

In Praise of Older Horses

A LITTLE AGE ON A HORSE SHOULDN'T BE CONSIDERED A DISADVANTAGE.

By William C. Reynolds

HISTORICALLY, WE HAVE VALUED THE stories handed down by the *viejos*—the old ones—in the West. It would seem only natural then to also value the skilled, aged horses that served the cowboys and stockmen of these stories willingly and skillfully for many years. Many older horses are valued. The lucky ones are treasured.

Unfortunately, though, many older horses are looked at like a car—after three, four, or five years, sell it and get a new one. For years, young horses have been raced and have been in competitions where 3-year-olds are considered experienced and in many cases finished with their “showing” careers. However, many of these young horses are capable of taking all that fast training and use in their early formative years and going on to other lives as great competitive, pleasure, or family horses.

Today, a little 24-year-old gelding—a sorrel grade horse with no papers or fancy registration—carries a 10-

year-old girl into a new chapter of Western adventures for both of them. “I wish I had a barn-full of horses like him,” her father says. “That’s a horse I could put anybody on and never worry.” He smiles, looking over at her. “Now I can’t get her off of him. He doesn’t seem to mind though. Just hope he lasts.”

The little girl riding him wouldn’t want any other horse under her and neither would her father. That gelding has been through three of his kids. One boy showed him in local 4H & FFA competitions, hauling him all over the West. His other son has taken him through four years of high-school rodeo and an endless number of weekend team ropings—not to mention the countless gatherings and brandings at their ranch and the neighbors’ places.

Like this lucky horse, today we see more horses being used and even celebrated for their skills and “life experience” late into their teens and even into their



twenties. Maybe this newfound “respect for one’s elders” is coming from the recent growth of organized and sanctioned ranch ropings and similar ranch-oriented contests. These are competitions that feature ranch horses—not show horses—doing ranch-oriented tasks such as sorting and doctoring, among other more common rodeo and stock-horse show-type events like calf roping and team roping. Doctoring is an event where a calf, steer, or bull is roped with the intent of gently laying the animal down to the ground, enabling the riders to dismount and administer some kind of medical treatment, mimicking tasks one would find in daily ranch life. It is an event that allows quiet and seasoned skills to be shown. Here, where slow is fast, competency outweighs everything else.

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Another reason the aged horse may be coming into his own could be the resurgence of interest in the ways of vaquero horsemanship—that of taking a horse through multiple steps of training from snaffle bit to “straight up” in the bridle, a training method that “takes the time it takes”—in many cases up to 10 years or more. When trained properly, the horse that has received this level of time investment is something to behold—and to value. By its nature this kind of training must be done slowly with great attention given to the learning abilities of the individual horse. It is a stepped process—one that requires respect to be shared between horse and rider. It is time intensive—a process that may be filled with too many subtleties for many in today’s fast-paced world. But for those horseman and -women who appreciate and understand it, the end result is worth it.

The “finished” bridle horse is anything but finished—in the “used up” sense of the term. At the grand old ages of 10, 12, or 14 these horses’ useful lives are just beginning, with a bond created between the horse and rider that time has strengthened. They have shared in a process that has brought respect to both, each playing an important role in getting the job done. This work becomes a dance, uniting horse and rider. As writer Thomas McGuane wrote, “...some enchanted transformation [occurs] through which the horse and rider become a third much greater thing.” If it had to be put into one word, it would be *trust*—a relationship that comes only with time.