

CASCADE HORSEMAN

By Kathy Peth

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*Mitch and stockdogs overlooking the Oxbow Dam
on the Snake River where we turned cows out
By Kathy Peth • Photos Courtesy of MJ Rising H Ranch.*

On Monday, he's the horse ridden to check and sort calvy heifers. On Tuesday, he goes to the high country to ride fence. On Wednesday, he gets hauled over to help in the neighbor's branding pen. On Thursday, he's chosen to partner with an inexperienced rider as they ride to a high mountain lake for a little fishing. On Friday, he packs salt to the cows on the Forest Service allotment. On Saturday, he goes to a team roping jackpot, and, on Sunday, he carries a flag in a parade, or On Monday, he's the horse ridden to check and sort calvy heifers. On Tuesday, he goes to the high country to ride fence. On Wednesday, he gets hauled over to help in the neighbor's branding pen. On Thursday, he's chosen to partner with an inexperienced rider as they ride to a high mountain lake for a little fishing. On Friday, he packs salt to the cows on the Forest Service allotment. On Saturday, he goes to a team roping jackpot, and, on Sunday, he carries a flag in a parade, or goes to a Trail Horse Competition. This is the horse I want...one that's been there, done that, earned the shoofly

Well, they're out there, those solid using horses. Eastern Oregon horsemen Mitch and JoLinn Hoover, working together, are producing useful, quiet, well-rounded geldings. Their road to the horse business is based on a solid, practical foundation – Mitch has been managing large cattleranches most of his adult life (horseback, of course), and JoLinn has years of experience in events from 4-H to trail to cow horse.

Four years ago, the couple grabbed hands, shut their eyes, and bought their own place in the high sage desert near Richland, OR, almost spitting distance across the Snake River from Idaho. It was the realization of a lifetime's dream. The plan was they'd run some cattle and the work they did with their cows would help them produce horses to sell—steady geldings, trained the way the Hoovers have always trained horses, with care and an eye towards all-around use.



Mitch instructing at our 2006 Cowgirl Up Retreat.



Mitch and JoLinn doctoring cattle, all in a day's work for our training program.



JoLinn Hooper riding Another Legacy at the Oregon Mountain Trail Championships in Eugene, OR.

The work

involved in setting up their new place pushed the couple to burnout stage. The new MJ Rising H Ranch was taking shape, but the folks shaping it were wearing out. That's when JoLinn found a weekend break for them, something fun and unfamiliar: a competitive trail show.

“This was something so totally out of the ordinary for us,” she remembers now. “We went just to see how our horses would do, not expecting anything. Our horses did really well and we got hooked on the whole concept that what we do for everyday work prepares our horses to do well in a show situation.”

Competitive trail shows are a new and rapidly spreading horse event. Just five years ago, there was an explosion of “reality- based” trail competitions. The Mountain Trail Championship competition held its inaugural show at the Oregon Horse Center in Eugene, and the same year, 2002, saw the birth of the Extreme Cowboy Race, hosted by horseman Craig Cameron at his Double Horn Ranch in Bluff Dale, TX. The Extreme Cowboy Race is said to be the most popular series airing on the satellite television station RFD-TV. A ranch-related trail class is also built into the new and increasingly popular Versatility Ranch Horse shows, which are also natural arenas for Rising H horses.

While every trail course is designed as a test of the training and horsemanship of the competitors, these competitive trail contests are not the formal, choreographed classes you expect to see at breed shows or multiple-class Open shows. Consider them “reality-based” tests, rooted mostly in the kinds of tasks that crop up in the everyday life of a cow horse.

The Mountain Trail Championships is an elaborately staged trail course, built to be as natural a setting as possible while still being indoors. It boasts slopes, ditches, even a waterfall. Other regional competitions, like the Cowboy Trail Challenge in Elgin, OR, the Wild Rose Cowboy Race in Roseburg, and the Mountain Trail Horse Classics near Baker City, and others, are built outdoors, with courses from one to three miles long.

Obstacles and challenges range from the practical – open a gate, drag a log, cross a bridge, pony another horse, put on a slicker – to the more imaginative, which can involve anything from cardboard cutouts painted like cows, to ditches full of artificial fog.

Rules are individual to the competitions. Some courses are won by the fastest horse-rider combination, others are judged obstacle by obstacle, and still others are a combination of the two. The Cowboy Trail Challenge in Elgin, for example, offers a judged and timed event. As the level of judged competition increases, final placings hinge more and more on

subtle showmanship skills that take time to present to the judge. The Cowboy Trail Challenge has a course limit of twelve minutes in the judging portion; at this summer's event, Mitch used almost all the allowable time completing the course in his judging round. The final round was timed only; against the clock, Mitch finished the exact same course in two and a half minutes, and won the class.

Dress codes vary; some shows even allow tee shirts and ball caps, although the Hoovers teach their students that, as in most other events, a professional appearance is not lost on the judges. "It comes under 'style,'" Mitch says with a grin. At their clinics, the Hoovers make a point of covering the rules and their recommendations for each class and show. They offer instruction in everything from cattle skills, roping, equipment, even etiquette.

That first weekend at a competitive trail competition gave Mitch and JoLinn Hoover a new focus for their program. Their ranch-worked town-going horses had publicly proved the value of an all-around training program, and demand for their horses soon had the Hoovers rethinking the cattle side of the outfit. And their personal success in the show ring, mixed with their background coaching junior rodeo contestants, naturally led them to giving clinics to help other riders hone their skills.

"Because of our background and the kind of horses we like, we've found our niche in the Mountain Trail and Versatility Ranch horses," says Mitch. In addition, "We ride some outside horses and we buy horses, put them through our program, and offer them for sale." The MJ Rising H program has developed from the practical basics Mitch and JoLinn have gleaned from two lifetimes with horses, while also incorporating techniques they've learned from other horsemen and adapted for their own use.

For the prospects they buy, the Hoovers start out with a formula: "We look for a gentle, good-eyed, quiet gelding," says Mitch. "Anywhere from four to ten years old, the kind of beenthere, done-that horse that everybody's looking for, the one Mom and Dad can both ride, the kids can ride; a horse that will stay quiet and gentle. That's the kind of horse most people seem to be looking for."



Mitch swimming cattle across the river in the spring...JoLinn is in the river too, taking the pix...brrr!

Because they're value-added buyers, not "traders, per se," says JoLinn, they are patient, and look for quality, attractive horses, horses that are a pleasure to ride at home and will also stand out at a show. And that means color is a factor. "The horses have to meet the other requirements," says Mitch, adding with a chuckle, "and then color's always a bonus.

"We try to go through 'em, find all the holes and work 'em through it, so people can ground tie 'em, hobble 'em, use a mounting block or a rock to get on – these horses might not be capable of winning the world in Working Cow Horse, but they're not going to hurt anybody, either." The purchased horses are ridden anywhere from three months to a year before they're offered for sale. There's a waiting list.

"It's not only the horse that has to be trained," warns Mitch. "It's also the rider. We have people come to our clinics who just want to know how to do the obstacles – well they can't if they can't ask their horse to do what's required of them."

JoLinn adds, "Somebody will have trouble with an obstacle like opening a gate, and they'll say their horse won't do it. So we'll go to the gate and the first thing we'll ask is, 'Will your horse side-pass? And will it do a forehand turn?' The answer is usually no. Well, then it's not the gate the horse has a problem with, it's that fact that he needs to learn how to side-pass before you go to the gate. Once we break it down into what maneuvers the horse has to perform, the rider can see it's not the obstacle, it's their horsemanship that has to change."

"A lot of times it's not the horse that's the problem," Mitch says, "it's having the rider deliver the signals correctly so the horse can understand."

It's a package deal at MJ Rising H Ranch—Hoovers will spend a minimum of 60 days on a horse, but at the same time they encourage the owner to spend at least six hours during

that time learning the same methods and techniques the horses are learning. Safety, they feel, starts with an experienced and responsible rider.

MJ Rising H's individual horse training programs move equine students through what they call their "Natural to Practical" phase, where the horse is given a solid all-around foundation that equips him to move into any event, and the second stage, called "Finishing with Finesse," where the horse is polished in a soft, classical vaquero style. There is a graduate-level course as well, which includes bridle-less training for horse and rider.

The Hoovers offer two sets of clinics, a progressive advancement program in trail-riding called Trail I and Trail II, and another for Versatility Ranch Horse enthusiasts. They figure they'll be away from home more than twenty weekends in 2007, giving about fifteen clinics and competing at five to ten shows. The couple is also putting the finishing touches on their long-awaited DVD series which will be available in the summer.

Students are always welcome, and they range in age from "just out of diapers" to, at the moment, a rider in her mid- 80s. Students vary in experience from those who are pretty sure you mount from the left to proven winners looking for some extra polish. Especially at clinics, having two instructors gives the Hoovers extra flexibility; when it makes sense, they're able to separate beginning riders from those seeking advanced horsemanship tips. The instructions, however, are all based on the same philosophy.

"We've dealt with horses, children, and students all the same way," says JoLinn. "We look for even the smallest moments of 'rightness' and encourage that, and focus less on the moments of incorrectness. We look on incorrectness as a learning step and not as a big, bad, ugly, you-did-that-wrong kind of a thing. We've heard people say over and over that they're attracted by our positive attitudes."

As if they weren't busy enough, JoLinn has been a horsehair hitcher of some renown, and she is taking up her stick again to keep her hands busy while they're on the road between events and clinics. In addition to belts and bridles, she is doing some "memento" pieces, where she hitches a sample of a specific horse's hair, to be framed with competition or portrait photos of the horse.

After years of doing ranch work with Border Collies, Mitch offers Stock Dog Training clinics to help people learn the practical aspects of using cow dogs, outside of trial-dog situations. In his spare time (guffaw), he is also a facilities consultant for horse or cattle ranches – he's the one who makes sure barn placement makes functional sense, and all the gates swing in the right direction.

Under the sponsorship of Deadwood Outfitters, the Hoovers offer a 5-Day Trail Clinic in Garden Valley, ID, in mid-July. They also offer two Ladies Only getaways, where for several days, in a women-only setting, riders are offered a Chinese menu of fun, companionship, and horsemanship, covering ranch work, roping, sorting, trail riding, barrel racing; anything the group might wish to learn.

Alot of the riders who come to MJ Rising H Ranch start out saying, “Oh, I’ll never show” but, says Mitch, “as they work through the program and get confidence, a large percentage of them change their minds. Their confidence grows, and all of a sudden they’re coming to shows with us. It’s been really rewarding that way – we develop long term relationships with the people and their horses.”



Mitch and JoLinn, taken at a Mike Bridges Clinic at the Bill Berner Ranch in Bend, OR.

JoLinn adds, “Once students progress and gain confidence, they go on to do whatever they want – showing or just being comfortable outside, either way is great.”

The list of the Hoovers’ wins at rodeo events, Versatility Ranch Horse shows, and competitive trail riding is impressive. Mitch has saddles he’s won roping, as well as multiple Open Timed and Judged championships at the Oregon Mountain Trail Championships, Cowboy Trail Challenge, Mountain Trail Horse Classics, and was AQHA Reserve Champion at the AQHA Bell-A Versatility Ranch Horse Show, as well as being Champion and Reserve at the OTEC Ranch Rodeos in 2006. JoLinn regularly finishes in the Top Five and collects Open and Bareback Championships at the same shows, and was All-Breed Champion at the AQHABell-A Versatility Ranch Horse Show.

In addition, the Hoovers figure they’ve coached at least 60 students through competition at the Oregon Mountain Trail Championships. “Our goal has always been for one of our students to beat us,” says JoLinn. Well, that goal is within sight. Student Tammy Harty, of Bend, beat JoLinn in the timed phase at the Cowboy Trail Challenge in Elgin.

“One of the show management came up and put his arm around me and said, ‘Well, how does it make you feel to get beat by one of your students,’” remembers JoLinn. “I jumped

in the air and said Yes!” Mitch laughs. “And then Tammy said, ‘Watch out, Mitch, I’m coming after you!’ We went to Eugene, to the Oregon Mountain Trail Championship that fall and she went in and beat me in the timed part. She’s doing really well.”

Yes, Tammy Harty is getting some recognition for the work she’s done with her mare Little Bucks Bunny. They’ve qualified to compete in the Extreme Cowboy Race at Craig Cameron’s, in front of the television cameras, in late February, 2007. The Hoovers will be there, supporting and encouraging.

The horse industry is not an easy one in which to survive and prosper, and the Hoovers keep their Stetsons close to the ground, ready to adapt and change to better support their clients and produce the horses people want. They are currently considering moving to a slightly more accessible area, while remaining in the high sage desert of northeastern Oregon. They are also cutting back on the riding and training they’re doing for outside owners, and refocusing their efforts on the horses they buy and develop themselves for resale. Students will still be a huge part of their lives, as they continue to encourage new owners to ride with them while they point out where they’ve “installed the buttons” on their horses.

“It’s odd to look back and see how things have evolved,” says JoLinn. “It’s unusual to be able to say we’re doing exactly what we intended to do all our lives.

“We’ve been blessed to live a life doing what we want to do.”

-Cascade Horseman, March 2007