



LIVING THE DREAM

Story and Photos by Steven Long

Life has been good for an Oklahoma boy who spent a lifetime on the back of a horse. Most of those horses have been fine ones – high dollar performance steeds bred to amuse the carriage trade - cowboy style. The tall, lean, man with the soft voice and gentle manner long ago left the Indian territories behind for California, and then Texas. Leon Harrel has written books for *Western Horseman*, played with the best there is in his field, and conducted clinics as a thousand eager faces hung on every word. Now, just north of Fort Worth he lives like a country squire dispensing wisdom and doing what he has always done, ride fine horses. And now he's on to a new project, selling what may well be one of the best equine teaching videos ever produced. *Serious Horseplay for Amateur Cutters* will likely become a classic.

SPRINGTOWN, TX, - At 67, Leon Harrel is becoming an elder statesman in the almost ethereal world of elite cutting horse competitions.

But he is far from ready to kick back into a comfortable retirement and let others take the luster of his fame away from him easily. He's enjoyed the recognition that comes with greatness for decades. Moreover, he likes it. In the arena of top riders of cutting horses, Leon is a legend, and that isn't using the term lightly.

He and his horses have won six world

championships. Not only Leon, but his horses Doc's Playmate and Fizzabar are enthroned in the National Cutting Horse Association's Hall of Fame. He has served that organization as its president, honorary vice president, executive committee member, and lifetime director. At the state level he has led the Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association as president, member of the executive committee, and lifetime director.

Leon Harrel is gliding toward old age in a body that hardly shows any wear. There is no stumbling gait, no stiffness, no short steps

of the elderly. At 6'1", and 170 pounds, he still has the lean body of an athlete. Throughout his career, he's been lucky. Unlike many professional horsemen, he's never been badly hurt.

The walls of his home, a mansion really, tell the story of a life on horseback winning accolades from peers, public, and the snotty judges who can make or break a career in professional cutting.

Harrel doesn't drop names. He tells stories of friends as legendary as he is – endless stories of Matlock Rose and Buster Welch – broth-

ers in riding the cutting horse saddle. This is a master raconteur at work, as comfortable telling tales of other legends as he is riding a horse in the NCHA Futurity. In short, Leon Harrel and his peers (and there are precious few of them) have done it all, have conquered a sport that is more akin to poetry than it is to rodeo, although that's where the game of cutting a calf and overcoming its herding instinct to return to the other cattle has its roots.

Like most rodeo sports, riding a cutting horse developed as a way to blow off steam and best each other among working cowboys. And men being men, prize money quickly entered the picture. Today in the three major national cutting horse contests, prize money totals \$10.1 million annually. The NCHA boasts 21,000 members worldwide.

In all, some \$42 million is paid out in the sport's 2,200 sanctioned annual events.

Riding a cutting horse in competition is like no other sport. Men and women compete at the same level in the same event – the only major sport that is gender neutral. And the NCHA has evolved into a sport that wisely grooms future competitors.

"We've got so many levels now that there is pretty much a place for every horse that will work a cow," Leon says.

But make no mistake about it. In cutting, the horse is everything. While almost any-

body can cut a cow, getting to the higher levels isn't easy. It's a lot more fun winning than losing, and Harrel places his students according to their ability to compete.

"You put them where they need to be," he says. "If they are on a non-pro horse, you don't expect them to be the next Futurity winner."

In his decades at the top levels of the cutting world, Leon Harrel has bought a lot of horses for himself and evaluated his share for others. What does he look for?

"I want a nice head on him," he says. "When he's standing there natural, I've got to like him. I look at the overall picture, and then I look at the wheels.

Harrel, who spent the early years of his career in horseracing learned from his previous sport.

"It was drummed into me from racing," he says. "If they don't have any wheels, they're not going to run."

And what of those wheels?

"I want them square. I look for blemishes. I look at the canon bone, and I don't want a pigeon toe," he says. "I don't look for trouble."

Cutting is the horse world's richest indoor equine sport. It shows. Leon remembers how practitioners of the sport set themselves apart from rodeo cowboys or cowboy wannabes.

"You could always tell a cutter by his hat

and by his clothes," Harrel says. "Up until the 90s you could tell a cutter by the way he was dressed."

But getting into the championship arena is like a piano player getting to Carnegie Hall to play a concert. It takes practice, practice, practice, for both horse and rider. While cutting is a high dollar sport, getting to the elite level takes a little extra, a little more.

"It has to be a passion," he says. "It can't be about the money."

It is from these high octane competitions that Harrel comes home to teach a handful of clients how to cut a calf from the herd and keep it from returning.

Training both riders and horses is a patience game, he says.

"You have to keep the learning curve going, going, going – you don't have to rush them," he says.

And starting a horse destined for cutting is different from giving an animal a solid foundation in other disciplines.

"You can't start him like a bronc," he advises. "You can't get on those \$30,000 and \$40,000 horses and ride them like you are Casey Tibbs. I'm pretty old fashioned when it comes to that kind of stuff."

Harrel came to Texas in 1983 and settled in Kerrville. But the Hill Country town that

Leon Harrel con't. on page 33



was once a paradise is now bursting at the seams and Harrel kept seeing the country around Fort Worth as his future home. Finally, he stumbled on his dream.

Leon Harrel's home sits atop a low hill within a chip's throw from a Texas blue highway just north of Springtown, which is just north of Cowtown itself. He and his wife Alex moved there last year.

This is horse country, a land where people are as at home watching a rodeo event as they are watching their beloved Dallas Cowboys. It is a place where the owner of the local feed store is as likely to sit on the board of a local bank as a realtor, car dealer, or hardware store owner (all of whom are as likely as not to own a horse themselves.)

This is the Texas that people from other states visualize in their mind's eye when they hear the name. And Oklahoma born Leon Harrel finally made his way there as soon as he could, even if it took him a lifetime to do it.

And lucky for anybody granted the privilege of an invitation into his home - Leon brought his pictures with him. The walls of the legend's home are almost papered with photos of his storied life, a visual biography in a domestic setting. And Alex Harrel has

a natural talent for decorating. The home is a masterpiece where guests and clients can come for total immersion into the talent, wit, and wisdom of an American original on horseback.

Entering the home of Leon Harrel must be akin to a basketball fan sitting in the living room of Michael Jordan, a football fan having coffee at the kitchen table of Joe Montana, or a boxing fan breaking bread with Mohammed Ali or George Foreman.

There is a difference there. None of these sports legends are probably nearly as entertaining as Leon Harrel, and there is little chance anybody would ever get to enjoy their sport along side them as I did riding a cutting horse named Colonel in the personal Springtown arena of the man himself.

I saw my first cutting event 60 years ago when the graceful horses and their riders were still a part of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo - the actual rodeo itself. It may have been the year a drunken Gene Autry fell off his horse Champion. I will never forget the disgust in my tea dry as a bone parents voices as they spoke among themselves about the "disgrace." From then until the Houston rodeo lost the NCHA World Championships I watched these athletes dance their graceful

dance in a dirt filled arena. (This year the cutting horse competition will be relegated to two sad days at a sparsely attended horse show in a horse arena likely slated for demolition. Horses just aren't a priority at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo these days, but the annual wine auction gets top billing).

Never in my life did I think I would have the opportunity to ride a cutting horse, much less a legend. Almost 20 years ago my friend, the late Don Crawford, took me to the legendary Crawford Farms, a diamond of an estate whose shooting star shined brightly and briefly in the ethereal world of cutting before burning out when its owner found big game fishing more interesting than horses. It was there that Crawford bred NCHA Hall of Fame horse Cash Quixote Rio. And it was there that my host invited me to ride him. I declined, and have regretted the decision ever since.

The thought of the opportunity to ride another world class cutting horse never again crossed my mind until Leon invited me up to his place to ride with him. I jumped at the chance, and dragged *Horseback Magazine* columnist Wes White along for the fun.

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As you might guess, it didn't take much dragging to get the slow talking, and even slower writing, cowboy to come with me.

I brought my wife Vicki's horse, Bruja, with me to Springtown. She's steady, a necessity for shooting pictures from the back of a horse, so most of my time in the arena was on my own horse camera in hand popping shots of Leon. Then the time came for me to leave the familiar back of our wonderful little mare and mount Colonel, an ex Futurity horse Leon had waiting for me to ride.

As wonderful as she is (and Bruja is wonderful) she was nothing compared to Colonel.

As I mounted I was firmly convinced that I would be laying on the turf of the arena floor fewer than eight seconds into my ride. I was so wrong.

"You'll be fine," Alex told me as I got on Colonel with a lot less enthusiasm than one might expect from a novice spending precious moments with a hall of fame rider while sitting on the back of a former Futurity horse.

"Colonel will never hurt you," Leon echoed.

As much as I liked Leon Harrel, I just didn't believe him. I had watched too many World Championships to believe I could stay on one of the extremely athletic fast moving cutters who would like as not contort itself as it moved to chase an escaping calf.

I sat my feet in the stirrups as instructed - on the instep, instead of on the ball of the foot as I had been taught. Because of the sudden and sometimes violent moves a cutting horse always makes, it is essential that the foot be firmly placed on what cutters call the "platform" of the stirrup.

With an abundance of caution, and with my characteristic bravado left outside the arena, I approached the herd, found a calf, and eased it away from its companions.

I was pretty proud of myself to have even accomplished that much. But the best was yet to come.

Just like the big guys, I dropped the reins and grabbed the tall horn of the cutting horse saddle I was riding. Instantly Colonel went to work and I was in for the ride of my life.

Leon had told me about the "electric rib cage" of a cutting horse. A high dollar cutter moves off the leg with a feather light touch. In an explosion of athleticism, Colonel began his equine concerto in Leon Harrel's arena. It was like nothing I had ever felt in 60 years of riding.

The Cheshire Cat of Alice in Wonderland could not have produced a wider grin than I had on my face as Colonel danced his ballet in the deep arena sand.

What's more, I stayed on him with ease. Leon and Alex were right. I could ride a cutting horse.

And from that moment on I was hooked. And my pal Leon Harrel made me a deal. He'd teach me if I would write a series of columns about my "George Plimpton" experience. (Experiential author Plimpton wrote of suiting up and playing with the Detroit Lions in his bestseller, Paper Lion). I readily agreed.

While I was on Colonel, Leon had evaluated Bruja and found her to be far from a cutting prospect. Yet he said she could be trained? At my age, visions of becoming a septuagenarian athlete danced in my head. Could Bruja do it? "It comes down to the heart," he says. "You instill trust, confidence, and consistency."

Leon Harrel follows words that make up a sort of horseman's acronym of advice - T.A.S.T.E. It stands for truth, accountability, support, trust and energy. Did our horse have what it takes?



Leon Harrel's home sits on a low hill.

"You give her that and there's no telling what she will give you back," he advised. "You might even win the Futurity."

"You do that, but don't go thinking you are going to win the Futurity, or even be in it," Wes White told me when I related what I was thinking of doing with Vicki's horse.

Well, Wes didn't win the Extreme Mustang Makeover, but by God he tried.

Leon Harrel's new video may be purchased at
<http://cuttinghorsetrainingvideo.com>



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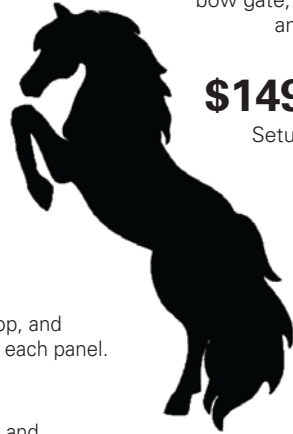
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