

Building a Winning Team
Veteran horseman looks for quality
By Clifford Mitchell

Horses hold a special place in the development of this great land. These four-legged critters have been called on to perform many tasks. Whether it was breaking ground for next year's crop, hauling the family to town or driving beehives to the market, horses performed the jobs they were called upon to do.

Today, horses play an important role in the entertainment department for a lot of enthusiasts. The equine-athlete is highly fit and trained to perform in the show ring in many different disciplines. One of the fastest growing equine sports is reining. Due to its worldwide popularity, reining will more than likely be an Olympic event in the future.

This performance show pits a skilled rider on a special athlete against a pattern designed to be challenging yet match the skill level of both horse and rider. Near the town of Mulhall, Oklahoma, third generation horseman Jody Brainard concentrates on quality horses and good people at Big Lake Ranch. The veteran horseman traveled to his first National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) Futurity in 1976 and won the Derby in 1983. He is also the Vice Chairman of the NRHA's Judges Committee.

"The reason reining is so popular is it is exciting for both the crowd and the exhibitor," Brainard says. "The playing field is leveled through the judging system and through the different divisions from professional to non-pro. It is worldwide and because it's so exciting we have been able to attract more sponsors, allowing for continued growth."

The American Quarter Horse is known for its versatility. By selecting top genetics, horse breeders have been able to fine-tune the athlete and match them to specific disciplines for competition. Improvement has been seen in both trainability and athletic ability.

"Without question we have a lot better horses today than we did 30 years ago," Brainard says. "There are still some great all-around horses, but breeders have taken individuals and found their niche. The horses are specifically bred to do a chore."

Much like the horses have found specific disciplines to compete in, Brainard has found a niche with the non-pro/amateur riders. He is part horse trainer and part coach, with a goal to make it fun.

"We have a lot of fun and we like to win, but winning is not everything. It is supposed to be fun. I tell my clients to show against the pattern and make a clean run, after that it will all fall into place," Brainard says. "The most important job I have is to match a horse with a rider's skill level. Sometimes I have to use an older more experienced horse as a teaching aid."

Finding the next prospect is a challenge in any business. Look at minor league baseball and count the number of prospects who actually become that big league star. It is the same in the show horse business. There are high hopes for a lot of youngsters; however, few end up competing at a high level.

"There are several ways to get that next prospect. You can raise them or go buy the next one," Brainard says. "You can hedge your bet and breed a great stallion to a great mare, but that doesn't always work. Because the horse business has gotten so

expensive, I like to buy a two-year-old that has had six months of training. At this point you are a lot closer to knowing what the end-product will be.”

The selection process starts long before swinging a leg over one. Genetics play a role, but reining asks so much of the horse, many factors will make up the selection criteria.

“Conformation is the first thing I look at, and people like to drive pretty cars so I look to see if it is an attractive horse. The horse has to be a nice mover, especially for some of my riders, a smooth-gaited horse makes a big difference,” Brainard says. “They have to be able to stop. I can enhance it, but I can’t teach them to do it. They have to look forward to stopping. I want that real quick, intelligent, sure-footed athlete.”

While all these factors play a key role in the selection process, much like a coach evaluates a quarterback, Brainard looks for those intangibles that can be the difference in a big check or going home empty-handed. These often invisible qualities have to be gauged by an experienced hand.

“I look for the overachievers. I want a horse with a great brain and a great heart. Those are special individuals. I may never win the big one, but I get a check every time I show,” Brainard says. “Sometimes the really great ones have too much natural ability and are too smart, which makes them hard to train. Those really intelligent ones are always trying to out think you instead of doing what you ask. That great one may win the big prize one time out of five, but you always want that overachiever on your team.”

Once a prospect is purchased, usually during its two-year-old year, Brainard will train and show that horse until it is a four-year-old before turning it over to his client full time. These horses will compete at the amateur level throughout the rest of their careers.

“Some of these horses will stay at my barn and some go home with the clients. By June of his four-year-old year, he is fully trained to do his job. His regiment becomes more of a conditioning program,” Brainard says. “We take the fully trained horses on trail rides, do pasture work or even work cattle. Something to keep them stimulated, because reining is a stress heavy competition for the horse. Thirty days before a competition we’ll get him ready to show.”

Before that prospect reaches the show pen, there are many obstacles it must overcome. None more stringent than the watchful eye of the veteran horseman, whose years of experience have brought to light specific qualities that will make successful clients and good reiners.

“I’ll show that horse at the Futurity and the Derby, but I have to have an eye on what the horse’s career is going to be. I am going to be pairing him with a less experienced rider, so that horse has to be forgiving and make up for the rider’s weaknesses,” Brainard says. “There are many decision-making times for a young horse. The most important time is probably six months into his two-year-old year. At that point in time, you will have a good idea if they can handle the stress of reining mentally or if they need to go find a new job because they can’t function at that level. I am trying to look into the future and ask each horse what they are capable of doing then decide if they are worth training.”

This is also a very delicate time in the development of a young horse. The skilled hands of a true veteran will do their best to get what they ask for from the youngster; however, they must be careful not to push too far.

“I always have to keep in my mind the plan for each horse. I have had some very talented three-year olds that maybe weren’t ready for the Futurity, but came back and were ready for the Derby,” Brainard says. “I have to be very careful and show him at the level he’s going to allow me to show. Three or four months makes a big difference in maturity.”

Personal attention to details is something Brainard takes very close to heart. The size of his operation allows for him to give undivided attention at these critical points of development.

“It is very important to me to keep numbers down and quality up. I want a low maintenance practical operation,” Brainard says. “That one-on-one time is very important. The employees I have are here to gain experience. I keep about eight horses in training. It is hard to do quality work when you have more than eight. Being practical is the key to success.”

A good work environment and a support group of key personnel are critical to the success of any business. Operating a practical low maintenance operation still consists of the right tools to make that quality horse.

“Facilities are very important. You have to have good footing, a good farrier and veterinarian. It is so competitive you have to have these things or you’ll get beat,” Brainard says. “It doesn’t mean a young horse trainer has to go buy a place with this, but you must at least board at a place where you’ll have access to an indoor pen where you can stay dry while you are schooling your colts.”

The well kept fence and the care taken with the landscaping gives Big Lake Ranch a truly rustic look, but it’s the pasture layout, the practical locations of the riding areas and neatness of the barn that give off an heir of an accomplished horseman.

“When you have success you get good clients and you can buy better horses. I want our place too look like there can be a \$50,000 horse standing in the barn, but not be intimidating to someone who isn’t at that level,” Brainard says. “I have to keep it clean and well maintained. That is very important to me.”

For Brainard, the competitive fires still burn, but may have been refocused with time. The joy of watching his clients achieve success is something he said with a smile, but quickly reverted to his love of the sport.

“One of the reasons I relocated to Oklahoma is we’re 45 minutes from the two biggest reining shows. I still enjoy showing a lot, but winning is not as important as it used to be,” Brainard says. “I have clients that like to have fun and show. We’ll go to six or eight shows every year. I have been lucky. I won the big shows and my clients win. Now, I think it’s more fun to watch my clients win.”

It takes more than horse sense for trainers to thrive in today’s business environment. The expense involved is greater than ever with inflated fuel prices and the costs of the superior athlete to compete at a high level. Client relationships are at the heart of Brainard’s business.

“In my business, integrity is critical to building long term relationships with my clients. I have a lot of long-term clients and those are the people I like to deal with,” Brainard says. “The key to making my business work is I have to be a people manager and then make sound, honest decisions at the critical times. Horse trainers are very optimistic, with good horses, but we have to make some really tough decisions.”

These highly-skilled equine athletes will continue to improve and the sport will continue to grow as long as it's under the watchful eyes of veterans like Brainard. There is always a place for good horses and a fair deal.

"I enjoy being a horse trainer. It's easy to go to work everyday when it's something you love to do. You're going to starve to death a little while, but if you want it bad enough you find a way to get through it," Brainard says. "I want to be known for integrity and fairness. Anyone who drives through my gate is going to get equal consideration and an honest opinion."