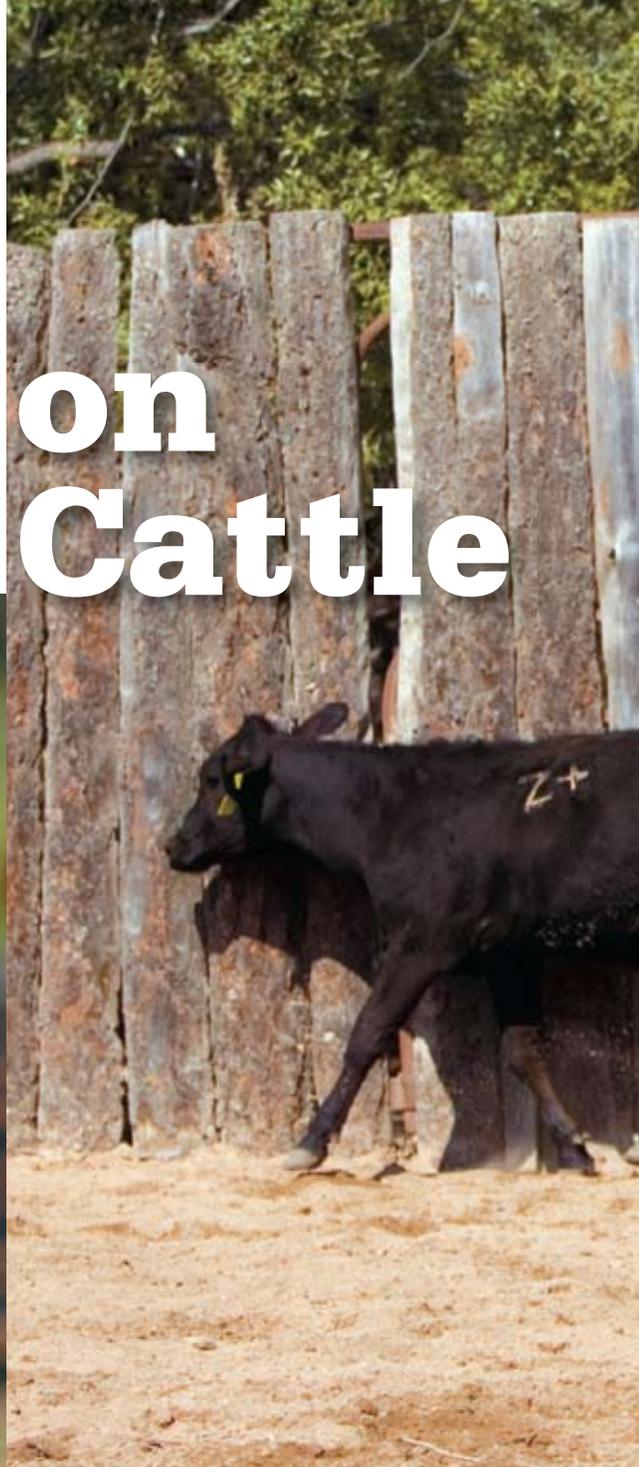


Building Confidence on Cattle

STORY BY JENNIFER ZEHNDER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROSS HECOX



National Reined Cow Horse Association futurity champion Ted Robinson uses

TRAINERS MAY DISAGREE on how early to start a colt on cattle, but they do seem to agree on one thing: A good cow horse wants to work a cow. He just needs to learn how to do it properly.

Since his first National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity championship, won aboard Nu Cash in 1987, Ted Robinson of Oak View, California, has introduced numerous prospects to the cow herd. And while his philosophy on starting young horses on cattle differs from that of other trainers, it is not new and it

works for him. Robinson has added six NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity championships to his resume since 1987, including those won aboard Master Checks (1991), The NU Colonel (1995), Shes Alot Of Cash (1996), Smart Little Cash (1997), Smokums Prize (2000) and Nu Circle Of Light (2005).

Here, Robinson shares his cow-horse training philosophies and techniques for starting a young horse on cattle. He begins with the basics, then advances to work a mechanical cow, a buffalo and, eventually, live cattle.



To build a horse's confidence on cattle, Robinson keeps things simple and consistent—fine-tuning focus, and teaching position and pattern.

incremental lessons in concentration and consistency to make a cow horse.

Basic Foundation

Robinson emphasizes that a young horse needs a solid riding foundation *before* being introduced to cattle.

“Some trainers believe that when a horse gets really broke, he doesn’t work a cow as well as when he’s green,” he says. “But, truth be known, the horse probably wasn’t that cowy to begin with.

“When I ride my colt on the machine or a cow for the first time, I don’t want to be met with resistance when I lift the rein.”

Consequently, 2-year-old prospects in Robinson’s reined cow-horse program start their training in an arena, not a cattle pen. The trainer says that a colt needs to be “good and broke” before he is introduced to a mechanical cow, a buffalo or a cow herd. The colt needs to lead with his head, rather than his hip or hindquarters, when traveling forward. He also should travel in a collected manner, flexing at the poll, elevating his back and driving his legs far beneath his body, and softly yield to his rider’s cues.

“When starting a colt on live cattle, I continue to direct the young horse’s focus and fine-tune and expand his attention span, all the while positioning and patterning the horse to work the cow.”

—TED ROBINSON, SEVEN-TIME NRCHA FUTURITY CHAMPION



“When I use the word ‘broke,’ I mean the horse really listens to the commands I give him, whether it’s my hands or the reins,” clarifies Robinson. “I don’t know that it’s important that a horse moves away from my leg as much as it is that he lets me hold him with my leg.”

A colt also needs to be able to stop and back well, he says. When Robinson picks his reins up, his horse should stop, and when he asks his colt to back, the horse should do so without resistance.

“A horse’s body is very interesting—it seems to move in all the ways I don’t want,” Robinson continues. “And if I don’t have a horse broke enough to say, ‘No, your concentration has to be here,’ or ‘No, you need to stop, back up and turn now,’

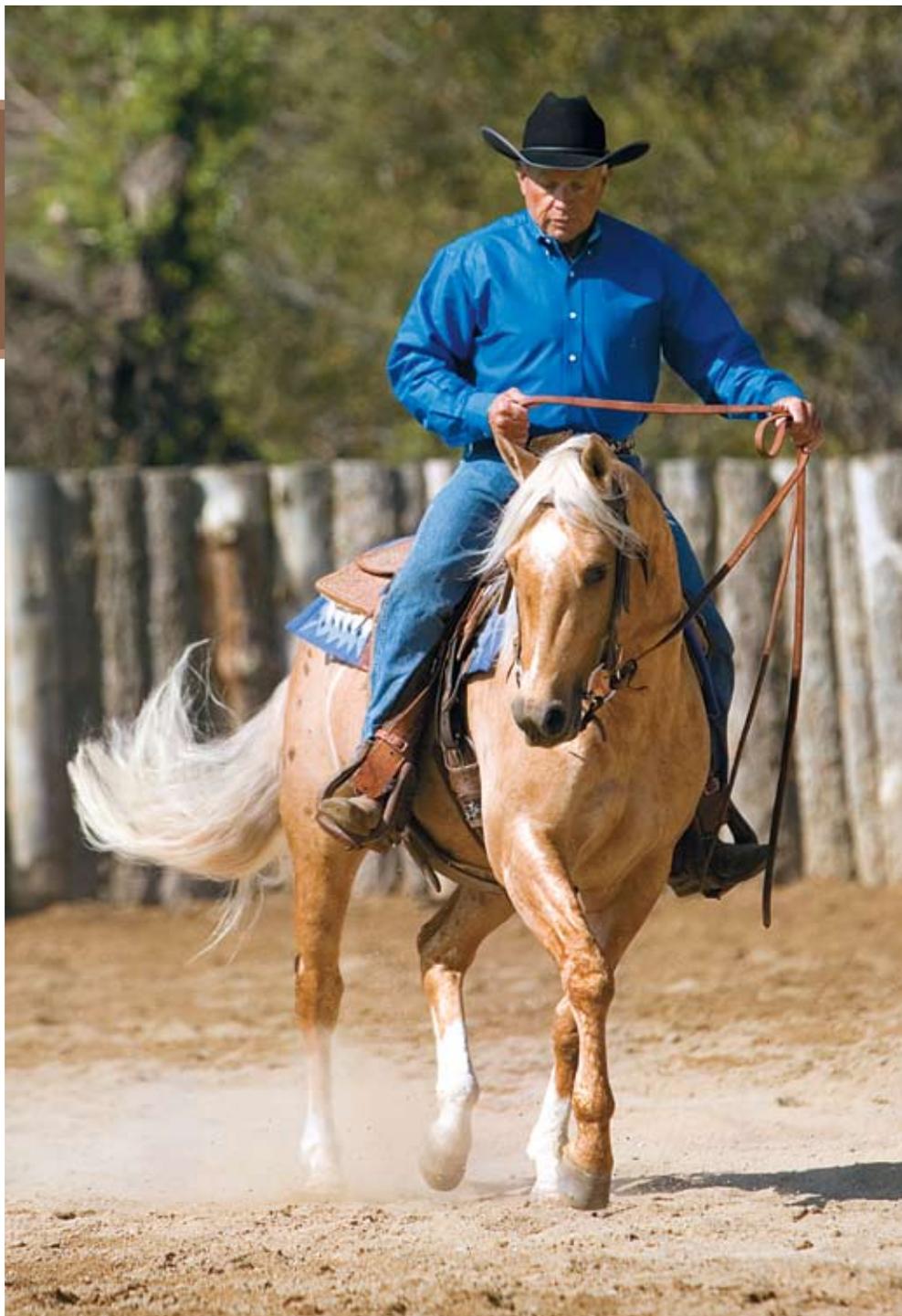
I’m wasting my time. Teaching position and pattern on cattle is hard enough on a broke horse.”

Robinson says that placing a totally green colt in front of a cow won’t deliver the soft, willing pupil he prefers. Plus, this situation gives the horse the opportunity to learn the wrong way to move with the cow as he turns, leading with his shoulder or hip, for example, instead of his head.

“Breaking a horse doesn’t take the cow out of him if he has it,” Robinson says. “It makes the horse correct in his maneuvers and enables him to work a cow to the best of his ability.”

Once a prospect is soft and yielding, Robinson incorporates the mechanical cow into the horse’s training. The remote-controlled, life-sized model travels along a track and simulates the





Left: A mechanical cow helps Robinson instill confidence in a young horse. **Above:** Robinson believes that a young horse should have a solid riding foundation before being introduced to cattle.

maneuvers of a live bovine. A mechanical cow gives a young horse the opportunity to concentrate on a more predictable subject than a live cow, and the model Robinson uses features seven computerized patterns of movement and the option to run it manually.

“It’s a good way to focus, position and pattern a colt in a controlled environment,” Robinson explains. “With a live cow, a colt doesn’t always get to figure those out.”

Concentration, Position, Pattern

When first working the mechanical cow, Robinson simply wants a horse to focus on the object in front of him. Then, while honing the horse’s attention on the cow, Robinson slowly

begins introducing the concepts of position and pattern. He positions his horse to work “inside” or toward the center of the cow, as well as patterning the young horse to start, stop and turn with the cow.

When the young horse has focused on the mechanical cow, Robinson encourages his horse’s attention, and eventually his body, to be “pulled” by the cow’s movement.

“If the horse’s ears—whether up and alert or flat-back and showing expression—don’t indicate his attention is on the cow,” he explains, “then I ride my colt to the cow to refocus him.”

The trainer is patient as he sets up the colt to work in proper position, riding the horse parallel to the cow and



After failing to “train” buffalo to work like cattle, Robinson came up with an effective way to make the animals work for his young horses.

keeping him alongside the animal’s mid-section. Robinson looks for his horse’s ears to go forward and for him to focus on the cow with both eyes.

“I have to be sure to give a horse enough time to react and understand what’s being asked of him,” Robinson says.

To encourage a colt to be pulled by the cow’s movement, Robinson lets the cow “get away” from the horse—just a little bit. When the cow is a few strides ahead of his horse, Robinson picks up on the inside rein (on the side facing the cow) and guides his horse through the turn with the cow.

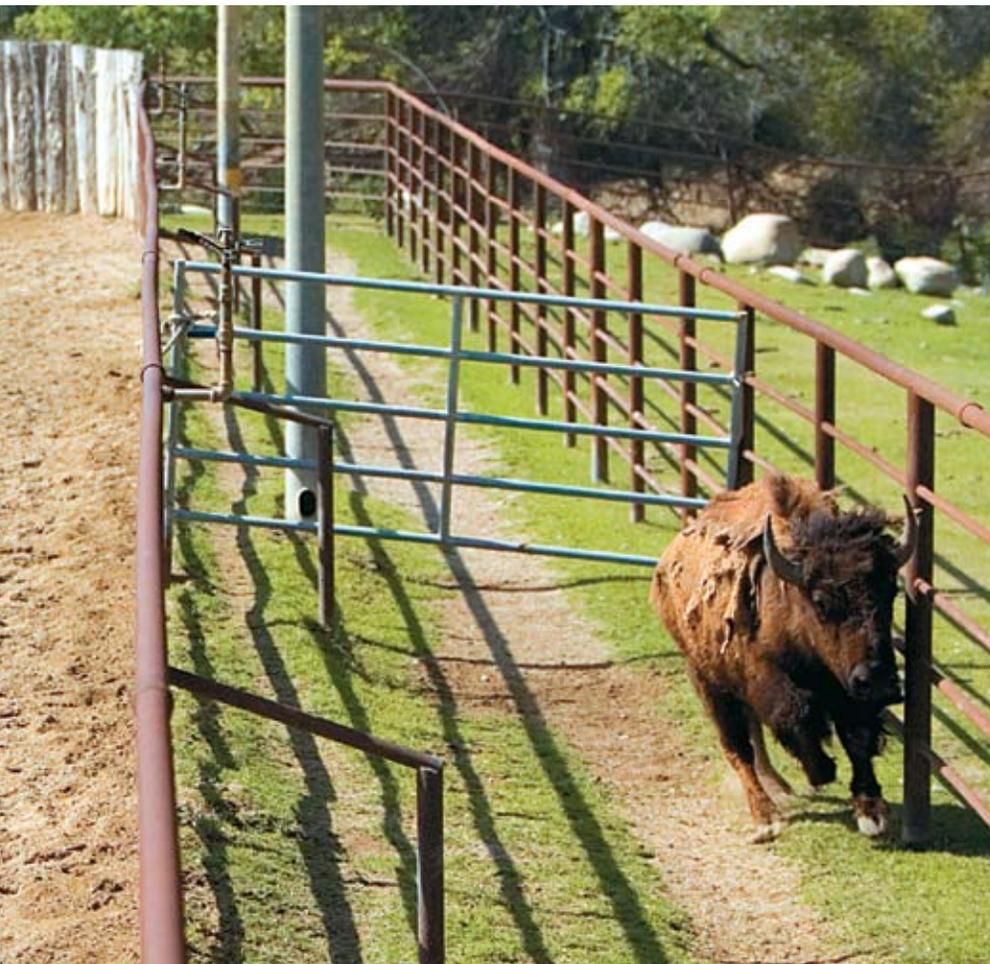
Robinson works his horse on the cow, but never *forces* his horse on the cow. He says that forcing the colt into position creates unnecessary pressure and sometimes resentment. A certain amount of pressure must be applied until the colt focuses on the cow, but how much depends on the individual horse.

A colt might not start moving with the cow at first, but he should be encouraged to stop with it.

“I never sacrifice my stop,” says Robinson. “I’m less worried about the colt turning to face the cow than I am getting him stopped with the cow.”

Stopping positions a horse for the next move. If a horse gets out of position, it becomes difficult for him to face, read and physically respond correctly to the cow’s next move.

“When a horse’s head is over, facing the cow,” Robinson says, “his shoulder stands up better—preparing him to cross over himself, rather than to move forward through a turn.”



The maneuver maximizes efficiency—shifting a horse’s weight to his powerful hindquarters during the stop and freeing up his front end to move efficiently through the turn with the cow.

As a pattern of “stop, back up, turn and look at the cow, then lead off with the cow,” slowly establishes itself, Robinson continues to fine-tune the colt’s concentration skills.

“Any time he quits looking, I ride him to the cow [which applies pressure] until I get the colt’s attention back [on the cow],” says Robinson. “A good cow horse doesn’t want to be too close to the cow, so pretty soon the colt starts focusing on that cow and looking to maintain his position all the time. That’s essentially what I want to build in a reined cow horse—I just want to build it slowly.”

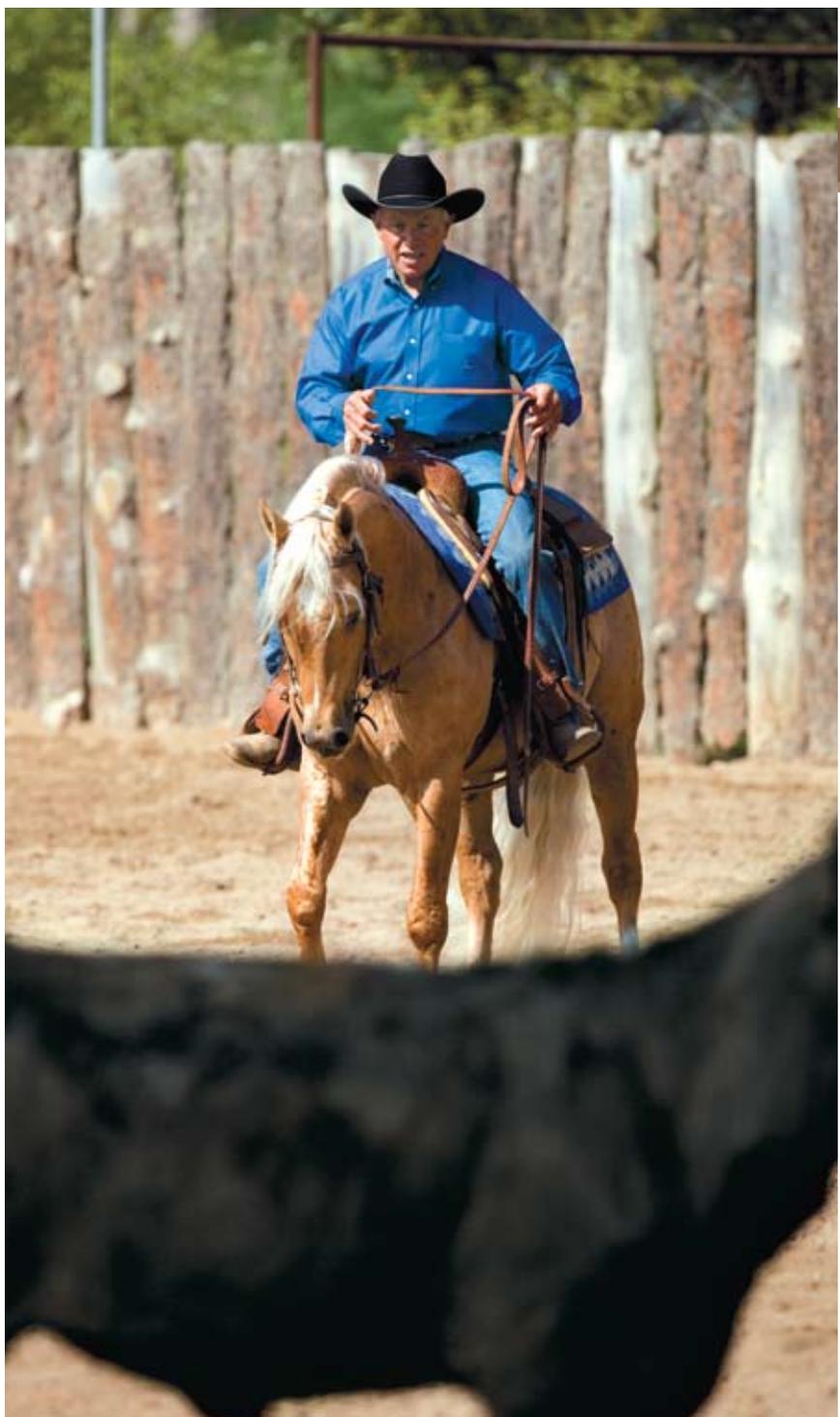
Robinson cautions that horses’ concentration levels vary, especially among young horses. The key is to know when a colt needs a little pressure to focus and when he needs the rest of the day off to regroup.

If a horse starts with a lot of concentration and try, he explains, he won’t work him on the cow very long, approximately two minutes or so. But if his colt starts out lackadaisically and is not concentrating, then Robinson works him longer on the cow, about 10 minutes.

“You don’t have to ride a young horse a lot or for a long time,” says Robinson, “but you need his wheels turning when you do.”

After a colt learns to concentrate on the mechanical cow and gains confidence in his position and pattern, Robinson rides the young horse into the cattle pen.





When “going live” on cattle, Robinson continues to direct his colt’s focus and increase its attention span, all the while positioning and patterning the horse to work the cow.

Going “Live”

When starting a colt on live cattle, Robinson continues to direct the young horse’s focus, as well as fine-tune and expand his attention span, all the while positioning and patterning the horse to work the cow. In Robinson’s program, young horses at this next stage of training might be introduced to buffalo before cattle, depending on the trainer’s cattle supply.

After several failed attempts to “train” buffalo to work like cattle, Robinson came up with an effective way to make them work without wearing out colts that might not be able to keep up with a buffalo. To begin, Robinson loads a buffalo into a sectioned-off area in the return alley. The buffalo generally runs from end to end within the alley, offering ample opportunity for a young horse, safe in the arena, to work his position and pattern. Robinson rides his colts back and forth along the fence, following the buffalo’s movements.

“So far, it’s been a pretty good training tool,” Robinson says. “People don’t think to work buffalo through the fence, but it seems to be working. The only side-effect I’ve had is when the dogs run the fence. I’d better be holding on, because that colt will want to work the dogs, too.”

Working cattle in the pen adds another level of difficulty to the young horse’s training. Again, Robinson seeks to apply the same skills of concentration, position and pattern, but now on a live cow. And, because Robinson has established position, pattern and confidence in his colt on the mechanical cow and buffalo, the next step of working a live cow poses no initial setbacks or loss of concentration, but rather a smooth progression that generally comes with increased intensity.

It will be several months (during a colt’s mid-3-year-old year) before Robinson teaches a horse advanced yielding and positioning on cattle in relation to the cow’s “bubble,” or pre-flight zone. The bubble is different for each cow, and, the faster the cow, the bigger the bubble.

“Many people don’t understand that the closer they get to a fast cow, the faster she moves,” Robinson explains. “That’s why the bubble position on a fast cow comes inside of that cow—from the shoulder or mid-rib.”

Positioning a horse alongside the cow and inside the bubble presents him with the best opportunity to work the cow. Robinson

positions a horse at a slow cow’s head and neck because the slower the cow, the closer the horse must travel within the bubble.

“If I have a colt that refuses or is real hesitant about walking to that cow, I don’t force him up there,” he says. “I encourage him, step by step. That’s how I mirror the cow.”

Repetition Builds Confidence

Horses are creatures of habit, Robinson says, so, to build a horse’s concentration and confidence on cattle, he keeps things simple and consistent. In the race to create the next superstar, Robinson thinks that simplicity and consistent application often are overlooked in training programs.

“I keep applying what I want to do—fine-tune my horse’s focus and teach position and pattern on a cow,” he says. “If I apply those correctly, my horse will work.”

“It’s what works for the horse,” Robinson continues. “He’s the teacher and I’m the student. There’s always one that makes me a better trainer.”

“Sometimes, we get to thinking it’s us, but it’s the horses.” 

Jennifer Zehnder is a WH associate editor. For more information on starting young horses on cattle, contact Ted Robinson at (805) 649-9028, or log on to tedrobinsontrainingstables.com. Send comments on this article to edit@westernhorseman.com.