

It's About Attitude

Reading the signs

Hargis hangs his hat at the Rusty Star Ranch, near Sulphur Springs, where he and his wife, Karen, breed and train Quarter Horses. But Hargis tallies plenty of mileage while traveling across the country to present clinics and seminars emphasizing the importance of a slow, systematic approach to training horses.

"People have told me that I've been lucky with horses, but I say luck happens when preparation meets opportunity," Hargis says, grinning. "Training horses is like anything else. You set goals and plan to achieve them. And a lot of it is attitude. When you ask a horse to do something, he has to choose whether to do it or to resist. Your attitude helps him make the right choice."

Gauging the horse's attitude counts for plenty, too, so Hargis stresses the importance of learning to understand "horse talk." It's a sometimes-subtle body language, with the horse's eyes, ears and posture sending signals that reveal the animal's level of anxiety. The most obvious indicator of a release of tension is the instinctive licking of lips and chewing motions displayed as a horse's jaw muscles relax.

"The signs are always there if you're horseman enough to read them," Hargis adds. "You have to understand what the horse is telling you. They will show you when they are anxious or afraid and when they are relaxed, confident and ready to trust you."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 282

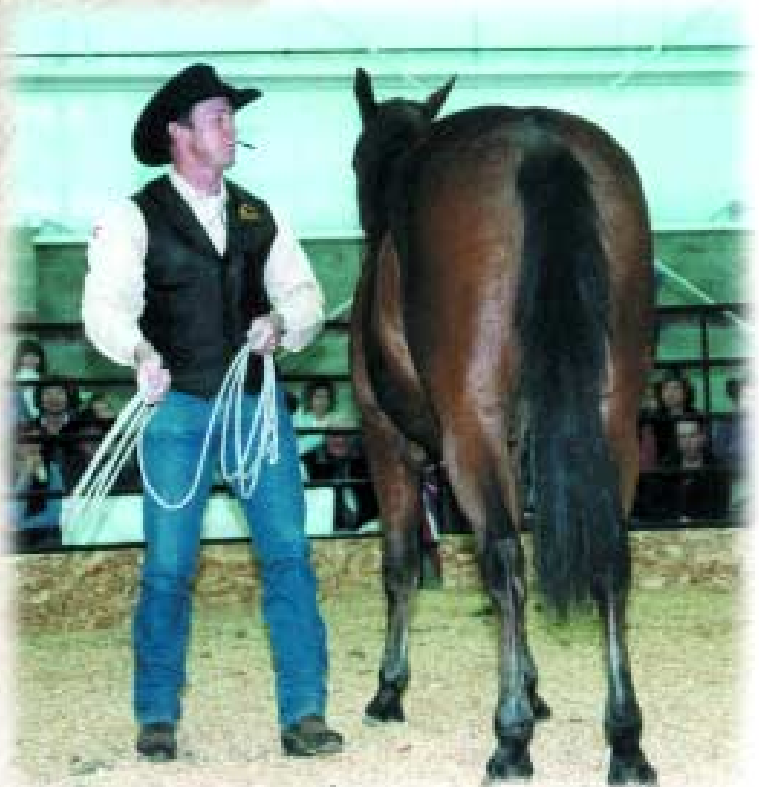
Horse trainer and horsemanship coach says working with horses is about mutual respect.

Story & photos by Troy Smith

It has been called a revolution in horse training philosophy — a movement that has attracted droves of recreational riders and saddle-worn horsemen alike. It was popularized and romanticized by the book *The Horse Whisperer* and a movie by the same title, but the root of the revolution is the serious equine enthusiast's desire to improve his or her horse-handling skills. Labeled "natural horsemanship" or "resistance-free training," the so-called modern concept emphasizes training as a process of communication and the need to understand the horse's perspective.

The horse-owning public's hunger for equine expertise has prompted an explosion of horsemanship clinics, conducted by accomplished trainers, where students seek secrets to success. Texas horseman and cowboy clinician Van Hargis claims there are no secrets or shortcuts. Shying away from the term "horse whisperer," Hargis says there are no tricks to communicating with horses, but it does require common sense and time.

► Horsemanship clinician Van Hargis gears some presentations toward further development of the more seasoned mount for ranch work or performance competition, but particularly popular are colt-starting sessions like the one held during the Northern International Livestock Exposition in Billings, Mont.



It's About Attitude CONTINUED FROM PAGE 281

Hargis says training built on trust starts at ground level. Groundwork is the basis for all that follows. It's how a handler gains control of the horse's body. A horse that is soft and responsive, when worked from the ground, should be more soft and responsive when under the saddle.

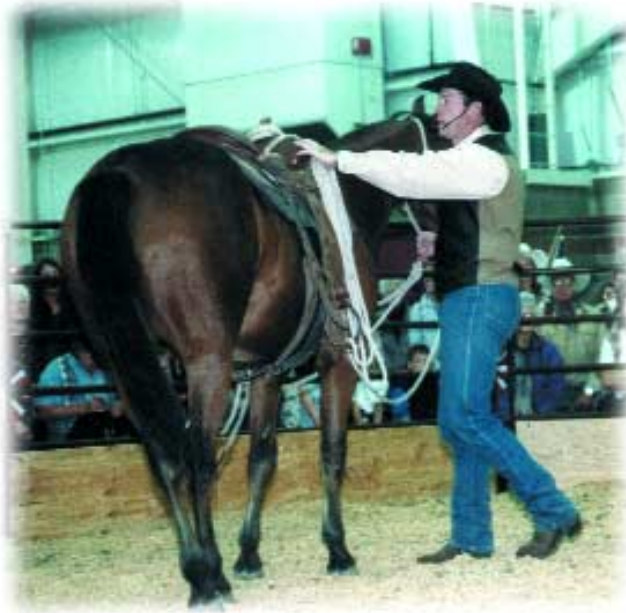
Even seasoned saddle horses that have become unmannerly will benefit from remedial groundwork. Hargis hears frequent owner complaints about horses that are hard to catch, even in close quarters, and turn away when approached.

"You should never let a horse turn its rear end toward you. The halter doesn't fit that end, and that's rude, disrespectful behavior," Hargis says. "You want a horse to face up, focus on you and stand quietly while being haltered."

Round-pen reasoning

Hargis likes a round pen for applying the groundwork necessary to the early training of a green colt. It can be a good place to remind an older horse to mind its manners, too. In the round pen, a horse can move out, but it can't get away. There are no corners in which it can try to hide its head, so it's easier to gain and hold the horse's focus. To teach a horse to face up, Hargis first works it unhaltered and loose in the round pen.

Positioning himself near the center of the pen and a little behind the horse's shoulder, Hargis encourages the horse to move forward and around the pen by clucking and twirling the end of a lead rope or lariat. As the desired response is achieved, pressure is relaxed and applied only as more encouragement is needed to maintain the horse's forward motion. Eventually, rope cues are replaced by body language and Hargis directs the horse's motion by stepping forward, backward or from side to side.



► Hargis covers the fundamentals of saddling and straddling a 2- or 3-year-old horse for the first time. Round-pen basics begin with groundwork, including getting the horse accustomed to the feel of a rope touching any part of its body. Once the horse is saddled, Hargis continues groundwork, using ropes as driving reins to teach the horse to remain calm and relaxed while disengaging its hindquarters and yielding to pressure.

By moving to a point ahead of the horse's shoulder and saying "whoa," Hargis cues the horse to stop. When it does, he looks for the licking and chewing motion signaling that the horse is relaxed. An ear turned toward the handler indicates the horse is focused. Then Hargis approaches and offers reassurance by rubbing the horse's forehead before introducing the halter.

"If he tries to move away, let him go," Hargis states. "Just work him around the pen a little more, ask him to stop and approach again. He'll learn that running away doesn't do anything for him, and it's easier to do what you want."

Work continues in both directions until the horse is relaxed, responsive to cues, and when asked to stop faces Hargis and accepts the halter. Of course a onetime lesson isn't enough, and repetition over time reinforces the correct learned behavior. Hargis also recommends that an owner take time to work his or her horse at halter to gain and maintain control of its head, shoulders and hips.

"I want a horse to be really well-halter-broke and willing to yield its body and lead freely," he adds. "You can teach them to move laterally, to side-pass and to feel the pressure of your focus while on the ground. Then it all comes a little easier when you mount up."

Of course, allowing a horse with bad ground manners to walk all over you just reinforces bad behavior. Well-mannered horses lead willingly, but yield when the handler stops, showing respect for the handler and the handler's space. If a horse doesn't stop and maintain a desirable distance, Hargis recommends prodding the horse's neck or shoulder, with a thumb or finger, until it takes a step back. If the handler steps away, the horse should stand its ground unless asked to follow. If it doesn't, push the horse back into place and step away again.

"The horse will begin to understand that it must respect your space, and that you will let it know when you want it to come toward you — when you pull lightly on the lead rope," Hargis explains. "The horse learns to come to you on your terms."

Hargis says there is some truth to the old saying that lots of miles and wet saddle blankets make good saddle horses, but he believes the quality of time devoted to training is as important as the quantity.

"Horses put together patterns of behavior. As horsemen, we have to be better at it than they are. They always look for the easy way out, so we have to make what we want done easier than the alternatives. People tend to want quick fixes, but shortcuts don't work. It does take time," he explains. "But every time you are with your horse, you have the opportunity to teach it something new, or to reinforce something already learned."

► Groundwork lessons build up to the first ride. Hargis often demonstrates how a green colt can be saddled and ridden for the first time during a session spanning 2 hours or less. He emphasizes, however, that it's not about beating the clock. Hargis recommends a systematic approach to training to make sure the horse understands each lesson before moving to the next.

