

Craig Cameron

Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen

THE MAKING OF A HORSEMAN

What is a horseman? I am often asked "how do you become a horseman?" Many times I am asked after a seminar or demonstration if I have a horsemanship certification program.

Well, to begin with a horseman is much more than somebody who rides horses. A horseman, to me, is a communicator and an educator of horses and the people who wish to ride horses. To be a great teacher first you must be a great student. So, to be a great teacher of horses you must be a great student of the horse.

Horsemanship is a trade that can be honed to an art form. Most specialists today such as doctors, lawyers, electricians, school teachers, and architects are required to have many years of formal training under a highly qualified professor before they can be licensed to practice their trade. Often times these professions require up to 4-8 years of intense and regulated study before receiving their specialized degree or certification. In the same way horsemanship is a calling that takes years to perfect.

John Ross was a young man trying to answer that difficult call. At the age of 23, John Ross had already traveled thousands of miles through numerous states working with literally hundreds of horses at the many Craig Cameron colt starting, cattle working, ranch roping, and horsemanship seminars.

Some might call it luck that young John Ross would have such a job and such an opportunity. But like I always say, "The harder I work, the more luck I seem to have."

John Ross' hard work and determination created his own luck. He was a young man that would not be denied. He grew up with the teaching that being a cowboy was the greatest thing anyone could be. From Eastland, Texas-heart of Texas ranch country-John Ross was influenced by his grandad and uncle who were old time ranchers and cowboys. At age 13, John was riding lots of young horses for the local old timers who would come and get him to test out their newest sale barn broncs. He was one of those kids who would just get on anything-"more try than sense" like they say.

Dempsey Ross, John's older brother and influence, day worked young John in all facets of ranch and cowboy work, and once said of his little brother, "After I got through with John he didn't fear anything but God." John, man on a mission, enrolled at Cisco Junior College paying his own way by working odd jobs and riding young horses. In July of 1996, John Ross transferred his studies to Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas and we had just purchased a ranch 15 miles to the north near Bluff Dale. Even though I was doing an incredible amount of traveling on the road, Dalene and I were making plans to build the greatest working horse ranch and clinic facility in the country. John had heard about my move into the territory and my plans. He wasted no time making his presence known and the importance his presence would have in my plans. John Ross showed up at our Double Horn ranch looking for work; he was willing to do any job-shoveling manure, building fence, washing the truck and trailer-if I would school him in the art

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of horsemanship. As a horseman and clinician I had never had a full time hand and wasn't interested in having one now. I have always chosen to work alone; I liked and preferred it that way.

Cordially, I tried to dissuade the young man. John just as cordially would not take no for an answer. The way I saw it he was resolved to learn the trade of horsemanship from Craig Cameron. He routinely showed up at the Double Horn grabbing wheel wheelbarrows, brushing horses, washing horses, and trying to make a spot for himself at the ranch.

About this time I was riding a rough string of outside horses. The rankest of these broncs was a big rawboned, rangy colt owned by my good friends and world champions Bud and Jimmie Monroe. I knew this horse pretty well and he was as raw as young John Ross. I sent the persistent boy into the corral to do some ground work with the horse. My real intention was to gauge the caliber of experience the boy had by watching him handle the horse on the ground, preparing the horse to be mounted. Attending to other business I came around the barn just seconds behind John Ross-literally seconds-but that was all it took as I realized with a sick feeling the wiry, young cowboy was already astride the nervous bronc.

Immediately, the battle began. The unprepared horse exploded into a bucking frenzy. Even though the young twister rode with admirable tenacity, the trip was more than he could bear. The bronc scored a reckless victory. Rising from the dust wounded but not beaten the boy spitting blood was determined to go again. In that instant, looking from an impatient, snorting colt to a very embarrassed, battered boy but I saw something in the pair. What I saw was heart, determination, and a willingness to try, all traits that are admirable in any horse and in any person. Wisdom and experience prompted me to restrain the youth and teach John Ross his second lesson of horsemanship that day. The principle of working through understanding was used in place of force. An hour later John was riding the same horse who was now calm and untroubled, at an easy trot and canter in both directions in the round corral.

Enthusiasm is hard to stop and John Ross was full of enthusiasm. Even though John could only work every other day, because of college he came with a quick smile and an open mind, willing to give. Day by day and week by week question after question time marched on. Teaching the young apprentice was much like teaching a young horse; it takes time and understanding, patience and consistency with repetition being the key. You don't make a great horse or horseman in 30 days. It is an unending process. Just as I begin teaching a horse on the ground that's where I started with John Ross. Now known as John Ross the journeyman!

Great work is as important to a young horse as it is to a young man. Understanding the nature, mechanics, and instincts of a horse are a must. Bringing along the young horseman is identical to bringing along the young horse; they must be allowed to make mistakes. It is through your failures that you find your successes. For the horse and horseman there must be an atmosphere of freedom-freedom to try and to work. As time passed on, ranch chores and ground work turned into groundwork and riding.

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I always say that habits are the easiest thing to make and the hardest thing to break. Just as a horseman develops cadence and collection with a young horse, I found myself trying to develop hand position, seat, feel, and touch with the young cowboy. Lacking finesse and awareness of the correct hand position, seat, feel, and touch I would have John work through exaggeration such as having him lay all the way back on his horse, ride with extremely low hand position, ride with eyes closed to build the allusive physical, mental, and emotional feel of horsemanship. Other times I would prompt the young man to ride bareback, sideways, and backwards. We began saddling and bridling, mounting and dismounting from the right. We rode bridleless, bareback blindfolded, for long rides out into the pasture and woods. To promote balance and timing, we would tie up our reins and ride through the narrow, heavily wooded trails guiding our horses through a feel using only our legs, hands, and mind.

Like a young horse, after the repetition of consistent riding, you begin to see the improvement of the horse or the man. By not pushing too hard or too fast positive results are inevitable. There are no shortcuts to greatness. Great horses and great horsemen are made and the making takes time. There must be willingness on the part of the horse and horseman to take the time or to give the time in the quest for success. The young horseman is sometimes amazed at the number of miles and horses that we go through in a year's time. I smile to myself and think, "Yeah, now he is paying his dues." I tell him, "Every mile and every horse is an education." For young, talented, hardworking John Ross his future with horses as an up and coming trainer or clinician will be outstanding. He is continually sharpening and fine tuning his horsemanship skills every day.

I remember years ago on a long road trip John asked me how long would I keep riding and handling all these rough horses. I told him, "I'll be riding till hell freezes over—with a good hand like John Ross by my side we'll be riding on ice."

—*Craig Cameron*