

Trainer reads horse's mind and lets its body follow

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— Daryle Schmidt
Alberta horse trainer

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DALMENY, Sask. — For more than three days, from early morning to early evening, a small crowd lined a corral in Dennis Lepp's pasture to hear a small-framed, softspoken cowboy as he worked their horses.

Daryle Schmidt, a Rocky Rapids, Alta., cowboy showed them a gentler way than the traditional TV western approach of clinging to the back of the bucking bronco until it succumbs to exhaustion.

"We're working with an animal that has a mind, body and feelings just like you and me," Schmidt told the group near this town about 20 kilometres northwest of Saskatoon.

"They get tired, sick and hungry and they have their good days and bad days. The secret is to be aware of their expressions and to understand what is on their mind."

He says a horse's ears, eyes, mouth and posture will reveal its feelings and how it is accepting the training.

"They have an inner spirit and when that dies, it's gone. We don't want to break the spirit of the horse, but to be more of a partner with the horse."

Schmidt grew up in Saskatoon and was always interested in horses. He spent as much time as possible on his uncle's and grandfather's farm near Waldheim, Sask.

Today, he manages the Pembina Provincial Community Pasture near Drayton Valley, Alta.

Long-term relationship

Riding community pastures for a living prompted his quest to better understand horses.

"It's one thing to go for an hour's ride and (another) riding for eight hours a day, five days a week."

He began training his pasture horses to make his job easier and safer. He questioned why his horses would sometimes behave badly, and sought advice from the most experienced horse riders, delved into books and attended clinics "of

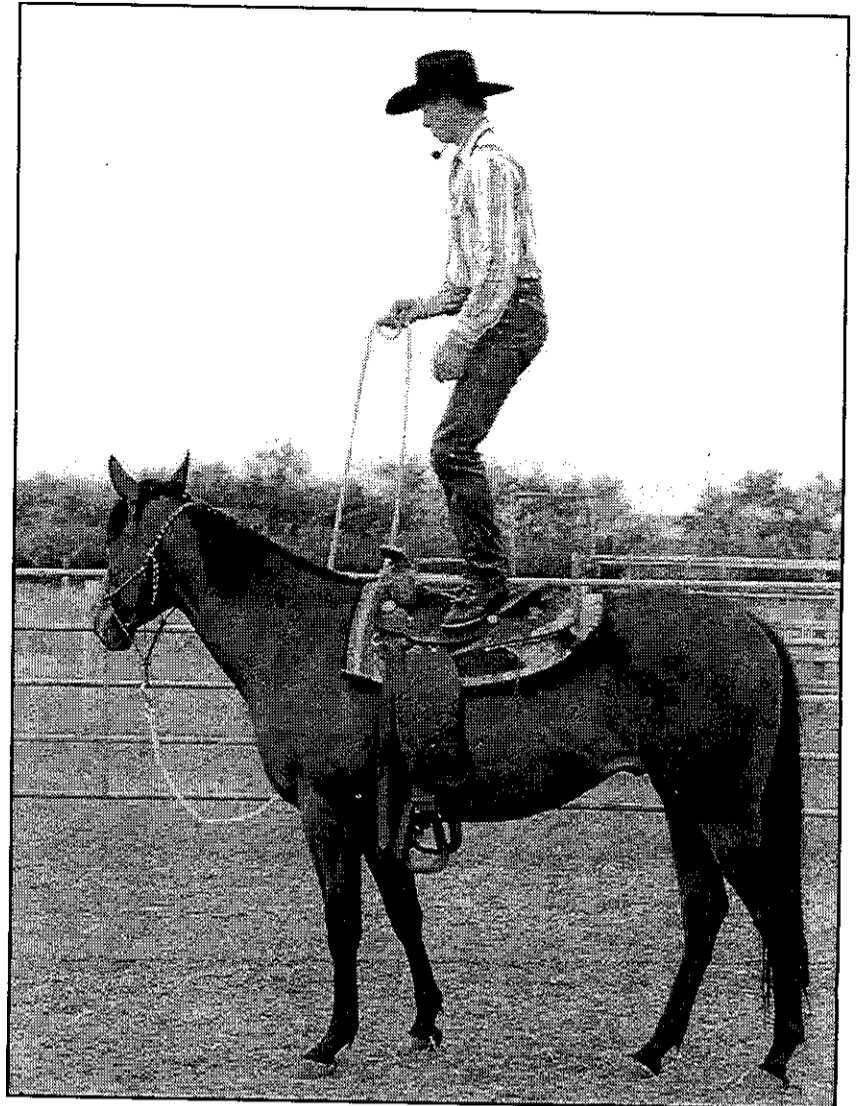
just about everyone who has been beating the roads," he said.

"I am still a student of horses. You never quit learning. All trainers are students of horses."

Schmidt's training style is a method that deals more with the horse's mind than traditional techniques.

"If you can read a horse and understand his mind, you can get his mind to enjoy the training. The key is in their mind and the body will follow naturally. I think what I've really done is to teach people a method using both the conventional and new method," he said.

Schmidt's style of communication worked well on a colt brought out for a two-hour demonstration. The owners were able to halter the colt but the animal bucked when they tried to put on a saddle. Amazed, they watched the conclusion of Schmidt's demonstration when he stood on top of their sad-



Gerry Popplewell photos

A would-be rider must build trust with a colt to overcome its natural fear of people. After two hours, this colt allowed Daryle Schmidt to saddle it and stand on its back.

dled colt, while the colt stood licking its lips contentedly.

When training colts, Schmidt works to overcome the natural barrier of predator and prey.

"It comes naturally to us to be predators; the horse is a prey animal so they fear predators. It's building that trust and respect that are the two main things when working with colts. Gain their trust and you get their respect," he told the group.

He said trainers who punish horses for doing wrong will find the animals become resentful toward them.

"A nice correction is all right, they never mind a correction and will accept that. There is a big difference between correction and punishment," he said.

Horses have monocular vision with eyes on the sides of their heads. What the left eye sees is sensed on the right side of the brain and what's seen in the right eye

works on the left side of the brain. "That's why we have to train both sides of the horse. What they can accept as OK on the left side, they may perceive as something scary on the other side. To be well-rounded they should be trained on both sides," he said.

Schmidt speaks of a hectic schedule, working as manager of a community pasture, training at his own facility and doing clinics on the road, but he just doesn't have the heart to give up any of them.

"I once thought of doing clinics and training full time, but like my training, I need that well-rounded thing and a balance in my life," he said with a laugh. Last year, he had a hand in starting more than 250 colts.

After finishing a sandwich for supper while sitting on the truck tailgate, he pointed to the group gathered for the demonstration. "There are no judges out here to tell us our progress. Here the horses tell us when we've done a good job."

Horses must be trained on both sides of the brain.