

How to get big bucks for your ranch horse

PERFORMANCE HORSE

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Round Up Your Reining Score

Jordon Larson shares his secret
to perfect show pen circles

Crossing the Line

Choosing the right sire
can increase a foal's
performance options

Gallo del Cielo

"Rooster" has
more than a
little something
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Fear of Cattle: A Good Thing?

Why a horse's wariness can be advantageous



A full-page photograph of a cowboy riding a brown horse in a dirt arena. The cowboy is wearing a tan cowboy hat, a white long-sleeved shirt with a red 'C' logo, and blue jeans. The horse is dark brown with a white blaze on its face and white wraps on its lower legs. The background shows a blurred barn building with a red roof and a person sitting on a bench.

The Runaround

Forward propulsion coupled with mental conditioning puts Jordan Larson's circles on track.

Article and photos by Annie Lambert

As long as a horse is moving forward, Larson says he can direct it into a perfect circle.

Training futurity prospects to execute winning maneuvers has taught Whitesboro, Texas, trainer Jordan Larson that loping perfect circles is as much a mental process as a physical one.

Rather than manhandling his horses into making a perfect circle, Larson actually lets his mounts go astray, repeatedly redirecting their path to the curves he has chosen. The end result, he says, is a horse that “hunts” a circle with little guidance in the show pen.

“When I show, I put my hand on their neck and they are thinking, ‘Where does he want me to go?’” says Larson, “instead of, ‘I’m going over here.’”

Larson points out that it all boils down to a horse’s guidance system. A horse that learns to stay between the reins while circling will automatically perform better stops, turnarounds and rollbacks, as well.

“I’m probably passionate about circles because I see so many people get stopped and turned around only to drag a lead, fall out of lead or break gait in their circles,” Larson says. “It is so hard to gain credit, and then those circles seem to be where credit is lost the quickest.”

Guiding the Mind

Sitting on a showy 2-year-old stallion, Larson defines his mount as an individual with a willing mind. He is a colt with the ability to focus on his job while maintaining a strong work ethic.

“He wants to be there, and he’s going to let me teach him what I want him to do,” Larson says of the sorrel. “He has the desire to be a good horse. If you don’t have a good horse, you might as well get a new one.”

The stallion is always a little fresh and routinely plays as he is being warmed up. Larson knows the colt well and allows him to have his fun because the trainer knows that when the playfulness runs its course, the horse will focus back on his rider.

“When he came out, he was squirreling around, swinging his head around, and I just encouraged him to go forward,” says Larson. “All of a sudden, he locked his head down, and I knew he was hooked. He’s been through the drill enough times to know I’m going to lope him until he puts his neck down and asks me where I want to go.”

When training, Larson encourages a horse to choose the directions it prefers to travel, then redirects it to the latitudes and longitudes on his route. It is a repetitive process that involves a simple change of course for the horse.

Importantly, Larson never scolds a horse at this point. He simply asks for a correction with as little pressure as possible. It isn’t until a horse progresses and has a better understanding of Larson’s expectations that the trainer anticipates a quick response. Once the horse reacts in a positive way, the trainer immediately rewards by releasing any coercive pressures.

“I’m trying to get that horse mentally focused on the same thing I am,” Larson explains.

“If you don’t have a good horse, you might as well get a new one.”

– Jordan Larson

“If a horse wants to leave a circle, I allow him to leave the circle and then I direct him back to where I want to be. The key is to let him commit to leaving the circle before I put him back. I ask as lightly as possible, but I don’t give up until after I get the response I’m after.”

Larson points out that he cannot direct movement until he gets movement. So long as the horse is moving forward, Larson is able to steer it back into the correct pattern. Sometimes an overcorrection is even warranted.

“When I’m running fast circles, I’m kicking and I’m not holding horses on that circle,” Larson says. “If a horse leaves on a 45 degree angle to the left as I’m running to the right, I let him go all the way over there, and then I’ll direct 180 degrees back the other direction.

“It does two things. It gets the horse hunting the middle of the circle and it gets your guiding better. It is like a little kid riding a bike all over the place. I peddle the bike and I let them choose the direction, then I say, ‘This is where I want to go.’ The horse starts looking to the rider for direction.”

Larson acknowledges that some horses try to be overachievers and begin to fade too far

into the middle of a circle. In that case, the trainer simply directs them back toward the outside and his chosen path yet again.

Now, the horse is learning that the safest place to be is right between Larson’s reins.

“It all comes from teaching their brain, not their body,” Larson says. “Whether I’m going in a straight line, a circle, doing a turnaround or a rollback, they are staying between those reins.

“I pull on my horses and push their bodies around just as much as everybody else. But the first thing I do is teach them to stay between those reins, and then I direct the body where I want it to go.”

Larson begins each training session by rein-

forcing his guidance system. Whether he goes in circles, straight lines or on diagonals, he wants a horse to stay between the reins. He will never skip ahead to work on any other maneuvers until the horse is in a proper mind set.

“I lope in circles until the horse stays between the reins,” Larson says. “It connects that horse with me. Once I have him thinking, I can train on him. If you get a horse thinking about its job, you can pretty much channel it wherever you want.”

Straighten Up

Larson explains that horses will drop in, duck out or all of the above when loping circles. A horse that leans while headed in a right circle will tend to lean to the left across the middle and to the right at the top of the circle, he says.

Jordan contends that, when a horse leans, some riders pull the inside rein across the neck putting the horse into a bind. Not a good correction, according to Larson.

“An inside rein crossing the horse’s neck pushes the shoulder out into an uncomfortable position,” says Larson. “If I was to stand

this horse up, to correct him from leaning in, I'd pick the inside rein straight up and lift that shoulder straight up underneath me, instead of crossing the rein over the neck."

Larson circles his horse at the walk, trot or lope. He first kicks the horse forward to have motion. With his hand(s) on the neck, he gives the horse the option of choosing a direction and lets him commit to the direction. He then redirects the horse to his flight plan and moves him forward again.

"The horse is thinking, 'Where in the heck does this guy want me to go?'" Jordan says. "I can change directions just like I would in a figure-eight. You can advance this drill from two hands to one hand as you go. But you have to have the impulsion coming from the leg first, before you can direct him."

Larson clarifies that he doesn't have any problem with bending a horse. He doesn't, however, cross the inside rein over the neck as he bends them.

"All it does is cause them to get out of position," Larson comments. "It is like a rubber band effect; you pull it out and when you drop it they put it back in. If you pick your hand straight up and collect that horse right straight you can get the same response and get it a lot better."

Comfort Zones

Listening to the rider and not free-ranging around their own space gives a horse confidence. As the horse begins trusting the rider to point out his destination, it gains confidence in the job at hand. This is especially true with mares, says Jordan, whose program has focused in part on developing the gentler sex.

"When a mare feels trapped, she won't show for you," Larson says. "When a good mare is confident in her job, and she knows what she's supposed to do, she'll show well."

Larson also believes that a "hard-to-show horse" will perform a lot better if they don't feel forced. He finds it nearly impossible to make a horse stay where they'd rather not be in the show ring.

"You can do all you want to do outside the show pen," Larson says, "but if you ride more like you're showing all the time [at home] and ask more like you would if you were showing, it creates the same scenario."

The 2-year-old Larson is riding as an example circles completely differently to the right than he does traveling left. The trainer finds the colt's comfort zone in each direction by trying to meet him on middle ground.

Larson believes in using a guidance system of freedom followed by control when training futurity prospects.



"If a horse is really confident, it will make a great horse even better" – Jordan Larson

"Going left, he holds his shoulder in more than he does to the right," Jordan explains. "To the left side, I attempt to get him straight without making him uncomfortable and un-

able to do his job the way that he would naturally. Horses don't run across the pasture, take a right turn and hold their right shoulder up, look right and cock their hock



Crossing the rein over the neck puts the horse into an uncomfortable bind.



Picking straight up on the rein lifts the shoulder up and under the rider, allowing the horse freer movement in the shoulders.

in. We want them to do that, but that's not their deal."

According to Larson, moving a horse out of its comfort zone can cause penalties. Penalties are incurred, he believes, when horses are not thinking about what they're doing.

"A horse that comes to the middle, slams into the small, slow and is not thinking about what their hocks and front feet are doing, is going to fall out of lead or will break gait," says Larson. "If you get horses thinking about their job they'll adjust. They don't want to fall out of lead, they don't want to break gait; it's not natural to them."

Speed Psychology

Controlling speed while you are circling is also a state of mind, says Larson. He often uses reverse psychology to get the desired results from his equine protégés. Rather than pulling on a horse and arguing with it to slow down, Larson relaxes his reins and encourages the horse to run that much faster.

"You need to evaluate a horse that wants to run off to determine the problem," Jordan says. "Most nice reining horses run off because they are either fresh, scared or they are headed a certain direction—meaning that they have chosen the direction they want to go.

"A lot of times, when they chose the direction, they'll lean. Once I correct that lean, a lot of times they'll quit running."

Larson makes it crystal clear to his horses that he is not afraid to let them make a mistake.

"I'm not going to get after them for making that mistake," Larson assures. "But if a horse is running wide open and they don't slow down, and they duck left and run the other way—and I give them that option—I'm going to stop them, put them back and go reinforce what I want and then go ask them to do it again."

A horse that is not blessed with natural rate

About Jordan Larson



Jordan Larson of Whitesboro, Texas, began riding reining horses as a pre-teen, but didn't show much early in his career. Living his first decade in California, Larson settled for a time in Colorado and then Wyoming, the state he likes to call home.

At ages 14 and 15, Larson rode with Ken Eppers during the summers. At the age of 17, he hired on at Doug Milholland's barn for a year. Milholland gave Larson the opportunity to show his first NRHA Futurity horse. Larson also spent a couple of years working for Darren Stancik.

"I went to work for Pete Kyle in the spring of 2000 for two years," Larson says. "It was a chance to ride a lot of different horses, and I ended up showing a nice mare during 2001, Amber N Oak. That mare took me along for the ride; she helped me out more than any other horse I'd had at that point. She was a turning point because people started wondering who I was a little bit."

Jordan won the NRHA Limited Open World title in 2001 and went on his own the following year. Within two years, the young trainer had lost his Mulligan as a limited open rider and had to deal with trying to find horses talented enough to make the open finals.

"This year is the first year I've had the stock that it took to get to the open Futurity finals," Larson says. "I've maybe had good horses before and just didn't know how to get them in the finals. Not that I'm any expert on that now, but I'm starting to understand what it takes to make the finals."

"I've had some really good guys that taught me," adds Larson. "I've ridden with Duane Latimer a bunch, and he has probably helped me as much as anybody. He's the reason I had the confidence to do well at the Futurity last fall. He told me to trust my horse when I wasn't happy with her. It gave me confidence, and the next day I was a 221 on her and was 223 in the finals." The 25-year-old trainer has lifetime earnings of nearly \$200,000.



Reverse psychology helps runaways gear down by encouraging them to go even faster and avoiding a tug-of-war pulling argument.

will be tough to win the big money on, according to Larson. He feels it takes away from other maneuvers when he spends so much time trying to define rate to a trainee. And often, he says, all the training reverts back to an out-of-control situation when he rides the horse into the show ring.

"If you can train that horse's brain—even if it is a hot horse—to listen to what you're asking him to do, instead of trying to force him, it is much more rewarding," says Larson. "I just don't think forcing a horse is going to work once you walk through that 'in' gate."

Patience is a virtue for anyone training a horse. Larson has taken his share of deep breaths to control the frustration that stems from training young reining horses. It might jeopardize his sanity if he didn't rely on a solid foundation to save him at a show.

At the National Reining Breeder's Classic three years ago, Jordan had a mare test his patience by trying to buck him off as he warmed her up. He kept driving her forward until it was his turn to run Pattern 5.

"I pushed my hand forward, and on the first

half of the circle she was running off," Jordan says with a laugh. "I just kept kicking and about half way around the circle she put her head down and did exactly what she was supposed to."

The reverse psychology referred that mare back to her early training. She was not scared; she was confident in her job and knew what she needed to do, according to her trainer. Having a relationship with the mare and not fighting her helped Larson salvage the run.

"I think it is really important that the horse has a good rapport with the rider, and can trust and understand what they are asking of them," says Larson. "Showing a futurity horse is different than showing a seasoned horse. The greener futurity mount can be on the verge of greatness and the verge of catastrophe in the same run. If a horse is really confident, it will make a great horse even better."

Around 'n' Around

"The circles, to me, are more mental training than anything," Larson says. "A lot of horses like to go back to the barn. If they like to go



Larson likes his horses thinking with him and staying between the reins.

back to the barn, I'm going to let them head that direction, then I'm going to say, 'Nope. I want you to go the other way.' ”

If a horse insists on traveling into a position that Larson doesn't want it to be in, he makes that site uncomfortable for the horse. He teaches the horse that where the rider wants him to be is the best spot in the arena—where it can do its job and find a reward.

“Training circling is the development of a horse's mind,” Larson says. “Some horses are tougher mentally than others. It is a matter of asking, 'How do you feel today?' 'Are you going to be aggressive today?' 'Are you going to run off?' Then, I let them know I'm going to be on them until they follow instructions, and then I reward them by putting them up and letting them relax.”

Larson has figured out that he might as well forget about trying to fine-tune a horse unless its mind is on track. By encouraging a horse to make movement and then redirecting it toward his way of thinking, Larson can build on his mental connection with that horse every day.

“I love walking in the show ring on a horse that I know is mentally hooked up,” Larson says. “That horse is going to be fun to show; he's thinking the same thing I'm thinking.” 