

Staying Hooked

Legendary teacher Leon Harrel talks about the importance of welcoming newcomers into the sport of cutting.

They say it's addictive. It's often referred to as a bug, the cutting bug in fact, and once you've been bitten, you can't stop. For many, it's true. The adrenaline rush of riding a cutting horse for the first time brings people into the sport from all sorts of backgrounds and lifestyles. Ideally, all of those first-timers would go on to be successful non-pros and invest in the sport. But unfortunately, many are lost within the first two years for various reasons. One reason, according to NCHA Hall of Fame rider Leon Harrel, who is a renowned clinician known for his teaching skills, is that they don't get the support they need to stay hooked.

Harrel and his wife, Alexandria, moved to Weatherford, Texas, from California, where he was instrumental in creating and developing the Galles-Harrel Training Center. He still travels both nationally and internationally conducting cutting clinics and promoting the sport. One of the biggest challenges he sees amateurs facing is finding a trainer who has the time to spend with them.

"What they really need is someone that's interested in educating them on their horsemanship and trying to dissect this game for them to make it simple enough and attainable enough that it's not overwhelming to them," Harrel explained. "The more successful they can be at this and move up the ladder, the more likely they are to stay involved."

Harrel, who served as president of the NCHA in 1982, said he believes that the association has done an excellent job of offering amateurs avenues to show in, adding that it's up to the trainers and other cutting enthusiasts to help keep newcomers involved.

Many of Harrel's students agree that the one trait that makes him such a great teacher is his patience. Being patient with customers, he said, is key – trainers should help their customers continue to enjoy the sport throughout their progression, as well as their regressions.

"It doesn't matter what level you are; when the fun leaves, there's not much excitement left," Harrel explained. "If you took a second-grader and put him in sixth grade, he'd never go to school again. It's the same way with people in this sport. If they knew how hard it was to win a World Championship, or place in the Futurity when they were first starting, they'd probably think, 'This is a little over my head.' If you build them up to it and support them, then by golly, they might just go to Fort Worth and pick up a check."

There are several ways that trainers can ensure that their clients are enjoying themselves. While proper tuning of horse and rider is important, it is equally imperative that the rider be mentally prepared.

"So many times amateurs get excited about showing and they think, 'Gosh dang, I'm taking old Dually down there and I'm gong to tear 'em up!' Then, they



COURTESY OF LEON HARREL

Harrel has been known for many years for his excellent teaching skills.

pull in there and see all the trailers and think, 'Gee, maybe I'm not ready.' Then they hear somebody say, 'That judge is really tough and the ground's too hard and the cattle are too wild, the pen's too wide or the pen's too deep. ...' Pretty soon they're thinking, 'I wish I'd have stayed home, I'm not quite ready.'

"When I see something like this happening, or any sort of negativity at all, that's where the support comes in. What I teach people is how to combat and beat the negativity that's around them. It's just a matter of keeping yourself primed. Instead of thinking, 'Gosh, I hope I can get through this,' rather, they should say to themselves, 'Today, I'm going to show this horse to the best of my ability.'"

Even when the trainer/client relationship is at its best, it's important that those new to the sport feel welcome by fellow competitors. If simply feeling good about being a cordial competitor isn't enough incentive, he said people should realize that the more cutters that participate in the sport, the higher the purses will be. It's a positive situation for everyone.

"First of all, be more personable to the newcomers," he advised fellow cutters. "Take the time to say hi and shake their hand. Make them feel more welcome; that's one of the simple little things they can do. The



JESSICA ROBBINS

Clinic participants said one of their favorite things about any clinic is getting to meet new people.

more people they can keep hooked, the more opportunity they have to be prosperous with the business coming their way."

Harrel began conducting clinics in the 1970s. He finds it to be the most effective avenue of reaching students. He's been presenting clinics nationally, as well as internationally, for many years and said they offer several advantages.

Riders can go and watch people without the pres-



JESSICA ROBBINS

Participants of Leon Harrel clinics reap many benefits from his small, personalized formats.



COURTESY OF LEON HARREL

Harrel focuses on horsemanship through his teachings as much as the principles of cutting.

sure of competition, hear the same problems they're having, or have had, and also find out how to correct these problems. They can get a lot of answers without being under the gun themselves by just listening and watching. The key factor in any learning environment, according to Harrel, is that the riders continue to have fun.

"If they can have fun, and not feel intimidated at a clinic, especially by their instructor, the learning curve is out of sight," he added. "You cannot believe what can be accomplished with people in two or three days."

Molly Sponsler, Aledo, Texas, recently started riding with Harrel and said he's helped bridge a huge gap in the riding program for her and her husband, Chuck.

"When we started, we couldn't find anyone to help

About Leon Harrel:

Leon Harrel was born in Oklahoma, a third-generation cattleman/rancher. At age 16, he moved to California, where he was involved in the rodeo circuit for many years, until a bull riding accident ended his career. He then became involved in training racehorses for J.D. Turnbow. Once he was introduced to the sport of cutting in the 1960s, Harrel began to devote himself entirely to his new passion. While on the West Coast, he became prominent in the cutting horse industry. He served as the president of the Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association in 1974-1975, and was inducted as a lifetime director of the association in 1975. Harrel served as president of the NCHA in 1982 and was inducted into the NCHA Hall of Fame in 1989. Some of his major accomplishments include winning the 1974 NCHA Futurity on board Doc's Yuba Lea and again in 1987 on Smart Date, as well as claiming five NCHA Open World titles. In his competitive years prior to teaching, Harrel was awarded more than \$1.5 million in prize money. Recently, he and his wife, Alexandria, moved to Weatherford, Texas, where he conducts small, intimate clinics, private training for individuals and, on occasion, outside horses.



COURTESY OF LEON HARREL

us," Sponsler explained. "They're not interested in helping people who are just beginning. That's why Leon's been so helpful to us, because he's willing to take the time, and he's so patient. We've had a great experience."

Sponsler attended one of Harrel's clinics for the first time in May. She said she's reaped several benefits from the close-knit format. She enjoyed meeting new people who are involved in the sport, and also got help with her horse, which was tuned by Harrel during the clinic.

"My horse had some issues and he taught me to recognize those problems and to deal with them properly," she added.

Nancy Calvin traveled from Calgary, Alberta, to attend Harrel's clinic for the second time. Because of the distance involved, she didn't bring her horse, but was still able to participate because Harrel provides finished horses that riders can learn on. This isn't something that's always offered at clinics, but according to Harrel, many times it's necessary in order for riders to maximize their learning experience.

"If they have a horse that they're having problems with, we can put them on something that can elevate their education quickly," he said. "We even have horses

that we can put riders on who haven't cut before, and be confident that they'll have a positive experience and be safe. When people come to a clinic, we want that individual to be blown away, and feel like they've really learned something."

Harrel has produced an instructional DVD for beginners, and is working on a new series geared toward amateurs. He has also worked with *Western Horseman* to author the popular book *Cutting*.

According to Harrel, his success in teaching has been the result of two key factors: being patient and being positive.

"I've been told I have a knack for making people feel comfortable around me. My style is not to yell and embarrass people, but to stop and talk to them before they go into the herd, to encourage and coach, rather than waiting for them to make mistakes that could have been avoided. The real key to being an excellent teacher and mentor is to always teach up to people. I try to offer constructive criticism, but always make sure I end on a positive note. While I'm giving them information they need, I do my best to lift them up at the same time."

For more information on working with Harrel, visit www.leonharrel.com. ■