

A person wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and brown Western riding attire is riding a grey horse. The horse is equipped with a Western saddle and a rope. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with other people and trees.

AQHA

eBooks

Guide to
Versatility
Ranch Horse

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Performance. Versatility. Conformation. Those qualities are at the heart of AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse competition, where American Quarter Horses are exhibited as working ranch horses and exhibitor-horse teams are rewarded based on their expertise.

Versatility Ranch Horse competition sprouted from the desire to display the versatility and usability of ranch horses in a show setting. Multiple classes are offered: ranch trail, ranch riding, ranch reining, ranch cutting, ranch cow work and ranch conformation.

These classes are divided among four categories. Exhibitors have the opportunity to compete in open, amateur, youth and cowboy divisions, and are no longer required to compete in all classes.



Getting Started in Versatility Ranch Horse

AQHA Director of Ranching Kim Lindsey provides insight to this growing sport.

Before getting into any new event with your horse, take the time to read through the rules pertaining to that event and try to attend at least once as a spectator. When you've decided to take on the challenges of Versatility Ranch Horse classes, be prepared for a learning curve. Many competitors ride their horses daily on a working ranch, but that doesn't



mean you shouldn't join right in. Here are some tips to get you going.

Saddle Up

"We're going on the assumption that you have a horse that has at least seen a cow prior to competition and you, the rider, need a little guidance to head into the arena," explains Kim Lindsey, AQHA director of ranching.

First, the working outfit. Remember that regional and personal differences result in each competitor having a nuance or two in his or her gear.

"When it comes to the saddle and bridle, the rulebook discourages a lot of show-style silver," Kim says. "Most of the competitors you see ride something that they would ride working on the ranch. It's not logical to ride a saddle with silver in the brush, and it's not logical to ride a saddle loaded with silver in a ranch horse contest. The whole idea is to keep the attention on the horse. The goal is to see how the horse and

rider perform in the trappings that are as close to the ranch as possible."

The bridle you choose should complement your horse's head. Some horses' heads look choppy with a brow band, others don't. Get a peer's opinion on what works for your horse. As far as the bit, Kim suggests using whichever type of AQHA-approved bit elicits the most response from your horse with the least noticeable cues. For more detail, refer to guidelines listed in Rules SHW305-307 of the AQHA Official Handbook of Rules and Regulations regarding the use of bits and other equipment.

Long before she was the AQHA director of ranching, Kim paid her way through college on rodeo roping scholarships, then managed working cattle ranches and even won an AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse world championship in the amateur division. It's safe to say she has had plenty of experience throwing a loop

in the arena and on the ranch.

“I like to use a poly rope if I’m going to rope something around the neck,” she says. “You can buy extra-soft nylon, but that type is made to rope something around the horns usually. I’ve roped with both, but would recommend a poly rope because they are easier to handle when roping something around the neck.”

Prep Work

Many horses that compete in this event get their prep work doing a normal day’s work on the ranch. But for other horses, a little extra prepping is needed. Kim says trail is one of the trickiest classes.

“AQHA includes a list of mandatory obstacles for the trail class. This is an advantage to exhibitors, because that means they have the chance to practice the obstacles at home,” she says. “Set up some obstacles or use the terrain around you to get your horse comfortable with these challenges.”

Kim encourages beginners to attend clinics to further their knowledge base. From there, beginners can try more beginner-friendly classes like ranch riding and work their



way up to ranch reining and ranch cow work.

If your horse is new to competition, you’ll want to take time to get him familiar with being around other horses, the PA system and everything else that comes with being at a horse show.

“You’ll want to expose a horse a little bit at a time,” Kim continues. “Having it compete in that one class can do a lot for it mentally when it’s not quite ready to handle all of the Versatility Ranch Horse classes. Gradually, you can add other classes until you’re both prepared enough to head into all of the classes without stressing the horse.”

Locate a Venue

To find a Versatility Ranch Horse

competition near you, check www.aqha.com/showschedule for the latest list of approved shows.

In the Arena

Before most Versatility Ranch Horse events begin, the show manager, judge(s) and contestants will meet to make sure all contestants are clear on the running of the show.

“If you have a question, ask it,” Kim says. “Think through your game plan for the day of the show and jot down any questions you might have. Don’t be afraid to clarify something on a pattern or ask where the judge will be sitting. These things are important to how you show.

“Not every day can be perfect, but try to learn something every time you ride, and you’ll improve in time.”

Preparing Your Horse for VRH

Ranch horse competitor Bill Smith explains the in's and out's of introducing your horse to Versatility Ranch Horse.

Versatility Ranch Horse classes provide an outlet for ranch cowboys to show off their horses' talents. But don't worry – even if you're not a ranch cowboy, you can still partici-

pate. Bill Smith of Spur, Texas, defines the details that can make your Versatility Ranch Horse class seem like a day on the trail.

Choosing a horse to show in





Versatility Ranch Horse classes is challenging. A solid, broke horse is your best bet.

Some people consider ranch horses to be either big and bulky or small and cat-like. For Bill, size is not as important as talent.

"I don't like as big of a horse as some people," Bill says. "I don't like a little bitty one. I like a horse with a lot of rate. It seems you can make one 'go' and 'whoa' so much easier than you can teach it to rate."

He also considers balance an essential characteristic of a successful versatility horse.

"It is important to do a lot of loping

in these classes, so you need one that lopes naturally," he says. "Balanced horses seem to move easier than others. Then you don't have to work on it continuously. You want easy movement. Sometimes, a horse really wants to go. So we spend a lot of time doing what we call 'jiggin' around' – it's basically spending time on the horse – trotting, walking around. We start jiggin' around before we start doing anything else. If he can't do it walking, he can't do it."

The Playing Field

Going from a ranch horse's natural

habitat to an indoor arena for competition can be more of an obstacle than you think.

"We don't have any access to buildings, so our horses are just not used to that," Bill says. "And when you go show in a building, you don't have much access to it even when you get there."

Taking a horse into an arena without any prior exposure can be daunting.

"That is pretty hard on you and him both. It really puts you in better position if you are in the ring for even three minutes before showing to let him look around," Bill says. "People are getting their horses more accustomed to the indoor setting, and it is typical that good horses seem to just take it. They get the job done.

"It helps to get the horse off of his home turf, even if it's just going to a neighbor's place to jig around or work cattle," he continues. "You never know what might startle your horse. Once, it was the chalk line in the cutting that scared my horse. Since then, we get some chalk and we draw us a few lines around the home place."

Bill encourages riders to "spook-proof" their horses prior to taking a trip to town. "If you think your horse might not accept the banners waving

on the side of the arena, grab a bedsheet and duplicate them,” he says. “Turn the radio up outside until it becomes background noise, and the horse doesn’t notice it. PA systems can throw lots of horses for loops.”

Show Off

What is easy for a cowboy in the pasture might not come so naturally in the arena with dozens of eyes watching. The key is to do your best.

“I try to go with the attitude of not trying to beat anybody. Just go do the best you can and don’t be afraid to lose,” Bill explains. He emphasizes the advice he received from a 4-H adviser who told him to “not go in there and beat yourself – do what you are capable of. Don’t do something to take yourself out of it.”

“Don’t be afraid to lose,” Bill says. “I think people go into the arena and put pressure on themselves that they have to do good.

“When you get to the show, don’t use up your horse before the class. Trust your training and trust your horse. Go show him and see what happens. I’m not saying don’t lope him around and get him limbered up. If it doesn’t work, be better prepared the next time.”

In the Lead

Bill says lead changes are done

naturally in the pasture, but the show ring alters the situation. In the versatility class, lead changes come into play during reined work, roping a calf and trailing a cow. For many cowboys, telling the difference between a right and left lead is the first challenge. Then, the goal is to use consistent cues to tell the horse which leg you want to move first.

“To get him in a lead? Well, if I am going in the left lead I will squeeze him with my right leg and lift my left rein. That lifts his left shoulder because he’s trying to get away from my leg and the pull of the rein. Once he’s thinking about taking a step, I use leg pressure to encourage his movement forward,” Bill explains. For the right lead, Bill reverses the cues.

A smooth transition through lead changes, simple or flying, prepares you for the pattern in the ranch rein-

ing and ranch riding events.

Bill also says he usually doesn’t concern himself with teaching lead changes until after the horse has been ridden consistently for at least six months.

In Your Tracks

The ranch reining and ranch cow work classes incorporate the use of a stop. Mind you, this doesn’t have to be the spectacular sliding stop of reining classes, but it involves the same body language.

“I sit down in the saddle – rock my hips underneath me and push my weight out through my heels,” Bill says. “Then, I say ‘whoa’ and pick up on the reins. That’s pretty basic, but it works.

“I go through the first year and try not to ever pull on a horse with both reins with the same amount of pull,” he continues. “Even if I am stopping





him straight, I have my right rein with a little more pull. In the end, we pull both reins. But to keep the young horse from bracing up and kicking his hip out to the right, I will change out to my right rein for two rides or 10 rides and keep it a little tighter and keep him a little off balance in his early stage.”

Ranch horses use their stopping ability while sorting cattle in lots, moving cattle out of brush and roping – to name a few. Well-executed stops show good verbal and nonverbal communication between horse and rider.

Spinning Top

Spins aren’t the easiest skill to master, even for a top hand like Bill. It involves strict cues and a foundation of neck reining.

“I ride two-handed a lot, but my goal from day one is to move to neck reining,” he says. “Again, it’s simply getting the horse to see that the easiest choice is to follow his nose. If I’m turning right, when I lay the left rein on him, I want him to look that direction. I don’t try to take a horse and drill his back leg into the ground, but follow his nose.”

To get a horse to follow his nose into a spin, Bill begins by walking him in circles, gradually making the circles smaller and smaller. The horse will find a natural smoothness in spinning. If the horse isn’t crossing his front foot over the other very well, Bill nudges the horse with his outside leg to push him into it. To maintain speed and keep the horse from stepping out of the spin, Bill alternates his reins rhythmically.

This “check” of the reins reminds the horse to turn its forward motion into lateral movement.

Get Grounded

Many ranchers work the range alone. Often, they jump off their trusty steed to close a wire gap behind quick-moving heifers and leave their horse as an extra man. This is where ground-tying originated – utilizing all resources available. It’s also a matter of safety. You don’t want your horse running off when you step out of the stirrups to close a trailer gate.

Bill says he never worried about training a horse to ground-tie until it was part of a ranch horse class in Fort Worth, Texas, in the early 2000s.

“It was something most of my

horses did because of day-to-day exposure to ranch situations,” he said. “It might have been the unusual surroundings that put my horse off kilter, but when he didn’t stay put when I dismounted, it was bad.”

That experience encouraged Bill to learn the skill and make it part of his training.

“I start at the barn or in the round pen and ride the horse up to a stop. I will throw a rein down – maybe the right one – and just sit there. Then get off of him and lay the other rein down. Then walk off.

“It might take a month and you may not be able to get very far from him, but you gradually teach him. I lay the reins out in front of him where he actually sees them so he knows he is loose. I don’t try to disguise it. When you leave, pick up the reins and ride off. Don’t ever lead him off.”

Sounds easy enough. But what if the horse starts to follow you?

“Go back and tell him ‘whoa,’” he says.

Ground tying is often an obstacle in the ranch trail class.

Boxing

Reading Cattle + Turns + Reserve Energy = Success

Two of the events at an AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse show

involve cattle. That means it’s important to be able to read how cattle move and react.

“You have to be able to read cattle and judge how a cow is going to work,” Bill explains.

“The ranch cow work class starts with boxing. I see a lot of people that work their calves for so long that when it comes time to rope, the calf doesn’t have any wind left. That is part of it – you should gauge to have a little calf left.”

Once a rider can evaluate a calf for stamina, the horse’s ability to rate, or stay with a calf, is added to the equation. To get his horses to rate smoothly, Bill turns a single calf into the arena and trails behind it. He allows the horse plenty of time to begin watching the calf and develop an interest.

Bill first puts the horse on the calf’s hip. To keep the horse in that spot, he adjusts its speed with leg cues. When the horse begins to maintain his pace, Bill releases the leg pressure. Once the horse understands that the hip is the comfort zone, Bill begins to move the horse to the middle of the calf and even rides past the calf and maintains the distance between horse and calf. How does he get to that point? Practice.

“I want the horse to stay wher-

ever I put him,” Bill says. “I don’t think anyone can do too much of trailing a calf.” Soon, the horse will look to change directions. “I’ll let him stop. Soon, he’ll go by the cow and want to stop,” he explains. “He’ll look for that reward, which is releasing the pressure and turning the cow. But your forward motion shouldn’t quit.

“Everything you do with a horse is built on impulsion. Why trot this horse by a cow and stop him and kill all of your motion – especially in young horses?” Bill says. “You want him to go over there and turn around, but what you do is go over there and stop him. He barely knows how to turn around, and we stop him where he has to start all over.

“Sure, I want that horse to slide his tires and turn around, but it takes time to get a horse to that point. He has to rate well first, then want to be near that cow. Let him find himself and go with it,” he says.

Lasso Lessons

Roping takes us back to rating, “spook proofing” and impulsion issues. Bill begins getting the horse accustomed to a rope in the round pen and uses a rope around a horse almost daily. Then, from the saddle, Bill will get the horse to rate calves before he ever ropes them. When the

elements of rating and swinging ropes don't bother the horse, he'll rope calves, but not even stop the horse after catching. "I have been guilty of it – first thing we want to do is go rope and stick that horse in the ground," Bill admits. "But what we should do – what I do now – is go rope. Get confident about catching. Let that calf hit the end of the rope a few times and give your horse time. He will figure out that he needs to start bracing up and holding the calf."

Soon, Bill switches to a heavier calf, to teach the horse about more resistance. "Then, come back to lighter cattle, and he'll really go to stopping them. Let that calf hit the rope, and you stop, but not hard. If we go 30 yards and stop, let him

stand. He'll get the idea that when we rope the calf we are going to stop."

Cut to the Chase

The purpose of the ranch cutting class is to separate the cow from the herd, stop her and pen her. To practice for this element, Bill brings 10-12 cattle into the arena, walks the horse into the herd and calmly cuts out one head. When the horse hooks onto the cow Bill is watching, the reins drop toward the saddle horn. A horse with natural cow sense will focus on the cow and begin to move with the animal.

"The whole idea is control. The cutting horse to me is a horse that can control a cow. To control a cow is to stop her. If the horse can get

into the cow's view and stop her, he has accomplished his goal," Bill says. "If you ever watch old cowboys, when a cow runs off in the arena or outside, young cowboys want to go chasing her. You can't stop a cow if you are chasing her. Those old cowboys leave

– depart from the animal, go around and get in her line of sight. They might not get out of a trot, but they would stop that cow."

Bill uses this idea to get his horses within the cow's line of sight during training sessions. When the horse stops the cow and Bill releases his leg pressure, the horse learns the comfort zone for the ranch cutting work is having the cow stopped.



Game Day Strategy

Run circles around your competition by putting this practiced plan into play at your next Versatility Ranch Horse competition.

A basketball coach wouldn't try to take a team to the finals without drawing up some defensive and offensive plays. And you shouldn't attempt to show your horse in an AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse com-



petition without a game plan. Should you use a zone or man-to-man? That depends on you and your horse. If you're just getting started, concentrate on the basics.

If you and your horse have the basics down pat, then it's time to move on to beating the pants off your neighbor. Truth is, it doesn't matter. The people who compete well in VRH have one thing in common: Their game day strategy includes the Three P's – Plan, Practice and Perform.

The Plan of Attack

Poll a few repeat winners to find out what their strategy was going into any type competition, and they'll have an answer. If they say they didn't plan on winning, they are probably trying to be modest. It's the prepared person who walks away with the honors.

- **Plan your run before entering the arena.** If you don't have an

idea of what it looks like in your own mind, it is almost impossible to make a clean run during the actual show.

- **Be personable but focused.** Don't concern yourself too much with other exhibitors or horses; just keep your mind on your game plan.

Each class of this event has specific challenges that should be considered in your plan.

Ranch Reining

- Find the center of the arena. To have a top-notch go, you need to know where to execute your lead changes. When you can perform the needed lead changes in the middle of the arena, it presents a balanced run to the judge. Finding that point in the arena and putting it into play could mean the difference between performing and winning.



Ranch Cow Work

- Scan the arena for any areas that could be tough spots. That includes knowing where your cattle will be entering the arena and where other cattle will be held. Expect a singled-out cow to stick as close to her penned-up pals as possible. That factor can change how you approach roping.
- Don't go out of bounds. Be aware of the markers in the arena where you should push the cow when turning on the fence and when you've gone too far. Plan to stay within those boundaries.
- Determine which side of the arena you'd like to have the cow on before you go to rope her. If you're a right-handed

roper and you rate the cow down the right side of an arena, you have to contend with all the variables of roping plus the fence. If you can set the cow up with the fence on the left side of the cow, you've eliminated one complicating factor.

Ranch Riding

- Keep your signals consistent when asking your horse to change gaits. Scrambling the signals can foul up your game if you drop a gait or cause a severe reaction in your horse.
- Go out and ride your ride with commitment and courage in every maneuver. Know your horse and know your pattern. Your body language will reflect

that, and judges pick up on it. But more importantly, your horse picks up on it.

Ranch Trail

- It's your job to study the trail pattern. Walk through it and consider what gait you'll need to be in, and where your horse should be placing each foot. Yes, it might seem tedious, but you won't mind when you are taking home the first-place prize. Think of the course as your competition. You need to know all you can about it to guide your athlete through the obstacles with precision and ease.
- Expose your horse to the elements of the trail course before the show, if possible. The new

smells and sights could throw off your plan and bench your team sooner than expected.

Ranch Cutting

- No charging the opponent. When you approach the cow, give her some space. Then you will be prepared to take the charge if she tries to run over you. Watching one of the best, Bill Smith from Spur, Texas, he never crowds the cow, and he always performs well, because he sizes up his opponent (the cow.) One rule of thumb – it is easier to step to the cow than to step away from her.
- Watch the cows in the runs prior to yours when possible to get an idea of the temperament of the cattle.

Ranch Conformation

- Show format will determine some of your planning here. Check the schedule to determine whether you'll have time before the ranch conformation class to rinse off your horse. If you are the first to go in the class just before conformation, you'll probably have time for a rinse.
- Prior to entering the class, brush your horse.

The Practice Sessions

Performers have to practice. Period. Recreate the environment as much as possible, and then put yourself and your horse through the paces. If you approach practice in a lackadaisical fashion, your show performance will be evidence of that.

Practice is the first place you should be putting your plan into action.

Only you can know what amount of practice your horse requires to absorb a lesson. Use that knowledge as a gauge for the appropriate length and frequency of practice sessions. In general, young horses need more tuning than seasoned horses.

Your athlete (the horse) needs as much preparation for the events as any other athlete would for competition. Horses that aren't well-conditioned could come up lame after an event because their muscles weren't ready for the exertion required by particular maneuvers. It is important that you practice spins, rollbacks, lead changes and stops with the intensity that you will perform these moves.





You need to think about what you will be doing in the show ring. A mental practice run can assist you in your performance by letting you consider the arena, determine the points where you will execute maneuvers.

Set up obstacles and practice them. You might do all of the mandatory obstacles during a day's work on the ranch, but it is different in the arena. Refer to the AQHA Official Handbook of Rules and Regulations for the official specs on obstacles, and be creative on the materials you use.

Perform

It is easy to sit in the stands, watch a VRH show and remark, "My horse can do all of those events." Putting your actions where your mouth is can be an entirely different ball game.

This final step in the Three P program, Perform, is the most important, but it relies heavily on steps one and two. To perform well in the competition of VRH events, you will need to commit to your plan and carry out what you practiced.

Your plan might not be practiced enough to be performed at the first show you attend, but don't give up. It has taken some of the top hands years to learn how to tell which lead their horse has taken, how to read a cow and when to throw a well-timed loop.

If you don't like how your performance turned out, do as any coach would: Review your plan and practice schedule. Even a small change with your athlete's regimen could be a tremendous benefit to performing your game plan.