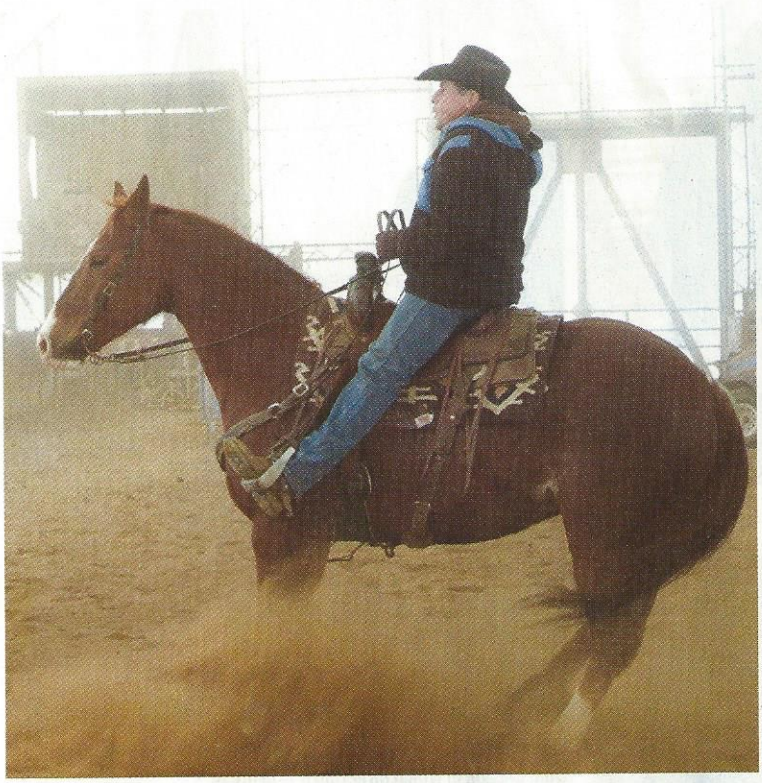
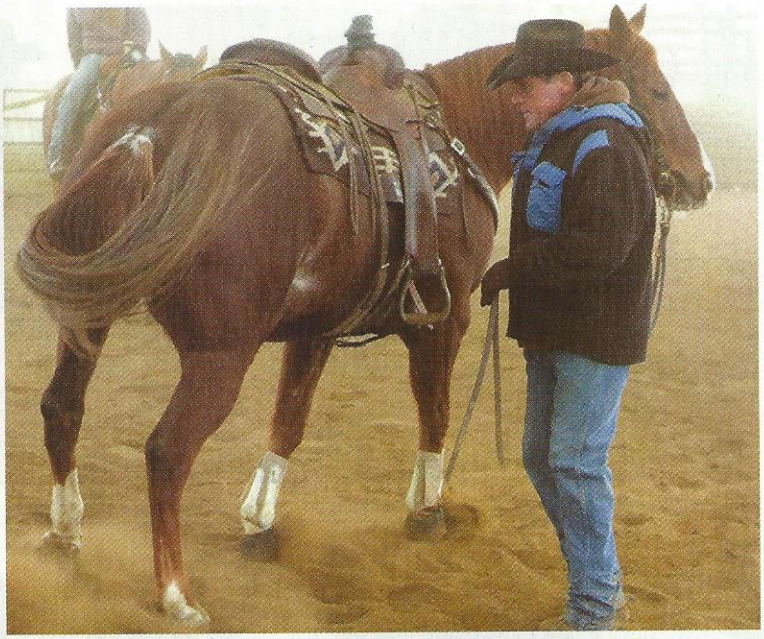
Horse, Meet Cow

Do your homework, on the ground and in the saddle, to optimize your horse's first experience with cattle.

Article and photos by Katie Navarra





(above) Before mounting up, Peters asks a horse to turn around on the forehand while in hand to engage his mind before mounting up.

(left) A horse needs to be soft in the bridle and move off your leg. He should stop when you sit down in the saddle, push your legs forward and say, "Whoa."

Horses bred for working cattle are like border collies raised for herding or beagles trained to chase rabbit trails – they instinctively know what to do. Genetics may make it easier to train a horse for cow work, but even horses that weren't specifically bred for ranch work can learn to track, follow and box a cow.

"When horses have been bred for cattle work and they see a cow for the first time, their ears go up and they instantly lock on the cow," said George Peters, a trainer in Schuylerville, New York.

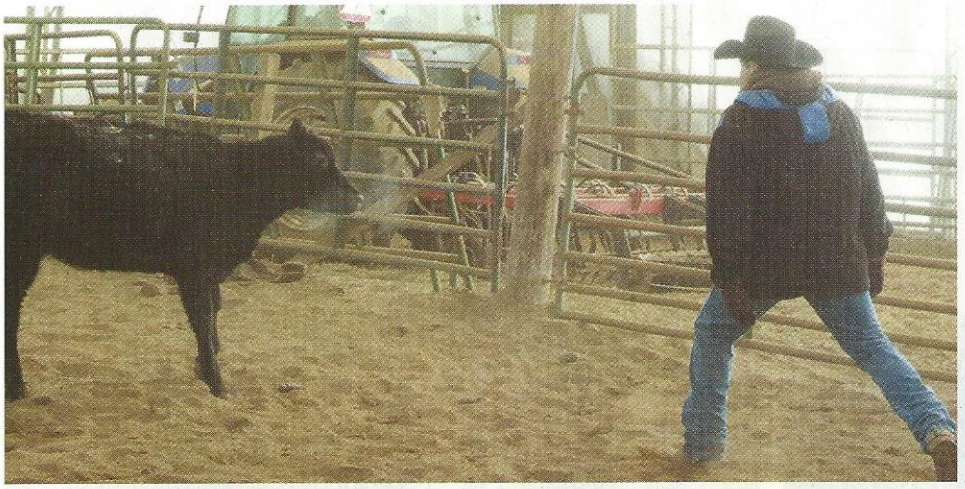
Occasionally, he finds a horse that is inconsolable the first time it interacts with a cow, making it better suited for another event. Fortunately, the majority of horses fall somewhere in the middle of intuitively knowing what to do and being afraid of the cow the first time they see it.

"Usually, once the horse gets an eye on the cow and realizes the cow is more timid than they are, they quickly learn they can maneuver it," he said.

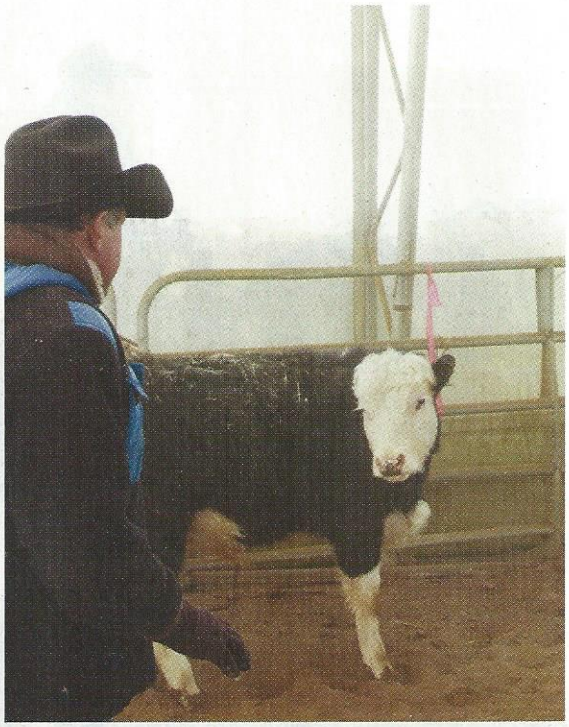
Regardless of whether or not your horse is

(opposite page) Introducing a horse to a cow for the first time should be a positive experience on which to build for the future.

Rollbacks on the fence enhance a horse's turning power, preparing him for the agility needed to work a cow.



A rider must be as cow savvy as the horse. Practicing on foot develops a rider's cow sense.



You have to be able to look a cow in the eye and know what it is thinking and in which direction it is heading.

By stepping in toward the cow, you can experience how the cow reacts to your movements and position in relationship to the cow's body.

bred for cow classes, Peters, 63, believes horses of any pedigree can find success with cattle.

In his 55 years of experience, Peters has learned that there is no substitute for mastering the fundamentals. Introducing any horse to a cow begins with preparation and the ability to perform the basics.

Do your homework

"We often joke that in order to play with a cow, there's a penance to pay," Peters said. "That penance is performing a reining pattern."

Without the ability to stop, rollback and run down the fence, a horse cannot effectively work a cow. Before the discipline of reining evolved into the event that it is today, the individual components of a reining pattern were essential pieces of a ranch horse's training to better prepare him for working a cow.

"The horse needs to be soft at the bridle and move off your leg. He should stop when you sit down in the saddle, push your legs forward and say, 'Whoa,'" Peters explained.

Groundwork can create the foundation for performing these maneuvers under saddle. Peters asks a horse to turn around on its hind end and on its forehand while in hand.

"You've got his mind focused on the job before you even get in the saddle," he said.

To help a horse further develop these skills, Peters likes to use a rollback on the fence and a straight-line rollback. Asking the horse to run down the fence, stop take a step back and then rollback prepares him for the quick-footed steps he will have to take when boxing a cow.

Similar to a rollback on the fence, the straight-line rollback increases the horse's turning power; however, one key difference is working on a straight line far off the fence.

"In the straight-line rollback, you're running on the same straight line, eventually creating a trench if you do it right," he said.

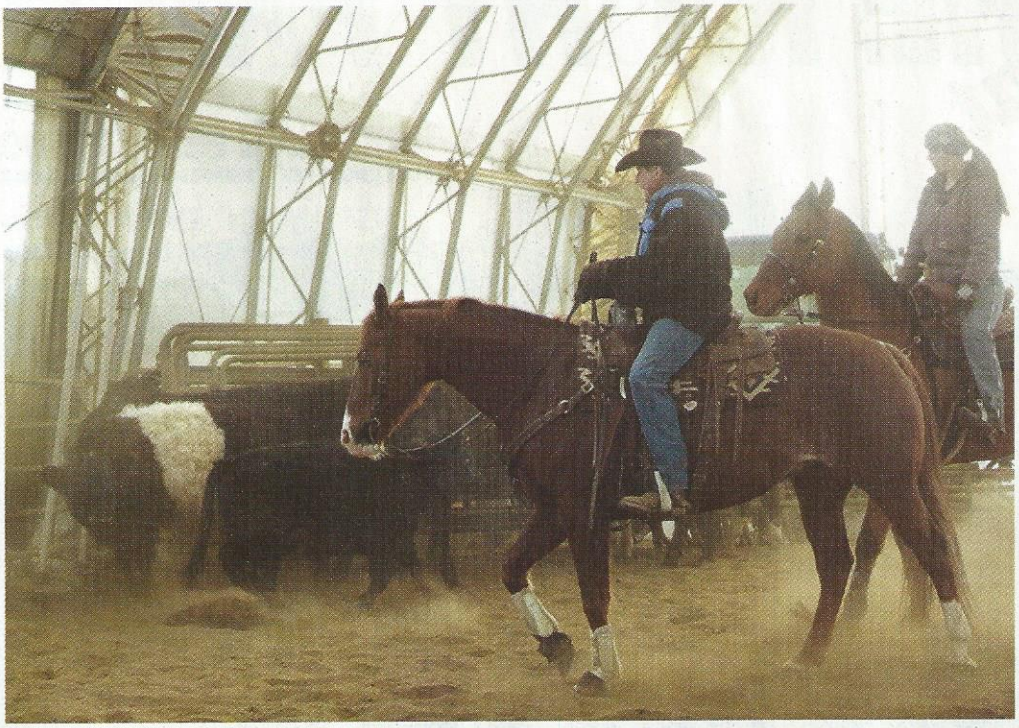
This exercise is especially good for horses destined for cutting, but can also be helpful in reined cow horse and boxing, too. Devoting time to dry work will pay off when you finally begin to work with a cow.

"If the horse needs help while working a cow and every 'button' is working, it's very easy for the rider to ask the horse to turn around or stop to avoid losing the cow," he said.

Rider, meet cow

Ranch horse and reined cow horse classes are team events. Horse and rider must work in unison to control the cow. Hence, a rider must be as cow savvy as the horse.

"Even riders on top cutting horses have to be the leader," he said.



A buddy horse uses the inexperienced horse's natural herd instincts to the rider's advantage.

To be the leader, you have to be able to look a cow in the eye and know what it is thinking and in which direction it is heading. Learning to read a cow begins on foot.

"Sometimes I think it's best to start with the human," Peters explained, "especially if they don't have a lot of cow experience themselves."

Peters first brings riders into the arena with one, two, three or even four cows, and demonstrates how to apply pressure to force a cow to move in the desired direction. The cow's head is the steering wheel, the hind end is the gas pedal and the middle of the cow is the brake. When pressure is applied to a cow's mid-section, she will stop and look at you.

Then it's time to experiment. By stepping in toward the cow, you can experience how the cow reacts to your movements and position in relationship to her body. Ultimately, directing a cow is like training a horse – it is about pressure and release. Applying pressure encourages the animal to move or stop in the direction you intended it to move. A release of pressure provides the animal with a moment's rest.

"The human needs to know cattle as much as the horse does," he said. "You learn by practice and screwing up a lot to learn from your mistakes."

Making the introduction

Creating a positive first encounter for a horse with a cow requires planning and preparation. Choosing an appropriately sized space in which to work, selecting cattle with the suitable temperament and working with an experienced "buddy" horse can all make a successful first session. Peters prefers starting a new horse in a 60-foot round pen.

"You're never going to lose a cow in a round pen," Peters said. "The cow can never get more than 30 feet away from you, and you can begin to direct the cow."

In a smaller space, the horse begins to understand his job is to track or follow the cow. At first, it's like playing a game of follow the leader. The horse should be encouraged to speed up as the cow accelerates and slow down as the cow does. The goal is to direct the horse as much as necessary, but as little as possible to allow the horse to figure out what to do next. When the horse realizes the cow will yield to him, it's a big confidence booster.

"Once the horse learns the cow will move away from him, the horse becomes more of an aggressor – turning from a creature of prey to a predator, stalking the cow," he said.

The cattle used early in the training process are as important as everything else.

"Wild cows are for the pros only," Peters cautioned. "The cattle need to be quiet and willing to be pushed around."

In between lessons or shows held at the ranch, Peters works his cattle to make sure that if the horse and rider do everything right, the cattle can be maneuvered into a pen.

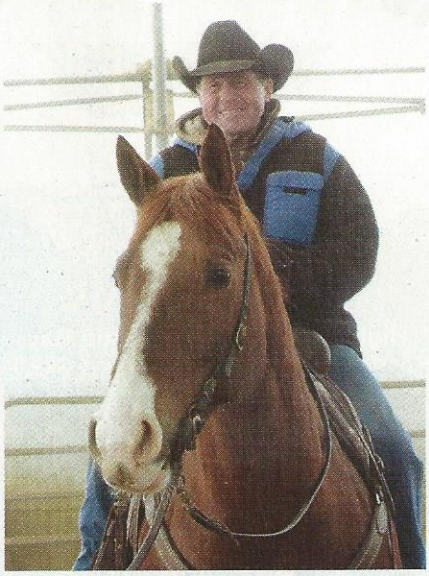
"The cattle won't go there without the horse and rider doing their job, but I make sure that they can be worked when the horse and rider do what they are supposed to," he added.

The first time a horse meets a cow can be unpredictable. The horse may be curious, timid or even frightened. Working with an experienced cow horse can provide confidence and comfort.

"I often use a 'buddy horse' to teach an inexperienced horse how to interact with a cow," he explained.

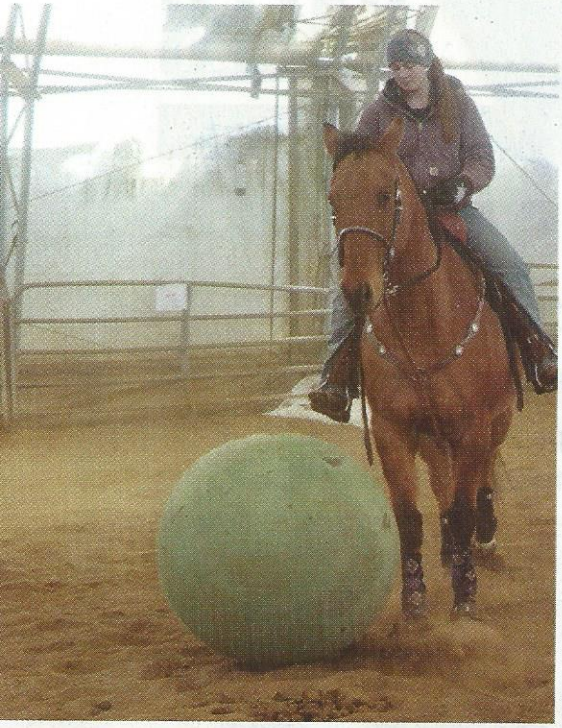
Using a buddy horse to introduce a poten-

About George Peters



George Peters

Schuylerville, New York-based trainer George Peters has been riding, showing and training horses for more than five decades. He has always admired the versatility of the Quarter Horse and focuses his program on training horses and their riders for all-around events. Give him a cow to cut, box or rope and he's ready to get to work. In 2014, he won the Open Reserve Championship at the New England Stock Horse Series after competing in just four of the seven events in the series.



An equine exercise ball is a good way to practice the angles you need to work a cow when you don't have easy access to cattle.

tially scary situation allows the rider to take advantage of the horse's instincts as a herd animal to achieve a training goal.

"By using a buddy horse that is a confident, 'been there, done that' kind of horse, we're using the horse's natural instinct to help us overcome a challenge," he said.

Less is more

Knowing when to call it quits may be the most critical aspect of the training session and may take the most time to develop. Today's society values instant gratification, fueled by fast food, speedy Internet service and quick results, but rushing a horse's training has the potential to sour a potentially good horse.

"Sometimes less is more," Peters said. "Even if it means you quit too early, it's better than pushing a horse too far, too fast."

Watch for subtle clues that indicate the horse has understood the day's lesson, but is ready to go back to the barn. For example, when working with a buddy horse, as soon as the new horse begins to work on his own, chances are he's done for the day.

"When the horse starts to track or stay with the cow with little assistance from the rider or the buddy horse, that's a good session," Peters said.

The first lesson will likely last less than an hour. That includes 15-20 minutes of warm-up to loosen the horse's muscles and focus his mind, followed by 15-20 minutes of cow work.

"I like to say if I can get it [the session] going well, I'll quit before it gets bad," he added.

It may be a few days or a week before he works the horse on another cow.

"Once the lesson is over, the horse needs time to digest what he's learned and let the marbles settle," he said.

Go backward to go forward

Chasing a cow is exciting and, for some riders, a break from other disciplines they ride. It can be tempting to practice working a cow every riding session. Returning to dry work in between cow work, however, is equally beneficial to a horse and rider. Before moving on, Peters returns to dry work to fine

tune his horse's skills.

"I will go back and do a lot of dry work so that if the horse needs help when working cattle, I can easily correct the horse because every button is working," he explained.

Exercises that encourage the horse to remain soft, supple and responsive reward the rider when in the pen with the cow.

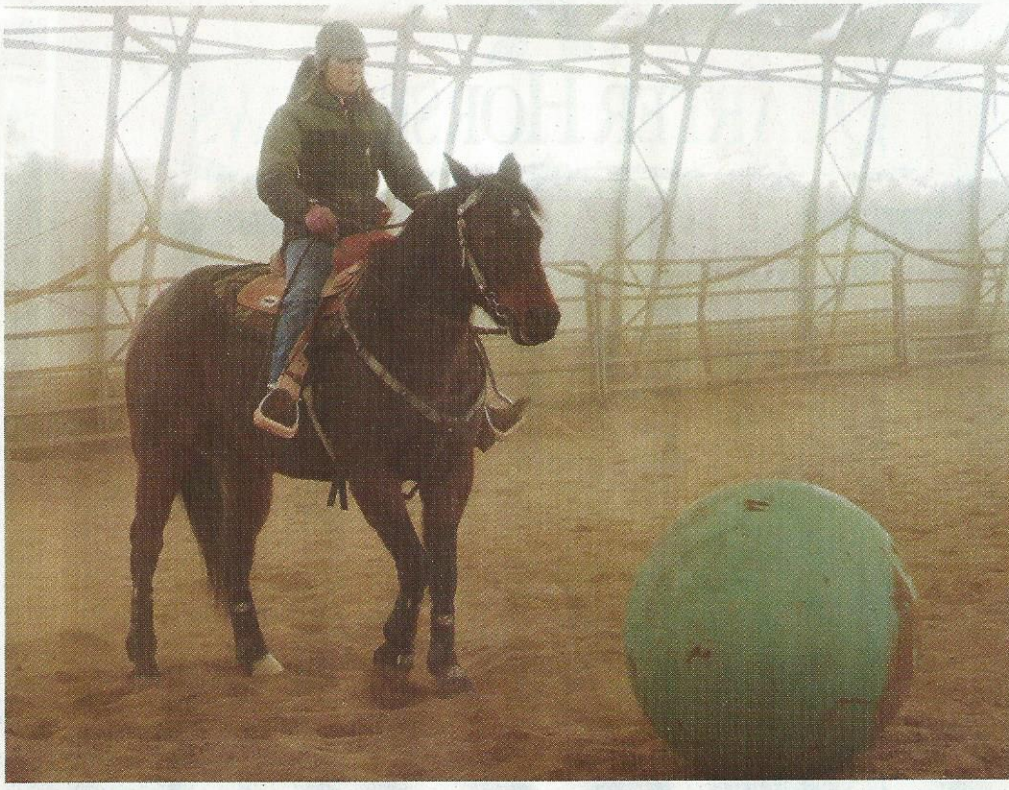
"I've had people practice dry work in between working cattle to ensure the basics are sound," he added.

For riders who may not have access to cows for training rides, an equine exercise ball can be a helpful tool.

"When you're asking the horse to push around an exercise ball, you have to choose the angle of approach and understand how it is going to move," he said.

Similar to working a cow, when you walk straight up behind the ball and ask your horse to push it with his legs, the ball is going to go straight ahead. The payoff?

"When you're working a cow and it turns and looks at you as if to say, 'Where do I go next?' you know you and your horse are really in charge," he concluded. ★



Returning to dry work or practicing with an exercise ball can help encourage the horse to remain responsive to the rider.

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