

In the first part of a three-part series, champion trainer and jockey Molly Powell shares the riding techniques she learned in cutting that she says made her a better barrel racer.

Many times during our competitive travels, we see horsemen and women from other equine disciplines and quickly separate ourselves from “them.” We are barrel racers. They are not.

Well, in 20-plus years of barrel racing professionally, I have had the chance to participate in many other types of riding besides my chosen sport. In my mind, there is no doubt that my experiences riding with “them,” those who participate in other disciplines, has influenced my horsemanship and barrel racing success in every way.

I always preach “horsemanship” as the key to winning—especially on different horses. If I had only one year to train a “city slicker” to run barrels and win, I would spend 11 months training on horsemanship, and one month on the actual barrel pattern.

During the next three months, I am excited to share with you what I learned from three of my favorite non-barrel racing disciplines—cutting, roping and jumping. The riding techniques I picked up from these sports helped improve the way I ride barrel horses, and I believe they can help you too.

### **The Cutting Seat**

Cutting is an amazing sport. The true instinct of a working horse is portrayed in this competition. It’s horse versus cow. I get shivers down my spine and sometimes a tear in my eye when I watch a great horse work a cow; the intensity and emotion are so dramatic! But I’m always appreciative of great horses doing what they love.

I first got involved in cutting when I was a freshman in high school in Montana. I had just entered the high school rodeo scene, and was blood thirsty for an “all around” buckle. Cutting was an event that I felt I wanted to try, as my parents had several friends who came to our indoor arena to practice. I was able to borrow an Open cutting horse, and after a few practice lessons, I was off to the rodeo.

I’ll never forget that feeling at my first cutting of having my stomach drop out from underneath me like I was riding a rollercoaster. What an eye opener. I could ride a barrel horse to a first place finish, but I could hardly stay on that cutting horse, much less help him out with the cut. Many times, I actually got in his way, and nearly fell off of him when he was working for me. Because he was such a well-trained, responsive horse, he was confused by all of my very unintentional “cues.”

The more I cut, the more I became aware of how much my horse felt my leg pressure, and responded according to how much I squeezed with my legs. From my perspective, I was just

trying to stay on his back anyway I could, and so I would “knee up” to stay on him. But the leg pressure, coupled with my nerves, made my horse leak forward toward the cattle and took us out of position to do well.

With more cutting practice, I learned that if I got a good seat by pushing myself way down into the saddle and pushing the heel of my hand on the backside of the saddle horn and locking my elbow into my hips, I was in a much better position to cut a cow successfully. I also learned how to get a “slouch” in my back on a nervous horse when I needed him to relax. By slouching, I was able to relax my whole body, including my legs. Now, every time I step up on a nervous horse, I instinctively slouch in my seat and work on relaxing him.

Before I rode the cutting horses, I just thought I could ride well. However, with the riding skills that I learned from cutting, I gained a much better seat. That good seat has helped me to have the confidence to ride horses with different styles of turning. That confidence in my riding skills enabled me to keep up with stronger horses and urge them to go for the win and not worry about me staying on them!

I refer back to riding Shali Lord's SX Docs Slider often because he has such a unique turning style. I would say that the confidence and experience in getting a good seat and locking my rear end down in the saddle was the only way I could have had the guts to ride Slider down the alley at the National Finals Rodeo. Thank God for those cutting lessons!

### **Achieving Balance**

Another thing that I learned from cutting was balance—and I mean awareness of my balance on my horse's back. I realized that I needed to be in the middle of my horse so that I wouldn't distract his performance. On an Open horse, that was one of my few jobs as his rider. A cutting horse comes back through himself with a lot of force when he cuts a cow, much like a barrel horse will when he finishes a turn on a barrel. Riding a cutting horse through a turn is a similar experience to riding a barrel horse through a turn.

Competing at cutting added to my preparation skills, as well. I would always try to take a deep breath and slowly exhale right before I competed at a cutting. While I was riding through the herd, searching for that perfect cow to cut, I was also trying to quiet myself both mentally and physically. I knew that my horse could feel me relaxing, and that would help him to focus and relax as well. I tried to relax my legs and get that deep seat that I knew I needed. This put my body in a very quiet, focused state and allowed my horse to work and think on his own.

Every time I ride down the alley on a nervous horse toward the arena, just before he launches toward our first barrel, I try to take that deep breath and exhale into my run. It's one of the keys to riding a nervous or sensitive horse for me.

### **Take the Challenge**

These days, I see lots of young riders focusing mainly on barrel racing and not working much on their horsemanship education. I don't think that I would have had as much success if I hadn't had the opportunity to gain that invaluable horsemanship experience that I did through other types of riding.

Sometimes I look back at all the opportunities that my parents provided for me by helping me with my barrel racing career. They always encouraged me to trying out different types of riding, and now I'm so thankful. If you are interested in becoming a stronger competitor than you already are, challenge your horsemanship skills. You'll be glad you did!

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*For more information on Molly Powell, visit [mollypowell.com](http://mollypowell.com) .*