

Reminiscing With Leon Harrel

GREAT ADVICE written by Alexandria Harrel

Once in a while, it does my heart good to look back at the people and experiences that have helped shape who I am today. I personally have been blessed in every area of my life with people who came along at the exact right moment. They not only had a big impact on me at the time, but also helped me fulfill my dreams and goals.

When I got into the horse business in 1964, I went to work for a man in California named G.D. Turnbow. He owned the Triangle T Ranch in Chowchilla. I was told I wouldn't last six months. They were right! As it turned out, I only lasted five years and I came away with a great education.

One of the things Mr. Turnbow taught me, was that the impossible only takes a little longer, but the good news is, there's no competition! He asked me one day to come over to his house after supper and to bring with me a list of the things that were keeping me from being as successful as I thought I should be in my life. That night, I worked very hard on my list, I had written everything I could think of. Everything from being from Oklahoma to the neighbors refusing to lend me money, I put it all down. When I handed him my list, he studied it very carefully, then he turned it over and wrote something on it. He told me it was a very impressive list, but there it was missing something. He handed it back to me and when I turned it over, I saw my name "Leon Harrel". He told me to forget all the other reasons I had listed and work just on Leon. If I did that, I would get everything from my life that I wanted. I will never forget what a profound statement and moment that was for me.

In the meantime, Sonny Fields ran the horse operation at the Triangle T, and as I look back, he was without a doubt one of the very best horsemen I have ever seen. At that time our primary source of income was from pre-training racehorses. Sonny had an extensive background and could train just about everything. When he came to the ranch, he brought some of his cutting horse clients as well. Sonny was such a gifted trainer that Matlock Rose himself thought enough of him to ask him to take Peppy San for thirty days of training and show him in the World Finals in Reno, Nevada that year. Sonny was a great person and a lot of fun to be around. He taught me how to be a true professional. He was a tremendous cowboy, and would never ask anyone to do anything he couldn't or wouldn't do himself.

My favorite story about Sonny involves some new horses that had come in. At that time I was very busy starting eighty head of colts and fillies each year. Sonny was away at the sale in Pomona, I had forty two year olds just started, and Red Randalls brought in five more just before Sonny left. One of the colts was big, black and wilder than mountain scenery, as my friend Jimmy Bush would say. When Sonny returned, he was the only one I had not ridden. When I told him that, he said, "I want that colt rode". Now, I had been working an average of sixteen hours a day, knocking myself out and wasn't in the best of moods at that moment. So, I told him if he wanted that colt rode, he could do it himself. Sonny immediately picked up a halter and went straight into the colt's stall. He haltered him, jumped up on his back (in a 16x16 stall) and that colt went to pitching. He jumped, bucked, kicked, squealed, tore down the feeder, tore down the automatic water, it was quite a rodeo!

When the colt finally quit, Sonny slid off him, patted him on the neck and said to me, "I think you can handle him." I got the message. It goes without saying that working with Mr. Turnbow and Sonny Fields had a huge impact on me both personally and professionally.

Riding race horses in the mornings and cutting horses in the afternoons, it didn't take me long to figure out where my passion lie. Sonny told me, if I wanted to be the best, then I should choose the best to study, and study them well.

In the cutting pen, the best on the Pacific Coast was a man named Don Dodge. So I watched and studied Don every chance I got. Don was an extremely accomplished horseman in numerous arenas including jumping horses and reiners as well as cutters. He had developed a lot of style and finesse with a horse, and that's what I learned to do from watching him.

I purchased Fizzabar for the Starlight Ranch from Don. Fizzy was responsible for giving me the opportunity to work with someone who became my best friend and mentor, Shorty Freeman. Here's how that came about. In 1969, I was showing her regularly to keep her in the top ten. The NCHA Top Ten was a very big deal in those days. There were only the Open and Non Pro classes and the \$1K classes, so to have a horse in the Top Ten was very prestigious indeed. It was also very prestigious to win enough money to get into the NCHA Hall of Fame. I was in Phoenix, Arizona to show at Adrian Berryhill's place where Shorty Freeman was training out of at that time. Don Dodge was also there with his horses for the winter and invited me to stable and work cattle with him anytime I was down there showing.

When I arrived in Phoenix for the next show, Don and Shorty were working horses in the arena side by side. Much to my surprise, over the next four hours, Don never once acknowledged that Fizzabar or myself were even on the property. Never one to miss undertones in a situation, Shorty sensed my discomfort and confusion and came over and told me that he had a stall for me to keep her in. He asked if I would like to work with him while I was there, since my other options had apparently changed. I gladly accepted his offer. That night, he invited me over for dinner. During dinner he told me, "you must be doing something right Leon, because I have never seen Fizzabar work better in her life, and while you are working that good together, it's important that you listen very closely to her." I took his advice, and we won a lot.

As for Don's unexplained change of heart, Shorty told me, "Always remember this Leon, if they're trying to kick you in the pants, you must be out front." Of course it was personal, but it's all in how you decide to take it. I liked Shorty's advice; it made me feel much better about myself that day.

It was the beginning a great friendship that lasted until he died. I loved Shorty dearly and I still miss him very much.