



When Colts Go on the Payroll

story and photos by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

The leaves along the creeks snapped to yellow the other day and beneath them colts buck and spar in the golden light. They are long yearlings, soon coming two. They look soft and round and immature. Still, there are some who would believe it is time to get them going.

There are many schools of thought on when colts might be ready to start. The old-timers, in this case old buckaroos that traveled many a long and hard mile, claimed that horses started later—after their bones had hardened and their minds matured—stayed sound much later in life. The feed was cheap or free and the country was big. We have all heard stories about ranches not starting their horses until they were five or six years old.

In that time horses were started quickly and taken outside within days or

in some cases hours of their first saddling. The older horse could handle a big circle if that was what the day required. Cowboys were required to do their job and do it well no matter how they were mounted. A younger horse would not have been able to take the long hours and rough country.

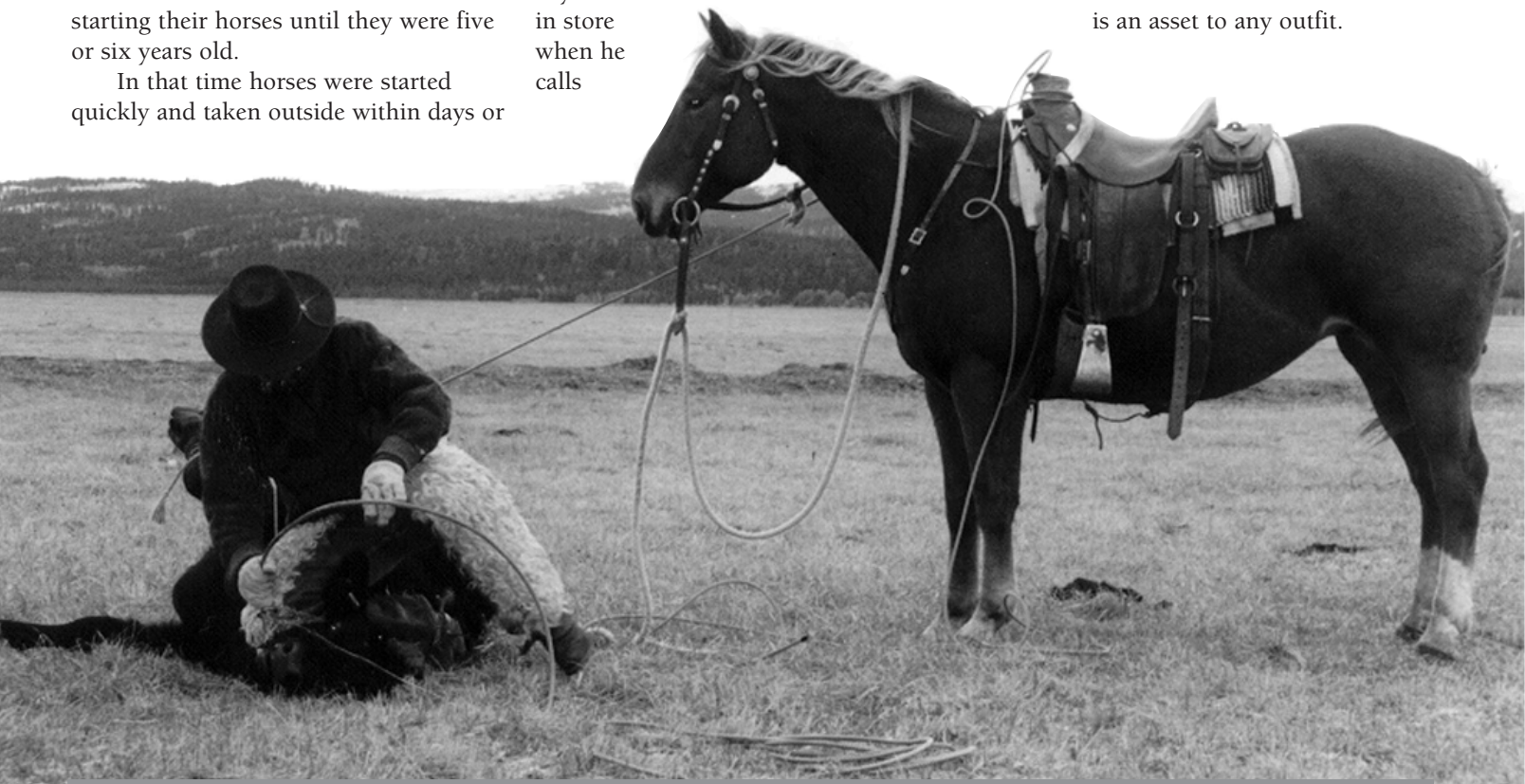
There are still some horses in the cavvies of the big outfits that were started at 4 or 5 and are still going the distance well into their teens. Those horsemen did not believe a colt's body or his mind could handle the work any sooner.

The Big Outfit

A buckaroo may not always have the luxury of knowing what the day ahead of him has in store when he calls

for his horses off the ropes. A good cow boss tries to give his crew some mention of the kind of horse that may be required for the day's work. Cow bosses that offer that kind of information are mindful of their cavvy and the importance of managing the horses in it.

A cowboy with six or eight horses in his string will try to choose jobs for his colts that can advance them and ride his other horses in turn. Busy times on the ranches will see days that are long and grueling. When going hard, a good hand will often give horses a full week between turns. He manages his string as best as he can, since keeping his horses in good shape is a matter of both pride and job security. Without them, he is afoot. A buckaroo that can manage his colts and make nice horses out of them is an asset to any outfit.



Racing to Get There

The racehorse industry was really the first to push veterinarians to determine when it was acceptable to put a young horse to work, wanting to know how quickly they could get a return on their money.

They looked for some physical marker to help with the determination. With some research, their vets decided that a horse's knees should first "close." This referred to the growth plate at the end of a horse's radius and the stage of growth and development it achieved. An acceptable stage occurred at approximately 685 - 700 days of age. Roughly two years. They concluded that this was the earliest date that colts could stand a measure of work.

Arguments abound about whether this physical benchmark is a sound one. Yet it still stands as the frame of reference most modern-day horsemen go by.

The Money Factor

In our affluent society there are now many horse competitions that have large purses at stake. The money needed to buy into the competitive world is considerable, and even greater expenses abound for those wishing to remain a player. The cutting, reining and reined cow horse futurities are prime examples of high stakes events.

Years ago, before the futurities came onto the scene, there were no premiere events for the young horse to compete in. Owners had to either wait and continue to invest in expensive training until the horse was old enough to be a competitor, or pressure their young horses along and force them to compete against seasoned horses far their senior. Investing in training for an extended period of time only to find out that a five-year-old "prospect" didn't have what it took to be a winner was costly and disheartening.

The futurities were originally developed to allow young horses to compete against horses their own age and train-



ing level but with enough money up to potentially offset a year and a half's training bill. They were a good idea. The futurities flourished, and with their success and large numbers of entries, sponsors rushed in and purses climbed steadily.

The Pressure

Substantial purses often bring with them their own curse. The competitions have intensified. Smaller and smaller details in a performance begin to make a bigger and bigger difference in the outcome of the event. As the money grows, the microscope that the judges look through is turned to ever increasing levels of magnification. Trainers feel the pressure and realize that a small advance in a maneuver, an advance perhaps gained by just one or two more weeks of training, could mean the difference between winning or losing it all.

They have pushed not only when they start their two-year-olds but what they ask of them. Many colts bound for these competitions are now well on their way by Christmas of their long yearling year. By the time they hit twenty-four months they have a six-month foundation on them. Knees closed or not.

This gives the trainer the edge they need to start turning up the volume on

their training to "mature" their young horses and try to cram what once took several years into the small window of time they have before the futurity. As the futurities draw near it is not uncommon for trainers to ride some colts twice a day in an effort to expand the time table.

Genetics

Breeders worked hard at developing lines of horses with qualities that would hopefully send them to the pay window. Colts with big hearts, loads of cow and tons of try now give it their all, making huge impressive moves, athletic turns and grinding stops. All spectators stand and stare in amazement at what trainers can accomplish on these young horses.

Unfortunately, several years ago breeders realized that the mentally superior horses they were producing could not hold up to the harsh physical demands of their events. They began trying to breed some substance and durability back into their horses when the best of their barn could not stay sound enough to compete. The road back for them will be a long one.

Though there are now some colts that manage to stay sound through their futurity year, their numbers are few. Fewer still are the number that can maintain any level of soundness when



Honoring Tradition

they approach 8 or 10 years of age.

Typically, some form of arthritis will be the ultimate result of horses pushed too hard too young. For some the malady will cut their functional life in half. Ankles and hocks stressed and wrenched become inflamed, change shape and calcify. Joint fluids break down and bone rubs on bone. There is a reason fillies bring a premium in the high pressure, monied worlds of intense competition. They can still extract a profit or at least cut the losses when they go lame.

The Futurity

All of these things were born of good intentions. Asking too much too soon was a gradual process. The horse shows and futurities have contributed to the horse world, and many good things have come from them. There are the genetics they have spawned, the interest and publicity they have fostered and the recreational enjoyment they have offered many horsemen. They have developed bright, sensitive horses that learn quickly and retain what they learn.

This is good news for those out of the arena who make their living horseback as well as those who simply enjoy their horsemanship as a sideline. Horses that learn more quickly and hold on to the knowledge are easier to start and do not require the same endless miles. Their minds are tractable and intelligent. For those who have spent their lives on ranches riding the old cold-blooded varieties, the sharp-minded horse is a welcome relief. Horsemen that stay mindful of substance and structure can truly benefit from these genetics added in to their breeding program.

The Balance

Picking and choosing from both worlds is what brings quality and balance to our lives, and starting our colts with that in mind is a rewarding practice. There is much preparatory work that can be done with young



horses well before they are old enough to carry a rider or go to work.

It is important that a colt enjoy and experience its childhood. There will be times when a colt will need to draw on its instincts to save itself and the rider as well. It is important that it have enough time with its mother and with other horses to establish its social skill and patterns and respond as a horse should in the required situation.

Colts may be handled respectfully at a fairly young age as long as the horseman is careful to gentle the colt without dulling its sensitivities. Feet can be handled, along with halter-breaking and sacking out. It is important to note that the younger the colt, the shorter his attention span. Horsemen should be careful to keep sessions brief and positive. Colts can be turned out for periods of time in between these sessions to let the lessons "settle" into the colt's mind and allow him to mature.

Colts started briefly at two and ridden lightly and turned out frequently until three stand a far greater chance at staying sound well into their twenties. Hard work should be put off if possible until closer to four years of age, depending on the horse.

Projects

Once a colt is going, the best of hands tries to choose work that will benefit the colt and the level of training he has achieved. There are many tasks well suited for colts. Small simple jobs are best, ones not requiring

hard riding and a lot of fast technical maneuvers. Those days will come later.

Jobs that are slow and offer a cowboy the opportunity to change horses if needed are the ideal. Riding pens in the feed yard or calving heifers are some good projects for colts to tackle. Here the horseman can take his time and work through situations without being under the gun, with a big crew on a tough day. The work at hand presents different situations to the colt and offers him different problems to solve.

Starting horses in this way can help a horseman protect his investment; not simply of money but of time. He will be able to enjoy the horse he has taken so much time making and work together as partners down the road.

Conscience

What to do, and when, with a colt comes down to a matter of conscience. We cannot legislate ethics or morality. Do we wait until a colt is grown, letting him freeload too long or do we cut our losses and climb on just as soon as he will stand still? A person decides what is right deep within their heart and hopefully acts on that decision.

We hold in one hand the ideal in all its purity and in the other our financial and economic limitations. Writer Robert McKee says it best when he states "the truth, as always, lies somewhere in the middle." Perhaps a look at the old disciplines that existed before money was awarded for their measure can help us to find an equitable balance.