

Craig Cameron

Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen

THE HAND

You have heard it said, “He is a hand or he is a great-hand or a poor-hand or a top-hand.” What is a hand? Why do we care about the word hand? I am not sure where the origin of “hand” began but I do know that it can refer to almost any field of endeavor be it sailor, welder, sculptor, doctor, lawyer or an electrician.

A phrase like “material on hand” is a comparison of work done; to give “first-hand knowledge” describes an event. “To hand over” is an action the individual attempted. “An old-hand” shows skill level, and used in a title as, “every extra-hand” will help...are only a few of the ways hand is used.

In the world of horses the hand is used as a form of measurement. Who hasn't heard of a horse being fifteen hands tall? I choose to think of the word hand as a compliment. To me, being a hand at anything means you are a worker or a hustler and good at what you do. I feel a hand measures quality when referring to the cowboy or more to the point a horseman just as hand measures size when referring to the horse. Using the word as a title explains hand as one that can handle a horse, just about any horse, not just own a horse. In the world of horseman a hand works with the horse not against the horse. A good-hand is not afraid to work and get his hands dirty. A first-rate-hand does not avoid work or responsibility but seeks it out. Many times over your best horseman is most often the first one to the barn and the last one to leave. In the words of some, a hand rides to the sound of the guns and is usually not only in the eye of the storm, he is the “eye of the storm.”

The top-hand is involved in all chores on the ranch. He does not just ride. The ranch-hand helps clean stalls, services the tractor, trims trees, cuts firewood, helps with office work, phone calls, and plumbing problems and is pretty much on the job twenty-four hours a day. Sure enough, this hand would be considered a “Jack-of-all-Trades.” But when it comes to horses and horsemanship the hand is the man!

Who knows when or where the word hand started in the cowboy world but to me a hand with horses, literally knows how to correctly “handle” horses. With his hands he imprints newborns and reassures mares. The hand can “doctor” his horses from an insignificant scratch to the most serious infection. His experienced touch can determine the “feel” of his horses. He can feel a fever, a tremor or nervousness and knows what treatment will make them better. A great horse-hand notices everything around him all the time. He is always watching, listening and seeing. In a midnight thunderstorm he wakes and mentally thinks about every horse and each piece of equipment. If something needs tending he is the first one up and does what needs doing. A hand cares about the land and the horses and cares for them with equal concern.

Maybe we call horse people “hands” because they actually communicate with horses in many obvious ways including with their hands. When horsemen bridle a horse they are exceptional

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with their hands. The way they stroke, halter, saddle and bridle a horse is smooth and efficient. Horses will then relate, accept and feel comfortable around this style of horsemanship. I think a good-hand is casual around his horses yet maintains control. He is the leader, the alpha of the herd not through pain, fear or forcing behavior but by earning respect and understanding from his horses.

When in the saddle a hand is an artist. He communicates with his horse through the reins with invisible cues. He is not pulling on the mouth, but going through the mind sensing the feel of the horse for perfect stops, backs and spins. He just seems to fit perfectly in the saddle. The hand and the horse are one; they work not only on a physical but on a mental and emotional level. The hand understands his horse; he recognizes the horse is his teacher and together through experience and common sense they learn and work as a team. A horse-hand does not take the attitude that he is better than the horse but more a student of the horse who is always willing to learn and to change when necessary.

A great hand approaches each horse situation and circumstance as unique, he is not a laborer who works only until his hands are raw but is a superb craftsman at his trade using his mind to solve and adjust to situations. He is an artist who uses and works with his hands, mind and heart. He rides with passion and a love of what he does and horses are able to relate to him.

So what kind of hand are you? What type of hand do you offer your horse? Are you a rough-hand, a tough-hand or an unsympathetic-hand? Do you offer a soft-hand, a slow-hand, an easy-hand, an understanding-hand? The hand of a friend to the horse is a hand of a horseman!

—*Craig Cameron*