just feels better to me. If a horse isn’t familiar with being collected, I start by asking him to hold that frame for a short amount of time. Riding like that for too long only tires the muscles and frustrates the horse. When I’m galloping in a straight line, I work on gathering up my horse, collecting and then slowing down gradually. I build physical capability and muscle memory.

In a barrel horse, a smooth downward transition is also more important than a big stop, for example, in a reining horse. I want my horses to break at the poll and have their necks a little higher than their withers, not below. I start working on this right away, too.

Professional athletes such as basketball players don’t just run 5Ks all week – they work on all the skills they use in the game. Even seasoned barrel horses benefit from executing drills – stopping, loping small perfect circles, counter-arc-ing, rolling back and sprinting.

Every day, I want to get to the barn and get started riding as soon as possible. I’m a morning person and I’m pretty chipper – which drives my husband, Kerby, crazy. I’m task-oriented and pretty self-motivated. I understand that some owners just want to play the futurity game, while others want a horse that they can go on with and run themselves. I like to train horses that can do both. I chose this life and I love every part of it – and I’m lucky enough to be successful doing it. Every day, I find things to be excited about. 🐾

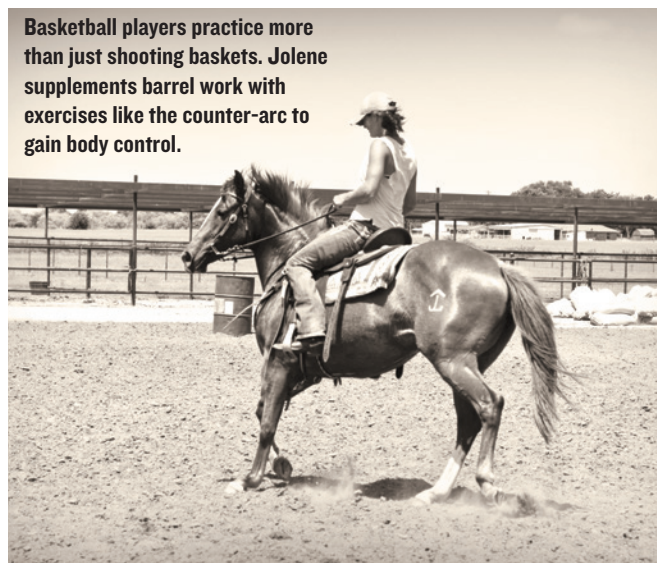
Barrel racing enthusiast Maesa Kummer is a special contributor to AQHA’s The American Quarter Horse Journal from Grover, Colorado. Maesa also hosts the barrel racing website sweetruns.com. To comment on this article, send your email to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.

Face time is essential. At home, Jolene teaches a young barrel horse how to collect and lope a perfect circle.

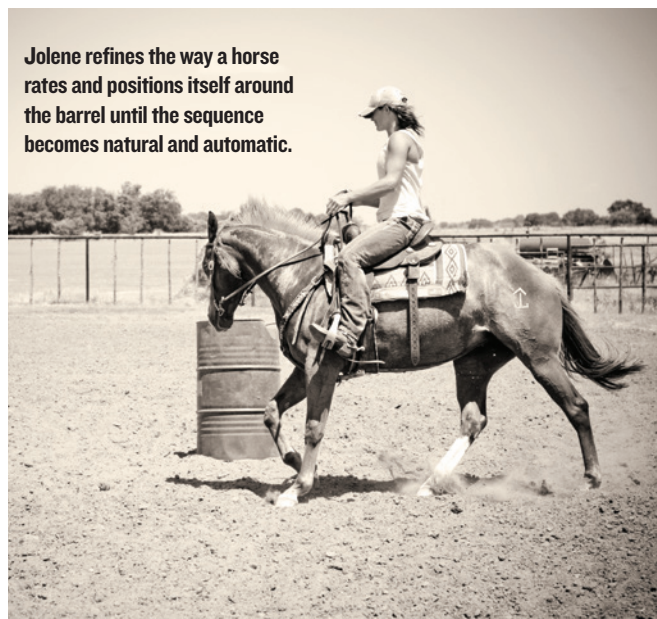


ARIGALLI PLANTS PHOTOS

Basketball players practice more than just shooting baskets. Jolene supplements barrel work with exercises like the counter-arc to gain body control.



Jolene refines the way a horse rates and positions itself around the barrel until the sequence becomes natural and automatic.



World champion Mary Burger offers 10 tips every rider can use to improve his or her barrel racing runs.

By Breanne Hill

SHAVE 1/10th OFF your BARREL TIME

Exploring the arena is a must, and Mary Burger knows this venue well. She had already won three rounds at the Calgary Stampede, but on the day of the \$100,000 final go, Mary and Sadiefamouslastwords ("Mo") were running in the rain – and won.





Mo handles each barrel differently and Mary had to determine how big of a pocket he needs.

PHOTOS COURTESY CALGARY STAMPEDE



The first barrel turn should be smooth and easy, without jerky movements, allowing enough room around that barrel for the horse to gather up and get away fast.



Mo tightly hugs the second barrel as he exits and leaves the barrel cleanly, saving time.



Mary has trained Mo to come in tight toward the third barrel, then take a step out to create a small pocket and hug the barrel close through the exit so he doesn't leave the third barrel too soon. Exiting wide puts time on the clock, she says.



Running hard for home, Mary's confidence in Mo put her in the winners circle four times during the Calgary Stampede, for \$116,500 in earnings.

IN LESS TIME THAN IT TAKES TO BLINK, YOU CAN LOSE A BARREL race. Winning runs are often distinguished by mere fractions of a second, and this leaves riders searching for ways to be more efficient through every beat of the barrel pattern.

Professional barrel racer – and nine-time AQHA world champion – Mary Burger says there are no guarantees in the sport of barrel racing. However, this Pauls Valley, Oklahoma, cowgirl believes every rider can take time off the clock by utilizing these 10 tips.

Tip #1: Go Slow at Home

“EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON YOUR HORSE,” MARY STRESSES. “From the position you take on the barrels, to just your enjoyment of competing, you’ve got to know what works for the horse you’re riding.”

You’ve heard it a million times. Preparation is the key to success. This is absolutely true in barrel racing. Riders like Mary, who have forged long-term careers in barrel racing, believe in tailoring the way they compete to fit whatever horse they’re riding at the time. To do this, they get to know their horses at home first.

“I do slow work with my horses, the basics of the barrel pattern, every day at home,” Mary explains. “This sets them up to where, if they get in trouble during a run, they’ll know by instinct how to reposition themselves and get out of it.”

Working at home at an easy pace can also reveal any quirks your horse has that may cost you time during a run – and at home, you have time to figure out a solution.

“If I’ve got a horse that I notice wants to step past that first barrel, when we’re practicing at home, I’ll stop him and just stand there for a few seconds before going around the barrel,” Mary says. “Or if I’ve got one that I can see is going to rate too much, I’ll just keep making him bring his nose to the inside and leave his shoulder up and come off the barrel straight.

“It’s all repetition, and easy work develops habits.”

Tip #2: Give It a Rest

IF YOU’VE DEVELOPED A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR HORSE, you’ll recognize when he hurts or when he is sick. Barrel horses are athletes, and they’re susceptible to health issues such as stress injuries, sprains and exhaustion.

Mary believes in being proactive when it comes to a horse’s health. Even the smallest issue can throw a horse off his game and may cause further complications in the future.

“Be aware of soundness,” Mary says. “Know when you’ve got a problem.”

And if you’ve got a problem, it’s best to seek help and rest your horse instead of running him. A well-rested, healthy horse will always run faster than one that is struggling.

“Staying ahead of health problems can really help you dodge a bullet,” Mary says.

Tip #3: Let Your Horse Choose His Tack

RIDERS DEVELOP A FONDNESS FOR CERTAIN PIECES OF TACK. While it’s great to have knowledge about a range of items, especially bits, Mary cautions against choosing a piece of tack only because you like it or it worked well for you with another horse.

“I let my horses choose their tack,” she says.

As she’s working with her barrel horses, Mary tries out different bits and gauges the reactions she receives. She will also take time to judge whether a horse does better with or without a chinstrap, and if he doesn’t like it, it comes off.

“Ideally, you’re figuring this out before you really get hard into training,” Mary says, “but sometimes, when you get a horse rolling, his style changes. If you notice you’re losing time on runs, you might want to take a serious second look at the tack you’re using.

“As your horse gets older, he may start to require a heavier bit or a lighter bit. It varies with each horse, but it’s something you’ve got to figure out, and it can really help you improve your runs.”

Tip #4: Explore the Arena

ARENAS ARE NOT IDENTICAL, AND THERE will always be conditions that are beyond your control at a venue. You can, however, gain an advantage over the competition by exploring the arena before you run.

“Most of the time, I’ll walk up to the arena and just check the ground,” says Mary, who loves discovering an arena with footing that is sandy loam mixed with a little clay.

“I’ll check and see where the timer is, how the alleyway is positioned, how far off the wall the barrels are – that kind of thing.

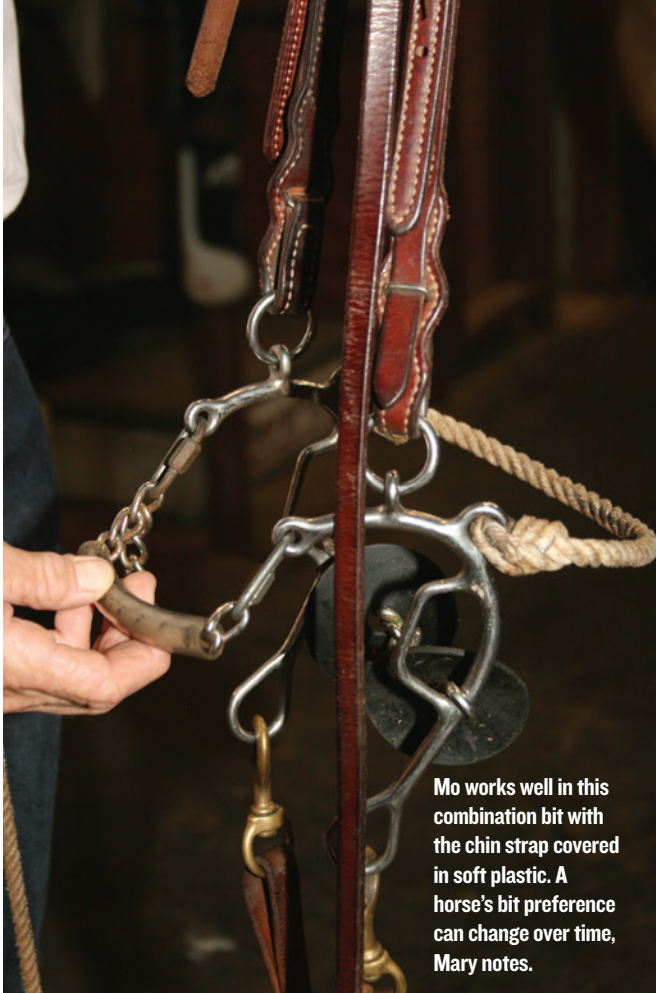
“I’ll look at the ground and see what we’re dealing with. Is it going to run fast or slow? Is it going to be shifty and hard to get a hold of? It all impacts how you ride.”

After noting this information, Mary goes through her run in her mind, mentally making adjustments as needed.



Mary suggests letting the horse choose his tack. She tries different headgear, gauges the reaction and fine tunes.

BETSY LYNCH



Mo works well in this combination bit with the chin strap covered in soft plastic. A horse's bit preference can change over time, Mary notes.

"I kind of like to have all of it in my head before I go in there and run," she says. "You've got to use common sense and know that each one of these details can affect your time."

Tip #5: Don't Waste Energy in the Alley

A HUGE PART OF EXPLORING AN ARENA IS familiarizing yourself with its alley or entranceway. Long or short, curved or cramped, the alley can dictate how you approach your run.

No matter what kind of alley you're dealing with, Mary says it is absolutely crucial that you keep your horse under control in that space.

"Having control in the alley helps you in a couple of ways," Mary says. "If you don't have control, you could be in trouble if your horse insists on taking off before you're ready. Then, you really have no control by the time you get to that first barrel."

Your horse will probably also have less energy once he reaches the first turn. Every bounce, leap and false start in the alley is power – and speed – lost for your run.

"I'm pretty passionate about control in the alley because of that," Mary says. "Why waste all that energy right there?"

PHOTO COURTESY CALGARY STAMPEDE



The place to pour it on is in the arena. Mo knows the signals for go and whoa, and expends his energy in the pattern, not the alleyway.

My horse knows what 'Whoa' means. It means don't go yet.

"Horses give it all to you when they run, so you don't want them to wear themselves out or wash out before you can get to the pen. Keep them under control where they know when they get to that arena, that pen, that's where they pour it on – not outside in the alley before you go in there."

Tip #6: Know Your Horse's Acceleration Rate

THE LENGTH OF THE ALLEY CAN ALSO DETERMINE WHERE YOU start running when it's your turn to go. According to AQHA rules, the first barrel should be set 20 yards from the starting line (where the electric eye that keeps time is set up), but how long it takes to reach the starting line may vary from arena to arena.

In one venue, the eye might be set up right inside the ingate. In another, it might be 5 or 10 yards farther out. If you know this (because you've researched the arena ahead of time), you can estimate where you should begin running based on the length of the alley and, most importantly, how fast your horse can accelerate.

"If you've got a really long alley, you wouldn't want to start running clear at the back of it and run your barrel race before you get to the first barrel," Mary says. "You also don't want to start so late that you're just getting to where you're running hard at the first barrel and you can't pick it out and turn it. Unless you've got a horse that's just so rate-y that you've got to really send them hard all the way, you've got to think things out a bit."

Again, knowing your horse helps. Does it take a few seconds for him to reach his optimum speed? Then starting your run a little further back from the eye may improve your time. Is he a fast starter? Then holding him back until you almost reach the eye may shave that 10th of a second off the clock.

"You've got to use your judgment," Mary says. "You can use the alley and timer placement to your advantage if you know how your horse performs best."



BETSY LYNGCH

In every aspect of daily care, Mary pays attention to details. She knows from Mo's attitude and behavior whether he's sound or sore.

Tip #7: Keep the First Barrel Smooth

MANY RIDERS CONSIDER THE FIRST BARREL TO BE THE MOST intimidating one. It sets up the rest of your run, and can be the barrel where you save, or waste, extra time.

Mary approaches the first barrel by entering down the middle of the arena, in line with the third barrel. She likes to let her horse ease into the first turn by allowing him to slow down and get his hind leg up underneath him, without jerking or pulling on him.

This is all done while leaving enough room, otherwise known as a pocket, around the barrel, so the horse has space to make the turn without bumping the barrel. Additionally, it puts him in the ideal position to run toward the second turn.

"They've got to have enough room around that barrel to be able to gather up and get away fast," Mary says. "If you come into that first barrel without enough pocket, you'll slice it and lose momentum.

"You can also come in too wide, which takes too much time to get around the barrel. You've got to figure out what works for your horse."

Mary compares rounding the first barrel to playing a game of pool. You don't want to make any mistakes here because you're setting yourself up for the rest of your game.

"Keep it smooth and even on the first," she says. "Nothing drastic, just good, smart riding."

Tip #8: Turn Tight out of the Second

THE KEY TO KEEPING YOUR TIME LOW AROUND THE SECOND barrel is to leave yourself enough room to get around it. Lost in the excitement and hasty decision-making that can mark the middle of a run, the second barrel is the one that is most likely to get knocked over.

"When you come off your first barrel, if you've come off of it the way you should, your horse should have enough room to smoothly come around that second barrel," Mary says. "If you don't have room, you're going to bump it or go by it and

kind of roll back."

The trick to correctly rounding the second barrel is to leave yourself space to get around it – and then pull in tight enough that you save time turning before your approach to the third barrel.

"You want a little bit of room coming in," Mary says, "then you want to come out tight. Hug that barrel, so you're on your way to the third without swinging out too wide."

Tip #9: Do What Works Best on the Third

OFTEN OVERSHADOWED BY THE anticipation of "running for home," the third barrel can help you make up time if you can identify your

horse's running style. For example, Mary's current horse, the 7-year-old gelding Sadiefamouslastwords ("Mo"), has trouble with the third barrel if he approaches it in the same way he does the first and second barrels.

"A lot of horses need a little room to come off the third barrel," Mary explains. "My buckskin is just a little different. If he has too much room, he leaves it too quick and doesn't come tight out of the turn, which puts time on the clock."

When Mary noticed Mo's tendency to do this, she went back to the training pen and taught him to come in tighter toward the third barrel, take a step out to create a small pocket, and then hug the barrel close through the exit.

"Your horse will determine how you position yourself on every barrel," Mary says. "If you give your horse what he needs, you'll cut a tenth or even a fraction of a second off your time. Your horse will work free and use his body correctly. That all adds up to a faster run."

Tip #10: Curry Confidence in Your Partner

DO YOU BELIEVE YOUR HORSE CAN WIN?

Horses tune in to the atmosphere around them and, more specifically, to your feelings and emotions. If you're nervous, your horse will likely be nervous. If you're calm, your horse is probably going to stay cool and collected.

Basically, Mary believes the best barrel racing partnerships are born out of confidence – confidence that you know what you're doing and confidence that your horse can get the job done.

"It pays to have a lot of confidence in your horse," Mary says. "Be the rider who has hands-on contact with your horse. It keeps them happy and content.

"With Mo, when we're at home, we do things he likes. When it's hot out, he likes his shower. He likes to be brushed. It may not seem like those kinds of things can impact your barrel racing career, but they can. A happy, healthy horse is one that is ready to run fast." 🐾

Breanne Hill is a special contributor to AQHA's The American Quarter Horse Journal. She lives in Ada, Oklahoma. To comment on this article, email aqhajrnl@aqha.org.