

The Southwest's Equine Sport & Lifestyle Magazine

Texas Horse

Vol. 12, No. 3

March 2006

Priceless

Talk

A photograph of a cowboy riding a grey horse in a corral. The cowboy is wearing a white cowboy hat, a light blue long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans. He is riding a grey horse with a white blaze on its face. In the corral, there are several longhorn cattle, including a white one and a brown one. The background shows a dirt hillside with some trees under a clear blue sky.

Leon Harrel

Maestro of the Cut

Dental Column Debut

Jahiel on Long and Low Work

Chapel Hill Wurst Repast



Cutting WITH THE LEGEND NCHA Champion Leon Harrel

By Kate Riordan

I first met Leon Harrel 24 years ago when I interviewed him a year before he moved to Kerrville, Texas - the state that proudly sports the title "cutting horse capital of the world." At the time I was the editor of *California Horse Review*, then the largest equine magazine in the world (300 pages monthly; I kept a cot in my office and at press time literally didn't go home for days). Certainly Leon Harrel's claim to fame in the cutting horse world was well known, and as I captured his words I definitely knew I was standing in the shadow of a champion. But mostly I remember his wit, the rakish tilt to his hat, and the rascal revealed by the glint in his eye - which undoubtedly earned him a finger-wagging or two along the way.

All these years later, not much has changed. The eyes still twinkle and the jokes keep rolling off his tongue. "Fun" seems to be a one-word philosophy with this world-renowned cowboy. At age 65, his demeanor and his face - crinkly from grinning - are billboards that shout out how much he enjoys life.

Leon Harrel, two-time winner of the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Futurity, past president of the NCHA, NCHA Open World Champion and member of the NCHA Hall of Fame, is truly a legend. Period. There's nothing he hasn't done in the cutting world, including capturing innumerable championships and learning cutting finesse

from some of the greats like Buster Welch, Shorty Freeman and Matlock Rose. Leon is remarkably humble, though, and generously gives praise to those who have helped him along the way.

As a maestro of the horse, Leon has decided it's time to share his knowledge with others. And share he does, including cutting techniques, awareness, and wisdom garnered from the years before the herd. This remarkable education is accompanied by explanations of intuition, gut feelings, fortitude and "feel" that have helped boost Leon to the height of his career. Standing next to him when he's watching a horse, you want to beg him to talk about what he's thinking. All these years of observation, training, and competition are bound to add up to a beak of a lot of cowboy know-how rattling around in his brain.

Staring at a cow face-to-face may seem intimidating to some. That heart-pounding moment when your horse focuses on one cow, pins his ears, gets "down and gritty," dances back and forth in front of the cow like an equine ballet star, and then runs across the arena full tilt to keep the cow from the herd - those are the moments that give "adrenaline rush" a new meaning.

For many, the thought of such an experience is frightening beyond words. Not to worry, the maestro says. "I'll give you a few hints," Leon grins, "we'll have a little fun."

Moreover, Leon shares his world at exclusive four-day, five-star clinics in which he says everyone who attends will succeed to the best of their ability. From first-time novice to the accomplished professional, everyone will benefit from these events.

"First of all," Leon says, "we match the right person to the right horse. And for the beginners, we don't just throw you in the midst of a herd and shoot off a starting gun! We spend a lot of time improving horsemanship techniques (most of which take place without a cow) before we work on performance. We teach people to build confidence, trust, and harmony with their horse.

"I share some of my philosophies at these gatherings, too. I've learned a lot from horses over the years, and I owe them a debt of gratitude," Leon states. "I've seen some people treat horses pretty poorly, both mentally and physically, and now I'm taking a stand to say that's never going to happen while I'm around. I really mean it from my heart when I say that I want people to treat the horse like their partner, to maintain the animal's dignity, to treat him humanely and with respect.

"We cover a lot of ground at these clinics. You'll discover small, but important, things like how to hold the reins, how to read a cow, how to best position your body in the saddle. Then our objective is to have fun! We keep everyone safe while teaching them horsemanship skills, turn-back techniques, herd holding, settling the herd, and then the secrets to success in cutting - at whatever level is appropriate for the rider."



So do we, as clinic participants, really get to know how Leon does what Leon does? With that danged sparkle still glinting in his eye, Leon replies enthusiastically, "You bet!"

Leon has taken the horse clinic to new heights in what is taught and in how his audience, some who have traveled from as far as Texas, is treated. The cutting clinics are conducted in Temecula, California, a bit of a hike for Texas Horse Talk readers.

It's worth the trip. The program is not only five-star because of who is teaching the course, and because of how each participant is treated. The horses are impeccably groomed, the tack polished and shined, the food superb, the libations generous, and the hospitality definitely earns each of those five stars.

"It's our job to make people feel special," grins Leon, "whether they're on a horse or sitting down to a catered dinner. It's more than just a horsemanship clinic - it's a terrific experience, a benchmark in life for most of our students. And people go away from these clinics happy, eager to try out their new education and skills. Most of them keep in touch with each other, and our Alumni Cutting each year is overwhelmingly successful. That's what a Galles-Harrel five-star clinic experience is all about - it's about life, horses, fun."

So who, you might ask, is the "Galles" part of these Galles-Harrel Five Star Cutting Clinics?

That is where karma comes into the cutting world. Leon's path crossed with another legend, Rick Galles, who race car fans will recognize as the owner of Indy cars for 20 years (including the car that Al Unser Jr. drove to the winning checkered flag at the 1992 Indianapolis 500). Rick, a race car driver himself, took one look at the sport of cutting, and without any prior knowledge of what it even felt like to be in a saddle, decided that cutting was the post-racing thrill he was looking for.

"I was finishing my racing career," states Rick, "and was looking for something that would fulfill my desire to compete. I've loved horses all my life and was intrigued by the fact that Joe Montana said once he got out of playing football, cutting was the closest thing to Sunday afternoon. So I thought cutting might be something I wanted to pursue."

True to his entrepreneurial spirit, the first thing Rick did in the horse world was to put on an aged cutting event at his ranch in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Far from being a backyard show, the aged event touted the third largest purse in the nation. Leon competed in that cutting, and at a cocktail party Rick hosted for the trainers, owners and riders, the two of them met.

"I had read Leon's book," says Rick, "so I recognized his name, even though I didn't know any of the big names in the cutting world. When I was introduced to him, I was intrigued not only with his wins over the years, but with the fact that he was someone who thinks outside the box. He wasn't a traditional player; he didn't just ride horses. Yes, he was a horseman, but he was also a creative thinker."

"We started talking and before I knew it, I cut my first cow at Leon's ranch in Kerrville, Texas in February 2004. We had discussed organizing clinics together and Leon immediately made it very clear that it was



important that I participated in cutting, and not just stand at the rail watching. So we planned a special cutting event and I invited friends and associates to Leon's ranch where we cut cows for three days to try out the clinic concept and format." The rest is history.

When asked about the difference between the thrill of racing and the thrill of riding, Rick replies, "I drove race cars years ago, so there's a certain feeling about that kind of thrill. And then there's a certain feeling about racing with the best in the world, like the Indianapolis 500. There's definitely a tremendous thrill to being an owner of one of those cars. Then there's the thrill of riding a cutting horse. They all provoke different feelings, but they're all good feelings. They're all exciting and they all get your heart pumping."

"I'm probably enjoying the horse competition as much as I did years ago when I drove off-road vehicles in desert races, like the Baja 500. It's a different sport, for sure - the Baja takes about 13 hours and cutting competition takes 2-1/2 minutes! But those 2-1/2 minutes are as exciting as the 13 hours."

When asked what his vision is for the Galles-Harrel cutting clinics, Rick replied, "I've always had a lot of fun building new businesses, particularly around things I like. I think there's tremendous potential in the NCHA and the cutting horse industry, and we hope to introduce some exciting new things to people interested in the sport. We have developed some unique team concepts, too, and people are pretty passionate about being part of our team."

"There aren't a lot of people doing what we're doing in the horse world, so we think we've found a niche in the industry. We're not breeders and we're not really competing in the aged events, but we're building a business through bringing new people into the sport. It's fun and exciting to see our team members and clinic graduates compete in a cutting, then ride out of the arena with grins on their faces - and it's such a great feeling to know we provided them an opportunity to do that."

They say that cowboys have a certain kinship with the wind. I believe that.

I also believe that the opportunity to learn from a legend like Leon Harrel is one of the most unique things that can happen in a person's lifetime.

"We'll get in the horse's mind a little bit," says Leon, "learn a few things about horsemanship, cut some cows, do some herd holding and turnback. But mostly we'll have fun a-horseback."

I believe that, too.



To find out more about the Galles-Harrel Five Star Cutting Clinics, visit www.cuttingclinics.com or call the Galles-Harrel Ranch in Temecula, California at 951.679.6312.