

“Leading Off”

By Randy Witte

High school students looking toward a career in horse training and management have an opportunity to complete a two-year program in this field at Lamar Community College in southeastern Colorado.

That’s the lead sentence I used in an article on this program 23 years ago, when the program was in its infancy. It’s a simple, straight-forward statement, and it applies today just as it did in 1978 when I wrote about the program that year in the August issue of *Western Horseman*. I got a kick out of looking it up in the archives after revisiting the campus a couple of months ago.

The horse training and management major at Lamar was into its fifth year when I originally visited the campus, and it was already proving to be successful at placing graduating students into a variety of horse training or breeding operations. That success has continued through the years, and it’s always pleasing to find that some good things don’t change.

Freshman and sophomore students currently enrolled in the HTM course at Lamar are just as eager to learn as were their predecessors. After all, the world is all before them. They have plenty of horses to work with, and their teachers are a couple of the best to be found anywhere—the venerable Jack Rydberg and his son, J.J. Rydberg, who farm and ranch nearby, and still raise and train their own horses.

Jack has done it all as a breeder, trainer, horse show judge, and competitor through the years. And J.J. learned from him, becoming a top calf roper in college and pro rodeo, as well as horse



Three sophomores in the Horse Training and Management program—Abe Queen of Dillon, Mont., Levi Cloyd of Sedgwick, Colo., and James Malone of Dunlap, Iowa—with their instructors, Jack Rydberg and J.J. Rydberg.

show exhibitor and horse trainer. Together they are a source of knowledge and experience that provide graduating students with the tools they need to find jobs in the real horse world.

“It’s kind of a hard-core program,” said J.J. “These kids come here as freshman and they each get assigned a 2-year-old. And some of those 2-year-olds are barely halter-broke. We hand each student a colt and start breaking them.”

The horses are supplied by a handful of ranchers, some near, some from farther away. The 2-year-olds arrive in early September, and they return home by mid-November, after the students exhibit them in the

campus arena, to show the owners what has been accomplished with their colts up to that point. “After Thanksgiving, we get in weaner colts,” J.J. continued. “We halter-break them, get them gentle to where we can pick up their feet and so forth, and then the students show them in a showmanship pattern. That’s at the end of a two-week period, and those colts return home and



J.J. Rydberg addresses the combined freshman and sophomore classes at the Lamar Community College Horse Training and Management course.

we have Christmas break. When the freshman return, they each get two colts to break. We have another horse show that spring, and again invite the owners to see what has been accomplished.”

Sophomores, meanwhile, have been working on advanced training with horses who are a year older. They take colts, including some who were green-broke at school the previous year, and they go into reining or start cutting or roping with them. After winter break the sophomores go into their internships with various trainers or breeders around the country. Jack pointed out that the school has enjoyed a good reputation with a lot of top trainers for many years.

“We try to find an internship according to each student’s interest,” Jack said. “If a person wants to go to a breeding farm or race track or get into cutting, reining, roping, whatever, we try to place each of them according to their interests.”

“That’s their avenue into business,” J.J. added. “Each intern will get four months of work, and learn ‘a ton.’ Maybe a particular intern will end up with a full-time job with that trainer, or maybe that trainer has a friend who needs some help. If they’re good hands, there is a place for them every day.”

J.J. said there are offshoots of the training program for those mostly interested in breeding farm or stable management. And Jack added that others don’t want careers as “colt breakers,” but want to be trainers who are capable of advanced training, and the HTM program provides the basics for that line of work.



Student Billy Barnes of Duke, Okla., works a 2-year-old in the round pen. The filly comes from the Haythorn Ranches of Arthur, Nebraska.



J.J. Rydberg answers a question posed by Erin Johnson of Cortez, Colo., a sophomore who was scheduled for an internship with Teddy Robinson, winner of the 1999 World's Greatest Horseman title and the five-time winner of the National Reined Cow Horse Association's Snaffle Bit Futurity.

Prospective students are required to participate in “riding interviews,” which are conducted each March. “We require basic riding skills,” Jack said, “because a youngster who can’t ride a gentle horse has no business getting in on colt breaking.” He added that they are also in the process of providing a basic horsemanship class for students who do not ride well or want to pursue a nonriding job in the horse industry.

In addition to the hands-on horse instruction, students have a regular school curriculum that includes horse production, anatomy and physiology of a horse, breeding practices, plus electives in English, math, speech, computer science, and history. They wind up with an associate in applied science degree.

“The Horse Training and Management program is a signature program for Lamar Community College,” said Lauren Grasmick, vice president for instruction. She reiterated that a high percentage of grads are placed with employers, and said students may also choose to transfer some courses to four-year institutions.

“The college is very proud of this program’s long history and the excellent students who have graduated over the years,” she added.

For more information: Horse Training and Management, Lamar Community College, 2401 S. Main St., Lamar, CO 81052.