

Craig Cameron

Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen

IS YOUR HORSE READY FOR THE FIRST RIDE?

All the preparation work is the key, however, bear in mind there are no guarantees that your horse will not buck when you step up into the saddle for the first time. Again, read the signs; *read your horse* – watch his eyes, ears, the tilt of his head, body position, expression, and the actions of the horse. If you did your homework, the work described in the last two articles (be it one day, one week, one month, or a cumulative amount of work adding up to years), your horse should be ready. It is what I call “The Cowboy Moment of Truth” – time to step in the saddle and make your horse’s maiden voyage.

Put only the toe of your boot into the stirrup. If the horse spooks or boogers off, you will be able to escape and start again. Do not think about getting on. Think about getting the horse ready to be gotten on. Hold the halter rope or rein short enough to have control, but not actually pulling on the horse. Pulling would cause the horse to move. I never get on a horse that is moving. Not only is this dangerous, but it teaches the horse bad habits. It teaches the horse that it is ok to move while you’re mounting – a Cardinal Sin in horsemanship.

Step on when you have weight in the stirrup. **Balance yourself by distributing the weight of your upper body only across the saddle.** If you are mounting from the left, use your right hand to rub the right side of your horse from neck to hindquarters as you are balanced across the saddle. Don’t forget to move that right stirrup as well. Remember that we are preparing this horse to accept the rider swinging and sitting down in the saddle. At this point, step down back to the ground. Rub your horse and do the same thing on the other side. The more repetition of this procedure, the more prepared your horse will be when you actually go to sit on the saddle.

At this point, if your horse has been standing quietly, tie up the reins or lead rope and move him around the corral to reward and relax the horse. Now start the mounting procedure again. When the horse is standing quietly with your weight and acceptance of your touch, go ahead and swing yourself over and sit down easy in the saddle. Do not tense up. Think positively and don’t forget to breathe. Stay what I call, “relaxed but alert, alert but relaxed.”

What the heck do you do now? Again forward movement is the key, essential ingredient. You need to teach and train your horse. What I recommend is a ground man to move your horse or another rider on a quiet gentle horse, or both, to help the initial forward movement. Sit deep and slow. Be a quiet passenger at this point and not a trainer. Don’t just sit; move your horse and help him to adjust to this new feel and new weight. Have your assistant help you move both directions around the corral. Do not pull on the reins or lead rope. Doing so will only confuse and trouble your horse. Guide, don’t pull and help your horse to understand the most important part. The most important part is that, “everything is okay; I am not going to hurt you.”

The first ride can consist of just walking and trotting. But, if the horse does canter, just go with him and help him to stay straight and collected physically and mentally. Don’t ask for too much

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too fast. Reward the smallest tries and find a good quitting spot. This lesson does not have to be long, just good.

Prepare to dismount. If dismounting from the left, remove your foot from the right stirrup. Make sure the horse sees you in the left eye and quickly, quietly and *effortlessly* step off to the front of the left shoulder. Reward and rub your horse all over and loosen your girth. Look into your horse's eye and whisper, "welcome to my world."

—*Craig Cameron*