

# *Craig Cameron*

## **Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen**

### **HIGH LOW COUNTRY**

As a professional horseman people often remark to me how lucky I am to have such a fun and exciting profession. “It must be so great to do nothing but ride horses all day long.” My reply is, “Well, there is not a day that goes by that I am not grateful for the things I have and the wonderful life that I live.” I love horses and they are my life. I would not trade places with anyone. However, I am amazed at how many people think that as a horseman, all you ever do is just ride around on horses all day having nothing but fun. Those involved in the equine world on a day to day basis, know that it is not all gravy. There are many highs but there are also many lows.

People either forget or are just not aware of the work involved on a full time horse ranch. Initially a person must learn horsemanship. What is that old saying? “It takes a lifetime to learn how to live a lifetime.” Nothing could be truer when it comes to horses and horsemanship. It is a time-consuming, unending, lifelong endeavor to learn good horsemanship. I have seen many people become so frustrated trying to learn this elusive art-form that they finally quit. The more dedicated horse people learn to go with the flow and roll with the punches because in the world of horses, an experienced person has learned to take the bad with the good. The real work actually begins after a determined horse fanatic has stayed long enough to hone his skills and acquire the most important attribute, experience!

Most, but not all professional horse people own or lease their facility. A good horse ranch does not have to be new, but it does have to be managed properly. This requires money plus a seven day-a-week commitment three hundred sixty-five days a year. A clean, efficient, safe, orderly barn takes daily maintenance. When this maintenance is done correctly it usually starts at most barns before daylight and continues until well after dark. Daily routine begins with an early morning feeding by the best ranch hand not only rationing out the correct feed, but having the awareness to check every horse from head to hoof, making sure each horse is sound and healthy. This feed person needs to have the experience to know if a horse is “off” or not his “normal self” or perhaps “colicky.”

If the water is dirty, troughs must be scrubbed out and refilled with fresh water. Then there is the unending chore of cleaning each stall. If you are queasy about shoveling horse apples or you are just too good to do it, the horse business is definitely not for you. Once the manure is picked up it must be dumped into or disposed of in a designated location.

At this point in the day if any horse needs special care or doctoring it is done now, like hydrating wounds or cuts and administering medicines or shots as needed. All horses must be handled properly—even unruly horses must be correctly dealt with by giving them the necessary extra attention. No tempers are to be lost by the handlers and no abuse to the horses should be given or tolerated. Oh and, don’t forget to handle those weanlings and yearlings before beginning the training day!

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Now the riding or training routine begins by haltering and tying the selected horses to be exercised. Being aware not to tie a horse too close to other horses where one kick can be a disaster. Each horse is groomed, including cleaning his hoofs. Next the horses are saddled with equipment adjusted to each individual horse. When horses need warming up before training begins they are lunged in the round-corrals and green or unstarted horses are worked there as well. More advanced horses are ridden on the challenge trails and in the arenas. Care is given to ride each horse as an individual to ensure that appropriate daily training progress is made.

At the end of the training routine each horse is unsaddled, cooled, groomed and returned to his paddock. Horses must also be taken to turn-outs to make sure each horse has free time and exercise. All tack should be properly put up and returned to its correct place in the tack room. No equipment is to be left out or unattended. Sounds like a good spot to end the day. Am I right? Wrong, after a short lunch break, the ranch work begins.

Ranch work can consist of one or a thousand different things. As a horseman or rancher a guy needs to be a “Jack of all Trades.” Your daily work might consist of fence building, water well or windmill work, clearing brush, sawing fire wood from a fallen tree, which always lands on the fence. Don’t forget mowing the lawns, weed eating, knocking mistletoe out of the trees, feeding the dogs and cats, treating the wood on all the buildings to prevent termite damage, tying cedar staves, painting corrals, hanging gates, maintenance on trucks, tractors and don’t forget to get that flat off the trailer, put on the spare and take the flat tire to town to get a new one. Oh yeah, don’t forget to clean out the trailer and repack the bearings on the stock trailer. The lawn mower needs repair and the chain saw needs sharpening. Please clean out the shop and sweep off the porches.

As a horseman not only must you be good with the horses to insure your income, you must also be apt at many other trades. It is necessary to occasionally act as a plumber, an electrician, a mechanic, a politician, a counselor to disgruntled employees, a veterinarian, a carpenter, a welder, a husband, a father and a good leader. You must do all these things and some days all of them in one day. You must do it and still be a good guy with a good sense of humor to keep all people and horses on the place enthusiastic and in a good mood. A good horse operation needs an upbeat and happy atmosphere.

Other professions may look forward to a rainy day because it might mean a day off but not for the rancher. Weather changes only alter the horseman’s routine, the same things need to be done—you just need to wear rain slickers and mud boots. But it is a great afternoon to clean the barn, stay inside and saddle soap and oil all of the tack and saddles.

Springtime means bringing your mares up to foal and shortly thereafter transporting mares and week-old foals to stallion stations for breeding. Don’t forget, to put out the weed kill and fertilize the hay meadow. Now, pray for rain! By the way, Mrs. Owens will be coming in late tonight with a new horse for us to ride. Can you get up and meet her, she has trouble unloading her horse and she does not know how to disconnect her trailer.

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During the summer months ranchers will be hauling hay in July; it's only a thousand bails or so in 100° temperature. Heck, nothing to it! Summer time a horseman deals with 100° weather on a daily basis. Summer means up at 4:00am to beat the heat in training hot-blooded horses that do better in cooler temperatures. This also means bathing every horse daily after their workout. The salt must be kept out and water must be routinely cleaned in hot weather to keep it cool and fresh. In addition, summer means daylight savings time, an invention that may be great for office workers but adds more hours to a cowboy's already long day.

During the winter months if the weather is cold you blanket the horses in the evening and weather permitting remove the blankets in the morning. Then if there is ice it must be broken for each individual horse to ensure sufficient water is available to drink. When a cold front is coming in be sure and drip the faucets, wrap the pipes with insulation and plug-in the diesel engines. As an afterthought, you need to be sure to leave on a light in all the pump houses.

On top of it all a horse ranch has office work like any other business and it should be kept up on a daily routine. Like all businesses, bills must be paid, employees need to be paid, phone and e-mail messages need to be answered, ads need to be written and faxes must be sent out. In my professional business promotional material needs to be constantly updated and mailed, problems need to be solved and a photo shoots need to be scheduled this week. As a clinician much of the time is spent on the road, as much as forty-four weeks per year, even though I am on the road the ranch work must still be done.

Private and semi-private clinics are given at the ranch and all participants are given first priority to insure a great stay and clinic each time they attend. This entails a long list of miscellaneous public space repairs caused by normal wear and tear. Extra cleaning of six cabins, seventeen beds, a bath house, a general store and our cook-shack area.

So you still want to be in the horse business? For all the work, expense, trouble and frustration it can cause; it is still the best life I think a person can have. To do it on a day to day basis you must love it. You must work with passion. Passion is power, a love of what you do. That's what keeps you going through the tough times, the hard times, the highs and the lows. So I say to you, keep on going and remember in the horse business you are definitely riding the high low country.

Keep on Riding!

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*P.S. All this and someone (me) came up with the bright idea of buying another ranch in another state, now all this is times two, just a little more time on the road! Real smart, huh?*