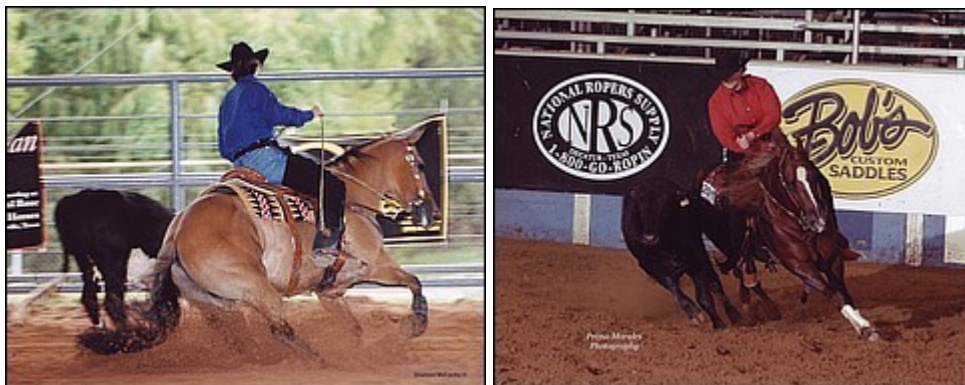


The Rider Writes

Archive 2



I was going to write an article on horseback riding injury prevention, but that's too much. I'll end up leaving my readers with the feeling that danger lies around every corner. Well, from my perspective it does, but that's not the point here. The horseback riding injury prevention article will have to wait. I told you how to get started on a memoir in "The Writer Writes." So let me put my money where my mouth is. Here is a situation I think anyone, rider or not, can identify with.

I stand out a little in my western riding sport. Most of the gals that do the working cow horse event are about 5'5" tall and they're on the light side. I don't know why that is, but it's a fact. I try to make the most (or should I say, the least) of the situation. I wear dark jeans and chaps, and avoid horizontal stripes. Dark crepe soled boots rather than the very popular cream colored crepe makes my foot look smaller. But there's only so much I can do to disguise 6 feet of cowgirl and a size 11 boot.

Sometimes clothes aren't the only thing that makes a rider stand out. Orange stripes, white jeans and matching soled boots wouldn't have made me stand out any more than I did during this particular competition four years ago in San Antonio, Texas.

We were riding at the San Antonio Rose Palace, one of my favorite facilities because of its old school ambiance. It was early in my cow horse experience and I didn't have a cow horse trainer at that time. I was trying to wing it on my own. I was on the fabulous, Mr. Mini Macho. Someone else has him now, but I think of him often.

I had finished the reining part of my cow horse run and I think we had done okay, not great, but nothing to be embarrassed about. Believe me, at that point in my cow horse and reining experience, minor embarrassments weren't uncommon. For those not familiar with reining, I will give a brief description. Reining is kind of like doing dressage, but in a western fashion. The horse is controlled by the rein and the leg just like in dressage. The horse and rider do a series of specific maneuvers like large fast circles transitioning to small slow circles. There are lead changes in the middle of the arena. One of the signature elements of a reining "run" is the sliding stop, in which the horse is directed down the middle of the arena at a progressively increasing rate of speed, ultimately to a full gallop. Then the rider asks the horse to stop by saying "whoa." The horse is trained to stop when he hears that word and stop he does. But in order to come to a full stop, the horse must slide, pulling with his front legs and sliding with the hind legs. It's a very beautiful, athletic and scary thing to do. But we did it fine that day and I didn't come off the horse or come up out of my saddle. Nor did I truly stop dead rather than slide, which results in an ugly pounding and usually gets a sympathetic groan from the spectators, especially those who have had car accidents

or back surgery.

Reining horses can also do a neat little trick: a spin somewhere in the pattern in which the horse spins around on its hocks, a few times each way, clockwise and counterclockwise.

And one other thing. The horse goes through this pattern willfully. Like he wants to do it. Hopefully on a loose rein, without a lot of pulling, spurring or other antics we might use in the absence of an audience or a judge.

Now that's the end of a reining run and really that's substantial, but in the cow horse event there's a little more and as you can guess, it involves a cow. It's not a trained cow or anything like that. It's a wild, don't-wanna-go-where-you-want-me-to-go cow. At the Rose Palace there's always this friendly quiet gentleman that opens the gate to let the cow out into the arena. When you give him the signal (a tip of your head) he releases the cow and you have to go "box it." Boxing means you use your horse to move the cow back and forth across the end of the arena. It looks a little like cattle cutting but there's a difference and that's not too important to understand right now. Once we have the cow's *respect* and we've worn him out a little, it's time for the signature move of the cow horse event and here's where I started getting a little attention despite my dark clothing.

The cow should be maneuvered around the corner of the arena and then driven almost to the other end. And I mean *derririven*. You position your horse at the cow's hip and push it along the arena railing. Now once the cow sees that it's all clear up ahead and there is a 1200 pound horse on its hip, what do you think it does? IT TAKES OFF RUNNING! Well, that would be fine if the ride was done, like the objective was to just make the cow take off running, done, SCORE! But no, before he gets to the other end you've got to speed up and sort of step ahead of him to make him turn around and go the other way. So this is also a very exciting, athletic and scary maneuver and there is a lot of momentum involved.

Now that I have a trainer, he tells me if you do it just right you will sit up perfectly straight and come through the turn like a princess, but on that particular day I might not have kept my eye on the cow just right because when we made that turn going 90 mph, I leaned all the way over and my shirt and sport bra caught on my saddle horn. Can you picture that? Okay, many would have quit at that point. But the bra was intact and I wiggled my shirt off the saddle horn, while my horse proceeded to chase after the cow like he was supposed to. In two seconds we were back up to a full gallop. I wasn't quite ready but I managed to get back in position for the second part of this maneuver in which we go do the same thing in the other direction.

This time I guess my heels weren't down just right because when Macho came through that big turn in the other direction, I came up out of my seat and then down again, this time looping my belt and my chaps over the saddle horn. So when I came up for oxygen the belt tore in two and as we took off again I whiplashed backward and my loose chaps caught around the cantle of the saddle. Can you picture that?

At this point I'm leaning back in my saddle. I'm strapped in by my chaps which are acting like a makeshift seat belt. Many would have given up. But if anything I am tenacious and it was time to finish the pattern by bringing the cow out into the middle of the arena to "circle it up." Well I wasn't really *bringing* it there because he' was long gone. I had to chase him and in doing that, my hat, which had once been glued to my head with hair spray and bobbie pins, began to flop up and down like a lid. The hair spray and the skin attached to it had already lost hold in the previously described maneuvers. Now the hat was loosely held in place by the bobbie pins. It was lifting up and down with each stride, painfully yanking the 273 strands of hair to which the pins were tenuously attached. My eyes began to water. I shook my head hard enough to rip the hair out or loosen the pins, one. The end result was that the hat came off. Are you getting the picture now?

In the next maneuver the horse and rider come alongside the cow, moving to its head, which causes the cow, in most instances to veer to the side and begin to circle as the horse comes around. We did one circle to the left and one to the right like we were supposed to. It was flawless... The ride was over and the crowd began cheering, though I don't think it was for the right reason.

I dropped my head and sagged into the saddle. It was then that I realized my dark brown shirt was gaping open, exposing my white sport bra. My black chaps were ripped apart at the belt and my trophy buckle was gone. Macho and I walked back to the gate. The quiet, friendly gentleman who opened the gates for us came jogging over with my dirty black hat and my trophy buckle in hand. As he gave them to me he said, "We were hoping you'd make just one more turn on that cow, ma'am."