

Leon Harrel

DANCING WITH COWS AND HORSES

by William C. Reynolds

It's 4 a.m. and Leon Harrel already has his spurs on. Well before most folks have had their first cup of coffee, he's already thinking about the second horse he's going to ride today. The first horse? He already figured him while pulling on his boots.

If you get the feeling horses are on Harrel's mind — not just at 4 a.m. but all the time — you'd be right. The horse, Harrel says, has taught him everything he knows.

Leon Harrel is a seven-time world cutting-horse champion. At 62 years young, he is old-school. He wears his cowboy hat and silk scarf wherever he goes. He says "yes ma'am" and "no sir" and stands when a lady leaves a table or enters a room. And Harrel knows a couple of things about horses — things only a cowboy knows from watching a thousand of them and riding a few thousand more.

To Harrel, horses are more than just something to ride and win on. They are part and parcel of preserving a piece of our heritage as Westerners. Harrel knows something about legacies. His story began on the grassy plains of Oklahoma. As a boy in the 1940s, he worked alongside his father and grandfather as they farmed and raised cattle. Early on, these two most important

men in Harrel's life instilled in him the Western tradition and the hard work ethic it took to maintain it. It was a world of "please" and "thank you" along with times of quiet hard work.



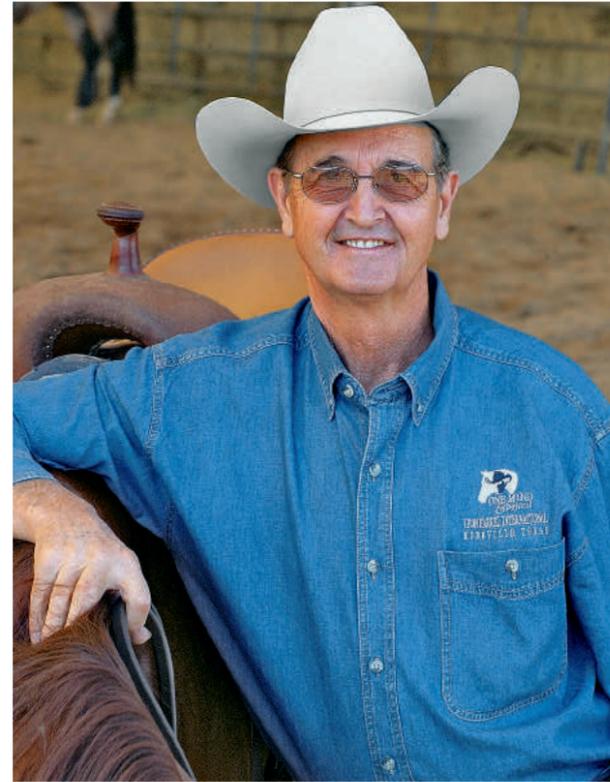
The sport of cutting originated from Western ranch work.

As a boy, Leon loved the West and dreamed of one day becoming a world champion cowboy like the ones he saw at rodeos. As he grew and evolved, he realized this childhood dream many times over. He has claimed the NCHA (National Cutting Horse Association) Futurity Championship twice, and has qualified for the finals 23 times in the

28 years he has competed in the event. He was inducted into the NCHA Hall of Fame in 1989 and has been named Honorary Lifetime Vice-President. But like they say, it's way far from over for this cuttin' horse man. And the key word is *cuttin'*.

The sport of cutting originated from Western ranch work, back when ranches were vast and fences were few. When a cow needed doctoring, cowboys had to figure out a way to separate the sick cow from the rest of the herd without the use of fences and without upsetting the whole outfit. Because cattle are herd animals, they depend on their own for safety, disappearing into their numbers. Cowboys learned to use their horse to "cut" or separate the wanted cow from the herd. Over time, this method of separating cows became a contest between cowboys, and a quick horse with a "cowy" mentality became a prized possession.

Today, cutting-horse competition is a highly refined and elegant sport. It is really more like a dance than anything else. A dance that brings cows and horses together with, oh yes, a rider along for just that — a ride. The more a skilled rider leaves a skilled cutting horse alone, the more beauty the movements between bovine and equine become. If you have ever experienced a good ride on a cutting horse you know what I am talking about.



Leon Harrel, NCHA Hall of Famer.

"The horse has been my greatest teacher. I want to continue that tradition."

It's addictive. Or as Canadian singer-songwriter and rampant cutting-horse rider Ian Tyson says, "It's the disease for which there is no cure."

Leon Harrel's way of treating the symptoms is to share his love of cutting and great horses with new riders. And he has figured out a creative way to do just that. He has taken his skills and understanding of good horsemanship and joined forces with rancher and former Indy car-racing veteran Rick Galles to host six summer cutting clinics at the Galles Ranch in Colorado. The concept for the clinics? To allow cutters of all levels to enhance their horsemanship under the watchful eye of an NCHA Hall of Fame champion, while enjoying the breathtaking beauty of the Rocky Mountain views of Pagosa Springs [see next page].

That means while you're on horseback in the Rockies, you

get four days of one-on-one instruction with Leon Harrel and his staff — at your horsemanship level. Pretty cool, eh? There's more. Cutting and crowds don't go together. It's a world where slow is fast. In order to ensure a high level of personal instruction and attention, each class is limited to 15 riders. And here's the kicker: You're paired with a trained cutting horse that is suited to your own riding skills. Your little equine partner will help you attain greater ability and knowledge. Which is exactly as Harrel has planned it. "The horse has been my greatest teacher," he says. "I want to continue that tradition."

It's an important tradition Harrel feels his and Galles' Five Star Cutting Clinics will help continue. For him, cutting is nothing short of the perfect antidote to a world that's gotten too fast. Harrel's answer to the need for roots and a simpler way of life? Time on horseback. Harrel insists that cutting is the most natural and fun thing a person can do on the back of a horse. It's synchronizing with an equine athlete, becoming secondary to the animal's will and drive to succeed at his job. The human becomes an extension of the horse, and that, according to Harrel, is where the magic happens.

It's a magic that runs deep in the ranching and cowboy traditions of fine horsemanship and cow working. For Leon Harrel, successful cow working demands fine horsemanship — you can't have the former without the latter.

So how did he get his cutting mojo really working? Saddle time and riding with the best. Harrel's competitive career saw him riding during the time of great horsemen like Shorty Freeman, Buster Welch, and Matlock Rose. "Those guys were more than just horsemen or pioneers of cutting," Harrel says. "They showed me the way. Simply put, they were just part of the horse." Now it's payback time — time to pass that wisdom on. ★

To learn more about Leon Harrel, go to www.leonharrel.com, or to get more information about the sport of cutting visit www.nchacutting.com. Contact Galles Ranch in Pagosa Springs, Colorado, at (970)731-



For Leon Harrel, successful cow working demands fine horsemanship.