

History of Western Riding

(Reining, Cutting, Working Cowhorse, Western Pleasure, Halter)

Western Style Riding began its start on ranches as early as the late 1770's. Much of the equipment was influenced by the early Spanish vaqueros. A cowboy spent a lot of time horseback and needed to be comfortable, with functional equipment. Many of today's western styles of riding were born of necessity.

The western saddle is one example. The stirrup leathers (fenders) are longer so that the cowboy could fully extend his leg when riding all day long. The stirrups themselves are larger to support the foot better. The horn on a western saddle is used to tie cattle to when roping, (the practice of tying to the horse's tail didn't last long). The tree is very strong to withstand having cattle tied to the saddle horn.

The western practice of "neck reining" (guiding the horse with one hand) also comes from necessity. A cowboy trying to rope a cow so that it could be doctored or branded, needed to be able to guide his horse with one hand. This would free the other hand to rope with. A good cow horse quickly picked up the idea of moving away from rein pressure on its neck.

Over time contests between ranches become common. Many of the ranch hands would compete to see who was the best at riding bucking horses, roping cattle, etc..... these became Rodeos.

Other contests would see the horses competing. Almost all of today's western horse events started in this way.

Reining:

This event is a contest in which a horse and rider must perform a complex pattern of, both fast large circles and slow small ones. Dramatic sliding stops, the horse literally looks like he is sitting down. Roll backs, were the horse stops, and lopes back in the other direction over his tracks in one smooth movement. Spins, the horse turns around one hind foot. During a good reining run, the cues to the horse are invisible to the average spectator. The early reining contests had a thread tied between the bit and the reins. The object was to see whose horse could perform without breaking the thread.

Cutting:

In cutting the rider goes into a herd of cattle and moves one cow out. He then places the horse between the cow and the rest of the herd. Once the rider drops his hand to the saddle horn the horses job is to prevent the cow from returning back into the herd. During a good cutting contest the cow will try very hard to get back into the herd and the horse will mirror its every move. If the cow stands still, many cutting horses will get low to the ground and tremble waiting for the next move. The ranches of the West prized their cutting horses so much that only top hands were mounted on them.

Working Cowhorse

This event is exactly what it is called, it shows the versatility of a working western horse. There are three portions, reining, cutting, and fence work. A working cow horse has to perform a reining pattern, cut cows, and then show that it can control a cow both in the open and along a fence line. The horse has to move the cow along the fence and then turn it the opposite direction at speed. Then the horse has to take the cow to the center of the arena and circle around the cow both directions, showing control.

Western Pleasure:

Over time people wanted a way to show how well trained and comfortable to ride their horses were. The horse has to truly be a pleasure to ride. Pleasure horses move very slowly and smoothly. All on a loose rein, and very subtle cues from the rider. A horse that enjoys pleasure riding will shine in the show ring. They are giving themselves to the rider 100%, there is no sign of resistance. There are many variations of western pleasure, like western riding, and trail. They all show how well trained and pleasurable a horse is.

Halter:

Everyone wants a pretty horse. Halter competitions probably started about the time many of the horse associations were formed. Halter horses are supposed to represent the breed standard. Conformation is the thing here. "How close does this horse come to the perfect specimen for this particular breed?" Many horses that compete in other events also do well in halter, although some are just halter horses. There are many hours of preparation that go into a properly turned out halter horse.

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