

# Two Centuries of Training: A History of the Working Ranch Horse

The cowboy heritage lies at the root of the equine industry's fastest-growing sports

By NWHHS

**A** WORKING RANCH HORSE must be fast on its feet, aware of its surroundings, attuned to its rider, and able to judge on its own how best to complete the task at hand. Long years of breeding and centuries of training have gone into creating a horse that anticipates what a cow is about to do and can turn that action into what the human in charge wants for the cow.

## THE OLD WEST

Much of the training and discipline used in working ranch horses is rooted in the tradition of the vaqueros (Spanish cowboys) of the 1600s, and the Native American ranch hands who made up much of the labor on ranches of the Old West. As cattle ranching boomed in the 1800s, these cowboys trained their horses stop, spin, cut, herd, and work with little guidance from their human counterparts, who were often too busy with roping or other tasks to give the horse explicit direction.

## Devices of gears and steel can never substitute for the skill, intelligence, and companionship of a well-trained working horse.

Working ranch horses weren't just trained—they were bred. By crossing the Spanish Conquistador's horses with other breeds, the American Quarter Horse was developed to have the low knees and hocks associated with the ability to execute fast stops and turns. Not all ranch or working sport horses are Quarter Horses, however, and such diverse breeds as Lusitanos and Arabians have been known to perform ranch duties.

With the development of mechanical farm equipment in the early 1900s, the need for working horses dwindled. Still, most ranchers agree that devices of gears and steel can never substitute for the skill, intelligence, and companionship of a well-trained working horse.

## MODERN DAY

Today, reining, cutting, and cow horse competitions are some of the fastest-growing sports in the equine world. Each discipline focuses on a different aspect of the working horse's life, taking it out of the workday fields and into the competitive arena.

Reining covers the finer points of control, discipline, and the communication between horse and rider; cutting emphasizes the horse's ability to think on its feet and carry out a task with little direction from the rider; and cow horses demonstrate versatility by performing tasks (including cutting) that mirror the work done on a ranch.

The sports themselves aren't exactly new. In 1898, The Cowboy Reunion in Haskell, Texas, awarded the first monetary prize for cutting as a sport. The first official event of the National Cutting Horse Association occurred in Dublin, Texas in 1946, and in 1998, reining became the first Western discipline and the sixth overall discipline of the U.S. Equestrian Team.

For those who are interested in trying on the lifestyle of a working cowboy, many guest ranches offer the full ranching experience to intermediate and advanced riders, and a milder taste for beginners.

## For more information:

- [www.quickbrochures.com/DudeRanches.htm](http://www.quickbrochures.com/DudeRanches.htm) offers an online directory of guest/dude ranches, sorted by state
- [www.ranchweb.com](http://www.ranchweb.com) offers easy search tools for working and other ranch vacations, including several international ranches
- [www.bcadventure.com/adventure/guestranch/index.html](http://www.bcadventure.com/adventure/guestranch/index.html) links to a variety of working guest ranches in British Columbia, Canada

## For more on the sports that have grown out of the heritage of working ranches:

- National Reining Horse Association ([www.NRHA.com](http://www.NRHA.com))
- National Reined Cow Horse Association ([www.NRCHA.com](http://www.NRCHA.com))
- National Cutting Horse Association ([www.NCHA.com](http://www.NCHA.com))

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