

G R E A T H O R S E M A N S H I P





REWARDING RUNDOWNS

A GOOD STOP
DEPENDS A LOT
ON HOW YOU
GET THERE.
HERE'S JORDAN
LARSON'S PLAN.

BY WENDY LIND,
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JOHN BRASSEAU

IN THE SPORT OF REINING, THE SLIDING STOP HAS LONG been the hallmark of the industry. It's a beautiful thing when a horse lays down a long set of slide tracks with hind legs locked and front legs peddling. However, as Texas trainer Jordan Larson will tell you, riders often focus so much on the stop that they lose focus on something just as important—the rundown.

“It's easy to forget that the rundown plays 85 percent into the actual stop itself,” he explains. “A lot of stopping problems occur because a rider gets so concerned about how his horse stops that he stops over and over while the rundown gets worse and worse. Eventually, the stop deteriorates. Then, the rider gets frustrated and can't figure out what went wrong.”

Larson, an NRHA Professional with multiple NRHA world championships and major wins to his credit, constantly refines his rundown program. Follow along as we go through it.

The Perfect Setup

While the rundown is not a separate judged maneuver, it plays a large part in the maneuver evaluation of each stop. It also sets up the stop, largely determining the end result. If the rundown is crooked, inconsistent, or resistant, the stop will likely mirror those glitches. When asked what the ideal rundown is, Jordan outlined it in simple terms.

Larson builds speed and runs his horse straight all the way to the stop.



One of the hardest things to teach a horse is to accelerate into the bridle and still stay soft in the face.

“The most important thing is to have your horse running straight and building speed at a controlled rate. You want him free, but waiting on you,” he says. “I tell my customers that it’s like starting your car at 10 miles an hour. Then, build speed gradually, and build all the way to the stop.”

The trainer went on to explain that building speed keeps a horse’s shoulders up, thereby preventing him from hitting on his front end in the stop. He also said that the ideal rundown involves a good measure of trust.

“I know in the past I didn’t let my horses run in the rundown because I was afraid they weren’t going to stop. But I found out that the more faith you have in your horse, the better he’s going to stop. If you can send your horse down and believe in him stopping, your odds are a whole lot better than going down there tentatively.”

Building a Base

When it comes to his two-year-olds, Jordan doesn’t work on stopping them so much as he does getting them comfortable running into the bridle.

“One of the hardest things to do in terms of stopping is getting a horse to accelerate into the bridle while still staying soft in the face. That’s probably one of the most crucial elements to getting a horse to stop correctly,” he notes. “I start from the get-go on my two-year-olds. When we go around the arena in long straight lines with oval ends, I ask a young horse for his face by pushing him into the bridle. When he’s comfortable with that, then he’s ready to work on stopping.”

While it can be tempting to stop a young, naturally big stopping horse, Jordan warns this only results in short-term gains.

“I’ve had horses at early stages that I could just run down and stop them, and they could do it. However, you’ll see those horses deteriorate over time because the control wasn’t there before you went to running and stopping them at higher speeds,” he says. A better way, he explained, is to first focus on getting a horse broke in the rundown, then asking for the stop. It goes back to concentrating on a correct rundown, rather than just the stop.

“With a properly broke horse you have total control over his face and body. You basically have a gas pedal to go fast or slow. You can eventually turn that control back over to the horse, but first you have to be able to control his body.”

When it comes to fencing, Larson doesn’t start running his two-year-olds fence-to-fence until late in the year. He cited the various problems fencing can create such as hollowing out (in the back), anticipating, and spurting right before the fence.

“You can prevent and alleviate a lot of those problems if you go around the whole arena more when you’re working on the stop. The only reason I teach my horses to fence is to get them used to running to the fence, because usually that’s the only way you can practice stopping at shows.”

Another important aspect of Jordan’s program is his select use of the “big W.”

“I probably say ‘Whoa’ to my two-year-olds maybe once a day, and around three times a day on my three-year-olds. I



Larson expects the horse to find the middle of his body, between his legs and the reins. When the horse leans with his head and neck or rib cage, Jordan drives that part with his rein or leg.

look for a horse to honor my hand and run up there and get correct before I run and stop him. It makes that horse want to stop. When he hears ‘Whoa’ he’s like, ‘Yeaaaah.’”

Freedom to Make Mistakes

As his young horses get further into training, Jordan starts challenging them.

“When they turn three, I give them more of a chance to make mistakes. But I don’t get angry at them if they do. I want them to find their boundaries.”

In terms of the rundown, boundaries include speed and straightness.

“Don’t get upset when your horse makes mistakes,” says Larson. “A repeated mistake is not great, but it’s better that the horse makes mistakes at home because that allows you the opportunity to fix them before you go to a show.”

Freedom to make mistakes also opens up additional opportunities.

“I encourage the people who work for me to give their horses more freedom so they can find their own style,” said Larson. “If you constantly try to make everything ‘cookie-cutter,’ the way you think it should be, then your horse won’t develop his own style. Allowing a horse to find himself is what will help make that horse the best he can be.”

Speed Control

When schooling his horses at home, Larson mixes up running fence-to-fence, and more often, up the sides and around the end. Regardless of which method he uses, he makes a point to lope off and start building the next stride.

“That teaches that horse that we’re going to build speed all the way down to the stop. Typically, a horse that takes off in the rundown is one that started too slow or got too slow around the ends, and then took off. Usually a horse that’s running free and building doesn’t take off.”

And while we often hear the importance of keeping speed under control in the rundown, it’s just as important to get comfortable with higher rates of speed.

“You have to ask your horse to run at home because that’s



For a horse who won’t rate speed, Larson pulls him into the ground smoothly, not with a jerk, which promotes a stop-and-go action.

Running a horse freely and openly, Larson has learned to trust a horse to stop.



when he's going to make mistakes. At faster speeds, he might not stay straight, or he might take off. Or he might not run. But if you never ask him to run hard, the horse isn't going to be comfortable, and you're not going to be comfortable."

If Jordan has a horse that wants to take flight in the rundown, he keeps his hands slow and his responses low key.

"Remember that it's not a big deal," he notes. "I pick up my hand, and rate him back to the speed I want. If he doesn't allow me to, then I pull him into the ground. I don't jerk a horse into the ground for taking off because that will promote a stop-and-go action that you don't want either."

Don't Lean On Me

If a horse leans in the rundown, the first thing Larson does is figure out what part of the horse is leaning. He wants a horse to stay between the reins and his feet. So he gives him those two perimeters, keeping his reins right next to his neck, and his feet close to the horse's sides.

"I give the horse a place to run through, and I want him to find the center of me," Jordan notes. "If he does lean, I drive him away from whatever he's leaning on, and I don't worry about leads. I drive him with the part of my body that he's leaning on. If he's leaning behind my legs, I use my legs to fix it. If he is leaning in front, I use my reins to fix it."

The goal is to ride your horse at home like you would at the show. So by using these fixes, you'll be able to ride your horse through similar situations in the show pen.

"If you're in the show pen, and your horse leans toward the rail, add outside leg pressure or your outside rein, and he should move away from it and get back to center. Don't try to school your horse at home in a way that you can't use in a show pen. He leans, you redirect. You don't want to redirect in the show pen, and then have him overreact because he just got in trouble for doing the same thing he did the night before."

Riders often get into the habit of holding their horses up at home and not letting them make a mistake. In Jordan's experience, this problem only magnifies in the show pen.

"Don't baby your horse in the rundown. Let him make mistakes so he knows where to be on his own," he points out.

Show Time

At shows, a lot can go on to dislodge all the hard work you've done at home. This is especially true during crowded fencing sessions. It takes only a couple of shaky rundowns and a missed stop to send a rider's confidence into a nosedive.

The key, Jordan explains, is to focus on preparing your horse to show. That includes considering mistakes as opportunities to fix problems.

“Remember what you’re going in there to accomplish before your class. In schooling before a class, I prepare my horse for what he needs to do in the show pen—not trying to show him off,” Larson explains. “The rundown is the preparation for the stop. So your horse has to be running free, straight, and soft. Controlled with enough stop on the brain that he’s going to stop, but also free enough that he’s going to run all the way down there to the fence.”

When it comes to rundowns, another component is smart showing. If you make a habit out of showing your horse smartly, he’ll last longer and his approaches to the stops will stay cleaner.

“I watched a horse show not long ago, and probably 70 percent of the non pros made the same mistake. They’d come around the corner, the horse would take off, and then short them before the stop,” says Larson. To avoid this problem, he has a game plan for getting to his stops in the show pen.

“Every time I show a horse, I try to run as long as possible to my stops within the perimeters of the pattern, so the horse doesn’t get in a cheating frame of mind. That really helps the horse’s longevity. If you stop right after the cone instead, your horse will develop bad habits twice as fast.

When it’s all said and done, Jordan says that a big stop is either in a horse or not. However, the rundown can make the most out of any horse’s natural ability.

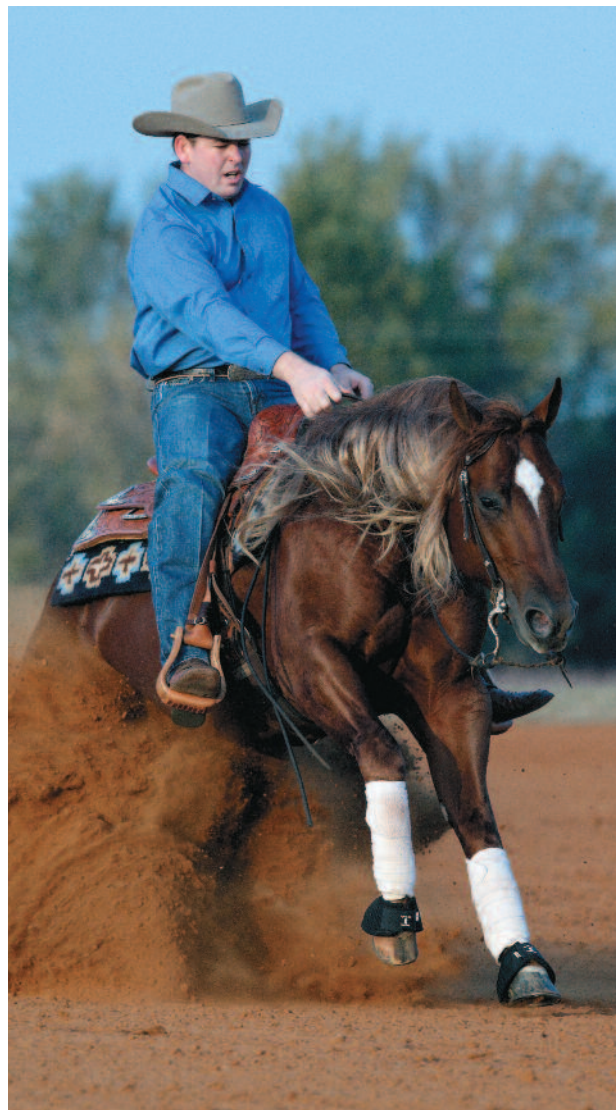
“If you prepare your horse to run down balanced and correct, he then has the greatest opportunity to make a big move to the ground.” ♦

ABOUT THE WRITER:

A licensed architect and NRHA Judge, Wendy Lind lives in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, with her husband Kevin and son Noah. She shows in NRHA events as a non pro competitor, earning multiple NRHA bronzes. She’s also been a finalist at the NRHA Derby and won 10 world and reserve world championship titles in American Paint Horse competition.

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A good, square stop is the result of momentum and straightness in the rundown.



Jordan Larson

Jordan Larson owns and operates Larson Performance Horses out of Whitesboro, Texas. With over \$252,000 in earnings to his credit, Larson won the 2001 NRHA Limited Open World Championship and Intermediate Open Reserve World Championship on Amber And Oak. Last year, he piloted Wind Her Up Chic to a seventh place finish in the NRHA Open Futurity finals. In 2007, he guided Memorable Affair to a fifth place finish at the National Reining Breeders Classic, while also winning the open mare incentive. At the 2007 Sandhills Slide in Nebraska, Larson won the open futurity on The Gunsmith, a horse he also rode to the All American Quarter Horse Congress Open Futurity finals. Jordan, an NRHA judge, and his wife Taylor, also an NRHA Professional, have a four-year-old daughter named Hannah.

Left: Larson with Southern Comfort.