

AQHA *eBooks*



Guide to
Showing Rope Horses

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In this guide to showing rope horses, three AQHA Professional Horsemen weigh in on what they look for when it comes to impressing the judges. It takes extensive knowledge and training to have a rope horse perform correctly under pressure, and each of the professionals explain their methods and preferences when it comes to showing rope horses.

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Increase Your Tie-Down Score

David Avery demonstrates to AQHA judges just how smart and capable his roping horses are by relying on the same skills that work in his favor when the clock is running.

By David Avery with Jim Jennings

Tie-down roping at AQHA shows is not a timed event.

However, the AQHA Official Handbook of Rules and Regulations says that roping events are supposed to demonstrate the level of training required for timed roping events outside the AQHA show arena.

I rodeo on the horses I show, so I take this mission to heart. From the rulebook description, judging the tie-down run begins with the horse going into the box. Nevertheless, I want my horse to be calm, comfortable and totally under control from the moment I enter the arena. When a horse is completely relaxed as he walks to the box, it shows that he likes his job, and he starts making a good impression with the judges right then.

The Box

I'll ride my horse into the box about halfway, staying as close to the left side of it as I can. Then I'll sit there, still facing the back of the box while the barrier is pinned.

During this time, I'll be getting my rope ready and making sure my piggin' string is right. I want my horse to remain totally calm and be just as comfortable as he was outside the box.



My horse is standing square on all four feet, pointed toward the barrier pin and the calf. He's against the back of the box, and although he's sitting slightly back on his haunches, he's not sitting on the box. His head is elevated slightly, but he's still soft in the poll, behind the bit, and soft in the bridle.



On his second stride, my horse is breaking directly toward the calf and the pin. He is already taking me to the proper position behind or slightly to the right of the calf to allow me as quick a throw as possible.

After the crew finishes with the barrier, I'll turn my horse around and back him into the corner. In that corner, I want my horse to stand quietly on all four feet, not be sitting on the back of the box. He should be soft in the bridle – in other words, not pushing against it. But I don't want him to be listless. There's a difference between scoring good and being lazy.

I want my horse behind the bridle, and when I push my hand forward, I want him to leave that corner in an instant. I call it being "hair-triggered." I want my horse to go off my hand, not my kick – because when you have to kick, it costs you time. There are horses that you have to do both, but, ideally, I want my horse so hair-triggered that as soon as I push my hand forward, he's gone.



This horse is in an ideal position for me. I'm looking at the calf's shoulders, and I'll take my swing and aim the tip of my rope right at my target. My horse has allowed me an opportunity to throw at any time.



A little farther down the arena, my horse continues to hold the proper position while he's rating the calf.

When I ride to the corner of the box, I want my horse to be ready to go as soon as I turn him around. You'll see guys who turn their horses around, bump the back corner and go, but I'm not going to do that. I want to show the judges that my horse is good in the box, so I'm going to sit there for a few seconds – but I still want him ready.

To make a perfect run, your horse has to be set up perfectly. I want my horse pointing straight at the barrier pin. That way, he's looking at the calf and it gives him the advantage of getting a good start and knocking the barrier out of the way.



Following my delivery, my horse is in a nice stopping position. Because this is a slow calf, it doesn't provide an opportunity for my horse to stop really hard. However, his timing is perfect. The horse is on his haunches and his front end is coming down in preparation for the finish of the stop.



From the expression on the horse's face, with his ears alert, you can see that this horse enjoys his job. As I am just finishing the tie and about to stand up off the calf, he is maintaining a tight rope for me. This is ideal.

Once I back him into the corner, if something isn't perfect, I might step my horse forward and then back him up again to reset everything. For an exhibitor to ride up and reset is neither a fault nor a penalty in the rules. However, I do want that horse to immediately come back to me and be soft behind the bridle. I don't want him to shake his head or get light on his front end from anticipation, because that is a fault. I want him right back where he was before I moved him, again pointing straight at the barrier pin and looking at the calf so he'll get a good start.

Running and Rating

When my horse leaves the box, I want him to drop and run flat – just like a racehorse – without elevating his head. When you see a horse sitting on the back of the box, the first thing that happens is he elevates. It then takes him two or three strides to hit that flat point. I don't care if my horse's head is elevated while he's waiting, but when he leaves the back of that box, he should run flat and level.

Once I drop my hand in the box, my horse should be on his own until I put the rope around the calf's neck and signal him to stop. If the calf moves right or left, I may guide my

horse laterally with just a light neck rein without actually pulling on the bit – and he's got to respond. But if I have to have him in my hand all the time and control his every motion, he is not as natural of a tie-down horse as I like to ride.

As a right-handed roper, I want my horse to immediately go either behind the calf or just slightly to the right when he leaves the box. And I want him to maintain that position until I throw my rope. I don't want a horse to get in position and then tell me when to throw by starting to stop. Some horses become patterned to that because their riders

always throw as soon as their horses get in position. Most of the time, that's probably all right, but there will be a time when the roper is not ready to try to make his catch. My horse needs to stay in position until I throw my rope, whether it takes me one swing or 20 before I throw it.

Stopping

Depending on the individual, I teach most of my horses to stop either when I throw my rope or when I pitch my slack. Either is OK and shows the judges that I don't have to pull on my horse to get him to stop. That's a desirable characteristic.

However, if a roper does have to pull on the reins to signal the horse to stop, that's all right, too, as long as the reins don't come back any farther than the saddle horn. Once I make my catch, my left hand automatically goes to the saddle horn for balance when I'm getting off on the right side. Because the reins are in my left hand, they naturally stop at the horn.

A tie-down horse cannot stop too hard for me. When he stops, he needs to be square, with his head, neck, shoulders and back in a straight line. And the horse needs to stay committed to the earth. In other words, his front feet should not come off the ground. The horse

definitely should not walk forward out of his stop. He has to finish his stop and then back out of it, pulling on the rope.

Working the Rope

It's what the horse does after he stops that makes the rest of the run. Everything has its purpose. A horse that works to keep the rope tight gives his roper a leverage advantage when flanking the calf. If a horse just stops and stands there, he's not helping his partner. He's demonstrating that he either doesn't like – or doesn't understand – his job. I want my horse to back up until I get the calf on the ground. Then he's got to stand there, leaning backward a little, holding the rope tight while I tie the calf.

Judged tie-down is the only event in which the person showing has to rely on the horse to work on his own. In every other performance event, the exhibitor is astride and in total control of the horse. Even in a halter class, the exhibitor has that lead

shank in his hand. In tie-down roping, once you leave that horse, you've got to trust him to do what he was trained to do.

While I'm tying the calf, I definitely don't want my horse to continue dragging the calf. That's a penalty – and it should be. I just want my horse to keep the rope tight. When I stand up and my weight comes off the calf, my horse may automatically step back one or two short steps because he's getting used to the weight adjustment. Then, as I walk back to my horse, he should stand alert and attentive, waiting for me. He should not be shying away from me. And he should stand at attention with that rope tight until I get on and ride him forward to give the calf slack.

Tie-down horses have got to like their jobs to be good. You can tell whether or not they do by their manners and attitude, from the moment they first enter the arena until their ropers ride them forward after they finish tying their calves. The judges will know it, too.



AQHA Professional Horseman and judge **DAVID AVERY** has trained and shown tie-down roping horses for 35 years. David lives in Amarillo, Texas, and has world and reserve world champion titles to his credit.

Emphasize the Positive: Heading Horses

Scoring, running, rating, setting and facing – not every head horse is strong in all categories.

Here are ways to showcase his strengths in front of the judges.

By Chris Littlefield with Jim Jennings

The most important thing to remember when you're showing a head horse is that it is a show. You are presenting a picture to the judge, and you want to present the best picture you can while performing all the fundamentals of the run. Those, of course, are scoring, running, rating, setting and facing.

Not every head horse is strong in all categories, so you want to really show off what your horse does best. For example, if my horse scores, runs, rates and faces really well, but his set is not the strongest, I try not to overshadow his weak points. I don't dwell on trying to have a plus-2 set, knowing that I'm riding a 0-set horse. I'll try to get my plus points based on my horse's strengths.



My horse is standing in the box with all four feet square and his body pointed straight down the path I want him to run. When I release my hand, he's going to break straight down that path and get us as efficiently as possible to our target.



As we start our departure out of the box, my horse is leaving smooth and flat. As I bring my rope up, he's pushing with his hindquarters and reaching with his front end, giving me all the run he's got on the first stride.

The Box

The run begins when the roper approaches the box. I want my horse to walk quietly into the box, turn around, back into the corner and stand there without moving until I tell him to leave. However, I want my horse to be what I call “patiently aggressive.” He should be standing square on all four feet, looking straight down the gun barrel, paying attention to the chute and the steer. He should be ready to leave as soon as I release my hand. The instant I drop the reins, my horse needs to find the target – the correct position on the steer – as fast as possible.



I've finished the delivery of my loop and made my catch, but my horse is still rating the steer. He's not gaining any ground, and he's not backing out yet either, which allows me to get my slack and to dally without the saddle horn going any direction. My horse needs to maintain position until I tell him to slow down. Both of my hands are forward at this point, so I'm not putting any pressure on him; he's maintaining the rate on his own.



I have completed my catch and dallied. My horse is slowing down, getting on his hindquarters and tightening that rope. We've taken a step to the left, but we're not leaving to set the steer until we have complete control of his head.



The rope is still tight and I have good control of the steer's head. My horse's hindquarters are down, his shoulders are up and his front end is mobile. He's using his hindquarters to slow down and take the momentum away from the steer. With his front end up, my horse has the mobility to move across the pen when I tell him to.



I'm leading the steer off to give my heeler the best opportunity to catch him. We have maintained momentum through the corner, and my horse's shoulders are still up. I am showing the judge that I have control of my horse and the steer.

I personally don't care for a horse that turns around, backs up a step or two and then looks like he's half-asleep. That doesn't look like a good head horse to me. I like one that's alert and ready to go, but I don't want him wiggling or jumping around unnecessarily.

Run and Rate

Once I release my hand, I want my horse to leave that box flat and straight, without hesitation, and go directly to the target, the steer. His job is to be my transportation, and I want him to move as efficiently as possible from the back corner of that box to the steer's left hip.



You can see the full power of the horse using his hindquarters to pull the steer. I have made that steer as catchable as I possibly can for the heeler, and maintained fundamental correctness throughout the run.



As I begin to face, my horse is using his rear end to stop, and his front end is up and coming around.



Halfway through the face, my horse's hindquarters are still down as his front end comes around toward the steer. He's really exhibiting athletic ability by staying low to the ground with his front end still mobile. Also, he's staying in the bridle. He's not pushing his chin out or flattening out too much.



I have finished the face, and my horse is crouched on his hindquarters, looking directly back down the rope at the steer. My reins are somewhat loose, but my horse is still holding the rope tight, waiting for me to release it from the saddle horn.

When I rope, I like the position of my horse's nose to be about even with the steer's left hip, or maybe his last rib, and a foot or two to the left of the steer. Some of the higher-numbered ropers prefer their horses to be a little wider than I do, and that's fine, but I definitely do not want to be tracking behind the steer. That's a fault and it should be. Also, if the steer steps left, the horse should read that and step left with the steer, staying in position. Sometimes a steer will drift to the left, and the horse, instead of main-

taining his position to the left of the steer, will fall in behind the steer. I definitely do not want that to happen.

I like to rope pretty quickly once I get into position. I want my horse to be gaining speed all the way to the correct position on that steer. But I don't want to stay in that position very long because when the horse's stride levels off, he loses momentum, which takes away from being able to set the steer and keep it moving out of the set so the heeler can make his catch.

The Set and Handle

When we're showing a head horse for points, we probably set the steer more than we would if we were heading at a jackpot roping. By setting that steer, we're exhibiting the horse's athletic ability, showing that he can use his hind end and still step out of there and keep that steer moving so a heeler can catch those hind feet.

As I mentioned, it's important to keep the momentum going in the run because when you lose momen-

tum, it makes it harder for the horse to get his rear end down. The set also depends on the cattle. You can't set a slow steer as hard as you can a fast one because you don't have as much momentum. The stronger the steers are, the more you can set them and get hold of them.

When I set a steer, I want to pull his head around to the point where his left horn is almost touching his shoulder. I really want to bend that head around because that dictates what happens with the steer's back feet. As I'm pulling the steer's head around, once his ribs break over, my horse has to step left and get ahead of the steer to get him moving so the heeler can rope him.

The header needs to get dallied and get tight on that steer's head

before stepping to the left. If I'm turning off and there's slack in the rope, I'm about to put my heeler at a disadvantage. I'm going to give him a false read. The steer is going to be on a loose rope because I've lost control of his head, which turns his rear end loose.

There's a fine line between getting enough set, getting the steer in tow and keeping him moving, versus leaking out of the set and letting the steer drift away from the heeler.

If I can keep control of the steer's head, I can control what's happening with his back legs, which is going to make it easier for my heeler to read where the steer is going to be on the next jump.

There's also a fine line between taking off fast enough to keep the steer hopping, without running off

with the steer – or going so slow that the steer quits hopping.

The Face

The face has changed a little bit from when I first started showing. Today, to earn credit for facing, you need to continue to pull that steer until your heeler has dallied. That way, the steer is always on a tight rope while the horse gets his rear end down and brings his front end around to face. I think it exhibits more athletic ability when the horse is using his hindquarters to pull that steer every stride and then gets his hindquarters down while freeing up his front end to bring it around. A smooth, level face on a tight rope, with the head horse coming around and looking down that rope at the steer, will nearly always be a plus situation.

World champion trainer **CHRIS LITTLEFIELD** of Henrietta, Texas, has operated Littlefield Ranch for over 10 years. He trains horses for team roping, tie-down roping, working cow horse and cutting. In 2004, while working as a horse program manager and assistant ranch manager of Stuart Ranch at Waurika, Oklahoma, he trained and showed Real Gun to the title of AQHA Superhorse, earning points in team roping, tie-down roping and working cow horse. In 2009, he showed a daughter of Real Gun to the junior heading world championship. He has also shown other world and reserve world champions in AQHA, National Reined Cow Horse Association, Palomino Horse Breeders of America and the Ranch Horse Association of America.

Showing the Heel Horse

How well a horse performs in the box, runs, rates, gets in position and stops all equate to earning the most points from the judges.

By Zane Bruce with Jim Jennings

A lot of what I do when I'm showing a horse in the heeling depends on the horse. A heel horse is judged on four things during a run – how he acts in the box; running and rating the steer down the arena; position in the corner and when the roper throws; and on the stop. How I handle my horse during all of those parts of a run might depend on how good my horse is, maybe how broke he is, and what his strong and – if he has any – weak points are. My objective is to get the maximum number of points that I can during the few seconds that it takes to complete the run.



After I ride into the box and turn around, I like to walk my horse to the middle of the box and sit there a moment while I gather my reins. Then I'll back her into the corner. This shows the judges how quiet my horse is and that she's under control.



My horse is at the back of the box, in the corner, and she's standing flat-footed, pretty squared up. She's on a loose rein with her ears forward. She's ready to go, but not pushing.

The Box

I like to walk my horse quietly into the box, turn him around and step up about halfway toward the middle. Then, if he's really good in the box, really quiet, I'll let him sit there and take a breath while I gather my reins and get my rope ready. I don't mind letting him sit there as long as 10 seconds or so if he's really good. You can get plus points in the box, and that's all determined by how quiet your horse is in there.

Then I'll back him into the corner. The good ones will stand still with their head pointed straight away and their ears perked. And I back all the way to the corner, because I'm afraid that if you stop him 2 or 3 feet off



This is the way I like one to look leaving the box. She's flat, my hand is down and she's striding out.

that back rail, the judges might think that he won't back up into the corner or that he can't run very fast.

I try not to be pointed straight at the chute so my horse doesn't fall

into the right lead. I set him up pointing just a little to the right of center. That way, he'll break to the right half of the front of the box and get in position on the steer quicker.



This is two strides out of the box. I would like for her to be in the left lead, but in one more stride, I'm going to pick her up and she will switch to the left lead. With the way we're angled while sitting in the box, she's going to leave in the right lead, especially with a steer that's drifting to the right like this one. I'm pushing her forward to get out in front of that steer and keep him hazed off the fence.

Running and Rating

When I leave the box depends on several different things. The object is to get to your position on the steer as quickly as possible. I'm normally not too focused on when the header leaves; it's more when the steer leaves. As a matter of fact, the only time I watch the header nod is if I'm riding a horse that might not leave as quickly as he needs to, and I know I need to get out early. If I have a slow horse, I'll watch the header nod to make sure I leave as soon as the gates open, instead of after they open. If you have drawn a steer



I'm in good position and my horse is in her left lead. We're still keeping our distance, about 10 feet wide, keeping that steer off the fence.

that leaves the chute really hard and you're watching the gateman instead of the header, you can be a little late leaving. Then the steer will outrun you and get too far to

the right before you can get up beside him and block him. But that's only in the case where you have a heel horse that's maybe not quite fast enough.



We've just made the corner, and I'm getting in position to rope, with my horse's right leg pretty well in line with that steer's left hind leg. I like to be inside about 6 to 8 inches so I can see my target.

But if I'm riding a horse that I know can run, I'll see that steer take a step and then go with him.

However, if you're in an arena where the heel box is on the right fence, that changes everything. You need to leave just a touch earlier so you can make sure the steer doesn't get over there on that right fence and cut you off. If you don't get that steer hazed within the first couple of strides, he's

going to beat you to the right fence and you can never get in position for your run and rate. That takes away from the look of the run and it makes for a bad corner. More than likely, if that happens, the judge is going to minus you on running and rating.

Going down the arena, I like to be 10 or 12 feet to the steer's right, and back from his head about 2 or 3 feet. Then, when the header sets that steer, I let

that steer lead me through the corner. My horse will be rating that steer going down the arena, staying in the same spot in relation to the steer, and then I'll speed him up a little bit in the corner and come in there just off the steer's left leg. I want to be just inside that steer so I can see the feet. In the horse shows, I'll usually stay in that position two or three swings – about three hops of the steer – and then I'll rope him.



I'm taking my slack and she's starting to get in the ground, which is good, but I wish my body was farther forward in the saddle. I have a tendency to want to push to the back of my saddle and help my horses stop, instead of staying in the front, where I think I should be.

The Stop

When I make my throw, my horse's head could be anywhere from about even with the steer's hip bone to back even with the tail head. If you get too far up, you run the risk of the judges thinking you might have bumped the steer, and that's a five-point penalty. I'll be squeezing with my legs around that corner, and then when I let off with my legs and start my delivery, my horse will start stopping. I'll usually take an extra

two or three swings so I can make sure my horse is straight with the steer when he takes that jerk. I want him to take it on all four feet instead of off to one side or the other.

Ideally, you want to throw your rope and pick up your slack, but let your horse get to the bottom of that stop before you dally. You want him on his butt as far as he can get when that weight hits him so he will squat right there and not move. If he's still sliding and moving forward when that

weight comes, he's not going to take that jerk as well. He might be a little off balance because he's still moving.

There are so many things that can happen within a run that affect all of this, things you can't account for – the steer slows down, you get too close, or maybe you've left yourself plenty of room going down the arena but the steer gets heavy in the corner and the header is having trouble keeping his momentum going. You can have the perfect run



There's not much I don't like about this picture. The mare is stopping really well, and I've got my slack picked up high so she can get all the way to the bottom of the stop before I dally. That way, she's stopped, in the ground, and ready for the weight to hit her. A fraction of a second later I will have dallied and the run will be complete.

set up and your header's horse stumbles and gives that steer back to you a little bit.

And there are so many things that depend on the horse. I try to ride them all the same, but you can't do that because they are not all the same. You have to ride each horse according to his individual abilities. You just can't make a perfect run all the time.

ZANE BRUCE operates Zane Bruce Performance Horses in Graham, Texas, where he trains horses for heading and heeling. Zane competed successfully in Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association team roping competition for a number of years, and has been showing horses in AQHA competition, including the AQHA World Championship Show, for the past several years.