

How the Pros Teach Cutting



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Excerpts from an article by Barbara Schulte

While the sport of cutting requires very specific manoeuvres, teaching a young horse to cut cattle includes a lot of the same foundation work as any other kind of horse training. Barbra Schulte starts plenty of youngsters on cows, and she took time out to give us a look into her world.

"First we have to teach a horse some basic skills that aren't related to being with cattle," Barbra said. "It's called dry work. That includes getting them soft in their mouth so that they will stop and turn well. That is paired with the rider collapsing in the saddle, or applying weight in the seat, so that the horse understands that will be the cue for slowing down."

Barbra also spends time building the horse's flexibility. A cutting horse has to be able to change direction quickly so that he can move with the cow and eventually anticipate what the cow will do. The horse must learn to roll over his hocks to turn with the cow.

"As the horse stops with the cow, the weight in his body should shift to his hindquarters," Barbra said. "Then, as he remains balanced on his haunches, I ask for his head and neck to softly flex in the direction of the turn. As the turn is initiated, his nose continues in the direction of the turn, 'pulling' the horse's body through the turn with elegance and ease. His body kind of folds into a 180-degree turn. His body is very soft."

"The precision, beauty and ease of the turn is one of the factors that separates cutting from other sports. All is in perfect synchronicity with the cow."

Because many of the top cutting events are for 3-year-olds, trainers begin their cutting horses as young 2-year-olds. After Barbra has done the initial dry work with a youngster, she introduces him to one cow in a round pen that is 120' to 170' in diameter, big enough for a horse to work with one cow first and then later with a small herd of cattle.

"When the cow is turned into the arena," Barbra said, "I'll walk the horse up in the direction of the cow, just to feel if I feel any response from the horse's physiology. Do his ears come up? Sometimes he'll kind of extend his head and neck. He might want to pause, almost like a dog pointing at a bird. I can feel a natural instinct."

When the cow moves, Barbra moves the horse, planting the idea of connecting the cow's movement with his own movement.

As with any training, repetition helps teach the horse what she wants. If the horse has good cow sense, he will pick it up quickly. As do all cutting horse trainers, Barbara looks for indications of how much cow sense the horse has as she teaches him his job. She can get an idea of just how good a cutting horse might be from these initial steps.

"We try to make it fun for the horse, kind of cat and mouse," Barbra said. "The cow stops, and then the horse stops and looks at the cow."

Keeping a horse interested in his work is critical for cutting horses. Trainers will often return to dry work or even trail ride a cutting horse in between cattle sessions - sometimes several days with cattle and the next day off doing something else. That way, the cutting horse can look forward to his time in the pen.

"Eventually, we'll work to get progressively more parallel to the cow," Barbra said. "Then you can actually move a little bit past the cow. The cow will stop and turn on the fence of the round pen. When the cow stops, you stop your horse with the feet and your hands. You ask them for their nose, and then with your hands and your seat, the pressure from your legs and your body control, you ask for that turn and then an acceleration. You can make the turn and then come up from behind the cow, to alongside the cow and then past the cow, stop, turn again. We do that over and over and over."

Barbra can vary the speed of the cow by correctly judging its bubble, the minimum distance between the horse and the cow that will cause the cow to move. If she wants to slow down the cow, she moves the horse farther away from the cow. If she wants to speed up the cow, she comes in closer.

Once the horse is comfortable working with one cow, Barbra will bring in several cattle. On her ranch in Texas, she has a couple of former show steers that she uses as babysitters.

"They know to stand in the middle of the round pen," she said. "We'll add three to five cattle in the center, and the babysitter will hold the cattle in the middle of the arena. Then you can drive an individual cow to the perimeter of the round pen."

The horse may still only be working one cow, but the addition of more cattle-creating a herd-adds a degree of difficulty. Because cows always want to return to the herd, the separated cow will work more quickly than he would if he were the only cow in the round pen.

By this time the horse has learned Cutting 101 and is ready for more advanced training. Eventually, he will enter the show pen, where his training coupled with his innate cow sense will determine whether he can become a champion.