

CHANGING IT UP!

with Taylor Miniath-Hildreth

I started “training” barrel horses a little bit in high school, although I don’t know if that’s what I would really call it. I would take a ranch or rope horse and get them to run barrels; I knew the basics but never had a clue how much went into truly training a barrel horse. My last semester of high school I was able to go ride with Joyce Loomis-Kerneck for about a month; this is where I learned how much time, dedication, and finesse it took to actually train a barrel horse. From there I went on to college where I began buying cheaper horses and turning them into all around horses. I roped on them, ranched on them and got them seasoned as barrel horses and then would sell them. After college I decided I wanted to try my hand with futurity horses, I got humbled. I had a couple pretty nice colts but I wasn’t winning much, and for whatever reason I decided to keep trying.

I definitely cannot say I have training futurity horses down to an art, but I have figured out a few things that have helped me through the process. When it all boils down, what I think has helped my horses the most and made them the

most usable and versatile is changing things up and not necessarily always resorting back to the pattern to fix a problem. I rope on almost all of my horses, and I really think this is what keeps them enjoying their jobs. My favorite tool that I use on my barrel horses is the roping sled. I have found that more often than not, horses make similar mistakes and have consistent bad habits on and off the pattern. If you can address these issues away from the barrels, it creates less stress and nervousness.

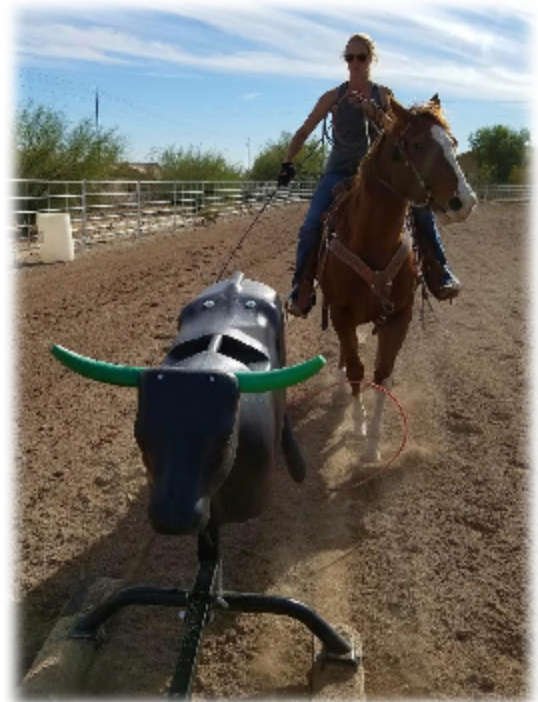
Since dabbling in training futurity horses I have noticed that most of them seem to get a little scattered when they hit another gear. You start to lose control of their bodies at higher speeds and they will try to make the turns in proper position. I really like to reinforce rating off my body so when this happens I don’t have to rely all on my hands. Reinforcing rate on the pattern is always a good thing, but sometimes I feel it gets redundant, so I use the roping sled for this quite often.

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I will track the machine in a pretty big circle, keeping them at a correct distance and in position. I usually start at a trot, making sure I stay as relaxed in my seat as I can and with light pressure on the reins. If they begin to get too strong or close to the machine I let them just bump it with their legs. More often than not they learn to back off on their own; horses are smarter than we give them credit for and I think that a lot of times letting them figure things out on their own gets you further than making them. Once they back off and get in position I will throw and sit down and ask them to stop and back up. After a few times of this they realize that when I throw, they need to stop. This is also teaching them that when I sit down they need to stop. I will continue at a trot and work up to a lope when they are ready, making sure that they keep forward motion as well and don't stop short or stop on their front ends.



Another way I use the sled to incorporate rate and softness is by tracking outside of the sled, as you would if you were running down the pen to heel a steer. While tracking it I make sure again to have relaxed reins and keep their ribcage soft with my feet. I will ask my driver to stop at a random spot, before I throw. The goal is to get the horse paying attention to the machine and watching it and ready for it to go left so they can get into the position to throw. If they keep going when the machine stops,

I stop them and back them up until their shoulders are even with the hip of the steer. By having the driver stop when the horse isn't expecting it keeps them honest and soft. They tend to start anticipating the corner or getting impatient and that's when they get strong and will drop their shoulders. Keeping them on their toes and in your hands brings you back into control of their shoulders and speed.

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Not only does roping help with rate, I really love how I can reiterate body control and correctness. Whenever I track the machine I make sure my horse is soft in its face, shoulders and rib cage. If I'm in position to throw and they feel like they are too straight in their ribs or pushing their shoulder in and losing their hips, I use my legs to bend their rib cage and push them up and forward to create fluency in their stride. This is really similar to what I do on the pattern as well. I don't ask for a ton of bend or collection from their faces, but I want them soft and slightly bent, driving evenly with their front and back legs and with a slight arc to their bodies. I believe that when they are in this position it is easy for them to stop, pick up their shoulders, or sit and turn when they need to.

In addition to the drills mentioned above just heading and heeling the machine in general is great for any horse. Most horses are *cowy* by nature and it is almost a game to them that they enjoy. You don't have to be a great roper to use the sled as a tool; in fact, you really don't have to even throw a rope if you don't want to. Just getting them to free their minds up and focus on something other than the barrels is a great way to train. I find that after a session on the sled they are usually a lot quieter and softer the next time I work them on the pattern. By their futurity year I shoot to be roping out of the boxes on them; this I think helps them learn how to handle pressure in a way other than hauling to a jackpot.

Taylor Hildreth