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# PERFORMANCE HORSE

May/June 2009

## Got Rate?

Russell Dilday explains why "rate" is so critical with or without a cow



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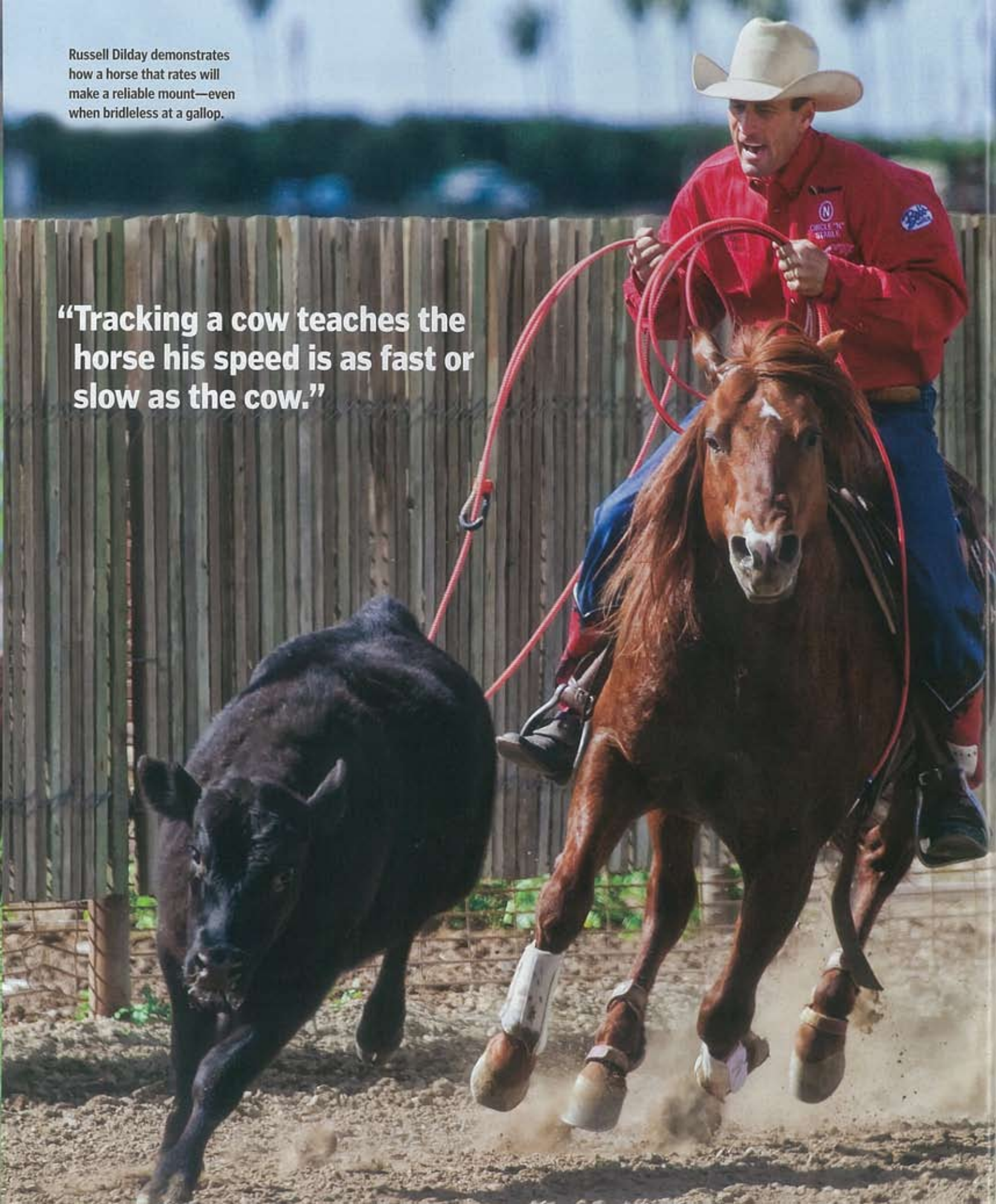
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Russell Dilday demonstrates how a horse that rates will make a reliable mount—even when bridleless at a gallop.

**“Tracking a cow teaches the horse his speed is as fast or slow as the cow.”**



Once rating, the colt can advance to cutting, roping, fence work or other disciplines.

## All about Rate

Moving to the hip is generally Dilday's next step with his youngsters, and more than likely he'll work in a round pen. He steps his horse to the hip, and when the cow stops or breaks away, the horse is stopped, backed a few steps, turned with the cow and asked to go with the cow again.

"You're teaching the horse to rate from the side," Dilday points out. "You [eventually] move him up to the rib, the shoulder, and to the neck and head, so the horse learns to rate from those positions."

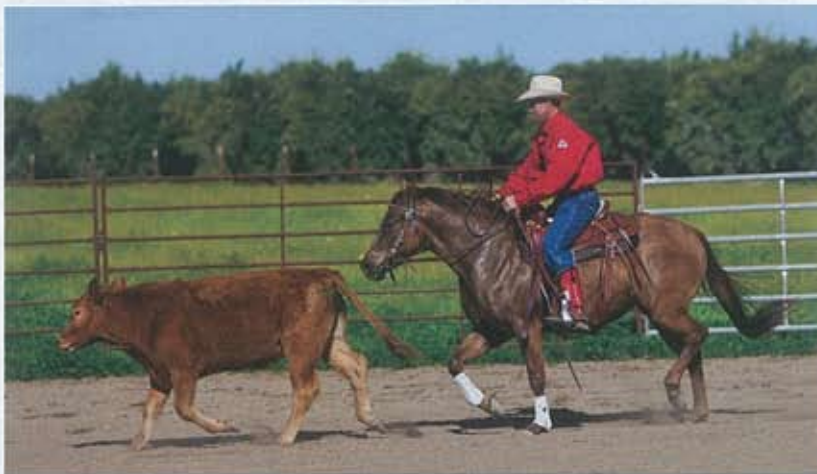
But the cutting, reining, roping and cow horse disciplines all require similar schooling, and the four-event horse must rate as needed for all of the above. Dilday notes that teaching a cow horse to go down the fence is similar to the rate a cutter learns moving across the pen, and those basics also apply to the rope horse.

"The fence horse you start by trailing the cow, and it should be stopping when the cow stops," says Dilday. "You'll move to a position between the shoulder and the rib, controlling the cow while driving it down the fence."

"The rope horse will track the cow, get to that left hip and rate there. I'm trying to follow the cow, not really pushing it as the fence horse is. A cutting horse is positioned toward the head to hold the cow. But it is all about rate."

Horses that learn rate on cattle transfer that talent to the reining pen very well, according to Dilday. Rate is shown when holding a steady speed in both fast and slow circles, while rundowns require an accelerating pace to sliding stops.

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Learning to rate begins with tracking cattle within the first few days of riding, staying in the tracks of the cow.



A colt that runs past the cow needs to receive just enough pull to get him slowed down or stopped, and possibly take a few steps backwards, before going on.



Easy turns or a slower spin can calm the busy mind of a nervous horse that is pulling through the bridle.

the cow," Dilday says. "That teaches the horse all the different speeds that he needs to be able to relax at. Then, when you go lope your circles, you're basically doing the same thing."

Dilday encourages his horses to stay relaxed at any speed. Holding a consistent pace and being able to smoothly transition between various speeds is the reining rate, he says.

"As babies, you just try and get a circle out of them," he adds with a laugh. "Eventually you get a perfect circle, and then you start controlling your speeds in that circle. When they are relaxed going slow, you can keep adding a little speed—as long as they stay relaxed—until they are comfortable making big, fast circles."

Horses with "bigger motors" often have trouble learning to rate, says Dilday, who practices two ways to help those individuals catch on and relax.

"You can let them run up to that cow and when they go past where they should be—where you want them to be—then just pick up on them firmly enough to slow them down while keeping them soft in the face, and continue tracking," he suggests. "If they show resistance, you can pull them into the ground and back them a few steps before continuing."

Dilday clarifies the term "pulling one into the ground" as taking his slack out of the reins and holding just hard enough that the horse has to stop and step backwards freely, never running in reverse. If the horse tries to charge out of the correction, the exercise is repeated until he relaxes. The rider should never kick and drive the horse out of the cor-

rection. "You cannot abuse them when they get to the cow," Dilday emphasizes. "You can't get after them really hard and go to jerking on them."

After mastering tracking from behind, horses are moved to the hip where they learn to rate with the cattle as they move left and right.



The second method is to turn the horse in a relaxed cadence. If a horse gets to the correct spot on the hip and begins to go past where he should be rating, Dilday says to firmly but smoothly slow him down enough to get him turned around. Don't kick and spin him hard, however; you're trying to slow his mind down.

"You turn around in that spin until they are relaxed, and then you leave the spin on a direct line back to the cow's tail again and turn them loose," Dilday says. "Just like when you stopped him, don't go blasting out of the turnaround. I really like the turning around because it keeps a lot of free motion. It is not a lot of hard pulling."

## Overlapping Strategies

There is a definite correlation between the rate applied to various disciplines. For example, starting a horse down the fence is much like tracking in the round pen, according to Dilday. The same principles apply.

"I do lots and lots of tracking around the big arena," Dilday explains of his fence schooling. "After I've tracked for awhile and the horse is

showing a lot of rate, if a cow lines up on the fence, I'll step my horse up to the rib and if things set up right, I'll let him make a turn with that cow.

"If I've been working on rate and my horse knows to stay with the cow, nine times out of 10 it'll be a really good turn, even on a green colt."

If the colt doesn't feel quite right coming out of the turn, Dilday will turn him around, keep his face soft and make sure he isn't afraid before returning to the cow and tracking until another opportunity arises to turn the cow.

"But I'm in no way pushing for a turn," Dilday says. "I'm not going out there saying, 'OK, we've been tracking long enough. We're running down the wall today.'"

Dilday is also cautious about sending his non-pros racing down the fence. In fact, he makes sure they don't turn on the first side of the arena, as in a show.

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## Meet Buford

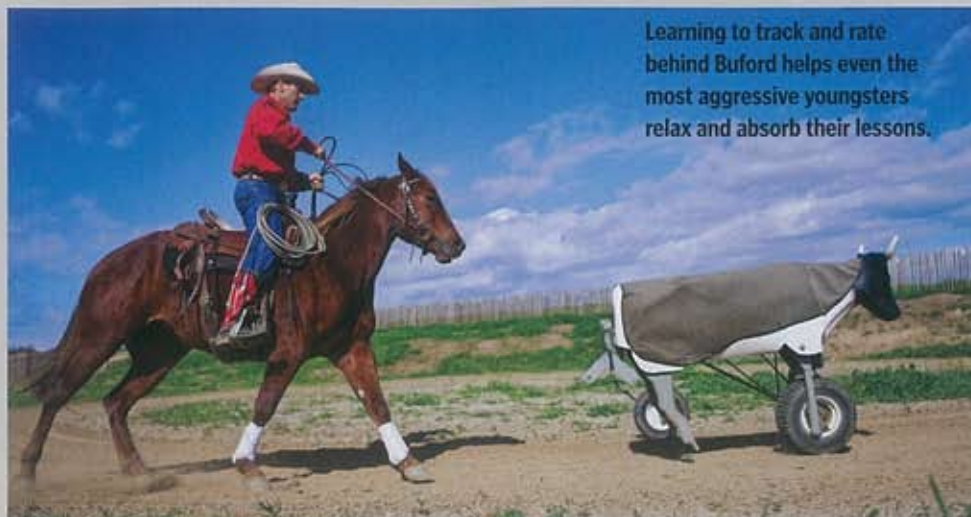
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"As long as Buford is going away, I just keep pushing them to [him]," Dilday explains. "Even the horses that are afraid, I keep riding them in that direction. If they get silly and take off or anything like that, I turn them around or I pick up and back them up, let them sit for a minute, and go after Buford again."

And if he has to get out of Buford's line of forward motion, the trainer backs the horse far enough away to keep it from being afraid of the oncoming machine. Once Buford has passed and is going away, the tracking begins again.

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Dilday says that the "Buford method" is basically the same as the other tracking and rating he does on live cattle. Buford, however, provides the perfect situation.

"The mechanical cow goes the same speed and just goes and goes as long as I want, so I get to practice repetition on my

rating," says Dilday. "You want to use live cattle, too, but Buford is a good tool to go do some consistent rating."

"Buford doesn't quit," Dilday adds with a grin. "I've had some real hot babies and I let Buford wear them out. As long as they want to go, he'll go. Pretty soon, the colts start slowing down, especially in the summer when the [live] cattle are hot and don't want to work. I'll let the horses follow Buford, and whoever I'm on settles down."

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A similar strategy is applied to Dilday's rope horse schooling. He feels the more tracking a rider does, the more time that horse has to learn where he needs to be in relation to the steer. With the fast action between the roping box and the stripping chute, young horses don't have a lot of time to find their rate position on the hip.

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"That is why you have to do all the tracking," Dilday reiterates. "When things are that fast, they don't have time to run to that hip and know where they belong. Repeatedly tracking around and roping will get that horse comfortable to where he can recognize the spot he needs to be."

"Otherwise, you're whipping them down there to catch a steer—at least it is going to seem fast to them—then you throw and handle them off and they never really got the number of strides on the hip that they needed. I can't even tell people how many strides; they just need to follow a lot of cattle. That is very important."

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While waiting in the roping box, Dilday wants his horses in his hand, while not having to hang on the head. A horse that leaves the box on his front feet, shaking his head, he says, has accomplished nothing but losing speed and balance.

"You want that horse to stand up there and watch that cow, and when you drop your hand he heads for that barrier as hard as he can," Dilday says. "But he didn't pull on you to do it. And you don't want to have to harpoon him out of there, either, because then you get them where they lock up in the back and jump way out of there."

The trainer prefers his horses to leave the box flat on the ground, running flat and smooth. The horse should feel slightly coiled up so that when turned loose to run, he leaves as hard as he can.

"That takes a lot of scoring," Dilday points out. "You don't always go out of there a million miles an hour. When practicing, you'll leave that box maybe a little early so that horse can keep himself calm as he leaves. If you hold him in there and whip him out of there every time, he's eventually going to be trying to go through that bridle to get out of the box."

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"The horse has to leave the corner with speed but be under control," the trainer explains. "People need to continually score that corner. The horse needs to go deep into the corner with the cow. If they leave the corner and that horse cuts across the arena on a diagonal, I make them

## Bridleless Rate

On a dare, Russell Dilday took the bridle off his two-time champion World's Greatest Horseman mount, Topsails Rien Maker, aka "Slider," to see how much rate the 9-year-old stallion would show without bridle reins as an aid.

"I hate being dared," Dilday says with a chuckle. "I was roping up and down my alley and was dared to try it without a bridle. The horse was right there for me."

Dilday "plays around" with the bridleless rating on and off. In his big arena, Slider can be guided around by Russell's legs and rates on the cow's left hip, seldom going past the correct position to rope.

"One of the reasons I do it is to make my horse think about the rate on his own," Dilday explains. "A lot of times we unconsciously hold onto the horses. If you're hanging on them, you're not letting them figure the rate out on their own. They should be slowing way down, not pulling through you."

"I can stop him with my feet, so if he goes past the cow I just stop him and then we go again," he says with a grin. "I stop him all the way; I don't hang on his face because I've got nothing to hang on."

Dilday has also worked on Slider rating to



The more Dilday experiments without a bridle, the more he says he realizes the importance of rate.

the right and left, which the trainer believes to be every bit as important as rating forward motion. Slider stays where he should be following a roping steer, but going down the fence might be an added challenge.

"I don't have quite enough right and left to go out and control the cow [down the

fence] like I want," says Dilday. "If I have a decent cow, I can go down the fence without a bridle. If one cuts in front of me really bad, I'm not 100 percent yet."

"It makes me realize how much you rely on your hands instead of teaching your horse to rate."

insists Dilday. "The cow should not be able to cut in front of that horse and trip it up. I don't ever want my horses, no matter what I'm using them for, letting a cow cut in front of them."

And while speaking of position, Dilday is quick to emphasize that a horse's "whole body" must be in sync with the cow to perform properly. If the cow falls away from the horse, he wants the horse to hold his body position and move to the cow rather than drop his nose and front end

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into the cow.

"I'm running down the fence and I'm 20 feet off the fence with the cow on my right when the cow falls 10 feet over toward the fence," Dilday explains. "I don't take my right rein and pull my horse to the cow. I keep my horse shaped just like he's shaped and push his whole body over there with my left leg."

"During the period where I'm trying to relocate closer to that cow and rate with the cow ... at any point that the cow goes to the ground [stops], my horse is in shape to go to the ground and make the turn. If I pull his front end over there, now I've got the sideways stop with the front feet hitting the ground first, hard, and we've got to bounce

through the turn."

That front-end stop can cause a horse to hang up on the fence, as well. Pulling the nose toward the cow changes the angle of his body so he is stopping facing the fence rather than sliding along the fence to make the turn.

"Now you've got that horse tipped with his hip out and his head pointed at the fence," Dilday explains of pulling the front end. "When that horse goes to the ground, he's going to slide into the fence and it is going to be really hard for him not to hang up. If he's traveling parallel with the fence, he can curl his front end and come through the turn. That's a huge difference."

Reining circles are made with the whole horse in position, as well. Pulling the front end into the circle can have unintended consequences.

"You don't come around on a right circle and take your left rein and pull your horse's head and shoulders to the left for a lead change," Dilday adds. "If you get that front end in there too early, your hind end didn't change."

"If you're going from a big, fast to a small, slow circle, you don't just take the inside rein and pull the horse around without everything getting discombobulated."

## Slow and Simple

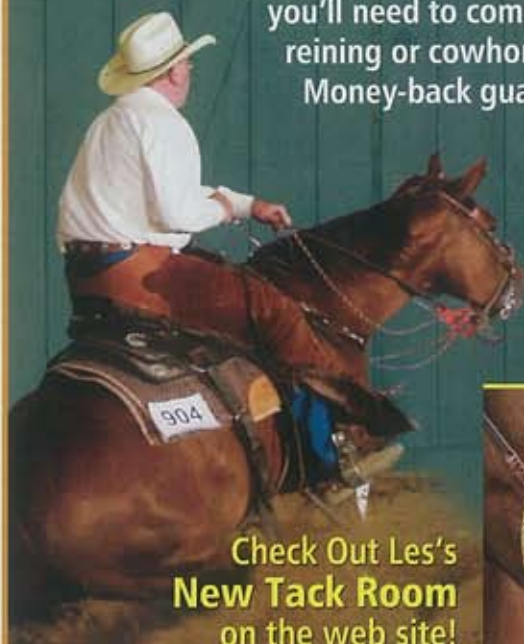
By teaching his horses to relax and find the rate and correct position on the cow (or in a reining pattern), Dilday makes his performances

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## About Russell Dilday

Known for his wide grin and upbeat attitude, Russell Dilday grew up on his family's ranch in Porterville, California. Little did the 38-year-old horseman realize back then how starting colts and knowing how cattle think would be an advantage in his career choice as a professional horse trainer.

With encouragement from his wife, Tanna, and his mentor, NRCHA Hall of Fame member Greg Ward, Dilday began polishing his cowboy skills to a showman's luster in the early 1990s. He made his National Reined Cow Horse Association debut in 1997 and currently has Equi-Stat earnings of nearly \$430,000.

Dilday recently made cow horse history by winning the World's Greatest Horseman contest for the second consecutive year on the same horse. Riding Topsails Rien Maker (by Topsail Cody and out of Jameen Gay by Toby Gay Bar), Dilday recorded the highest score in event history on the stallion he owns with Kevin Cantrelle.

Dilday specializes in cow horses and excels in all-around events. In addition to winning the World's Greatest Horseman twice, he won the Cal-Expo Magnificent 7 all-around contest and has been a consistent finalist at all NRCHA and National Stock Horse Association major aged events.

The trainer also won the 2008 NRCHA Bridle Spectacular, 2004 World's Greatest Horseman Reserve Championship, 2002 Reno Futurity Limited Open Championship and 2002 NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity Limited Open Reserve Championship.

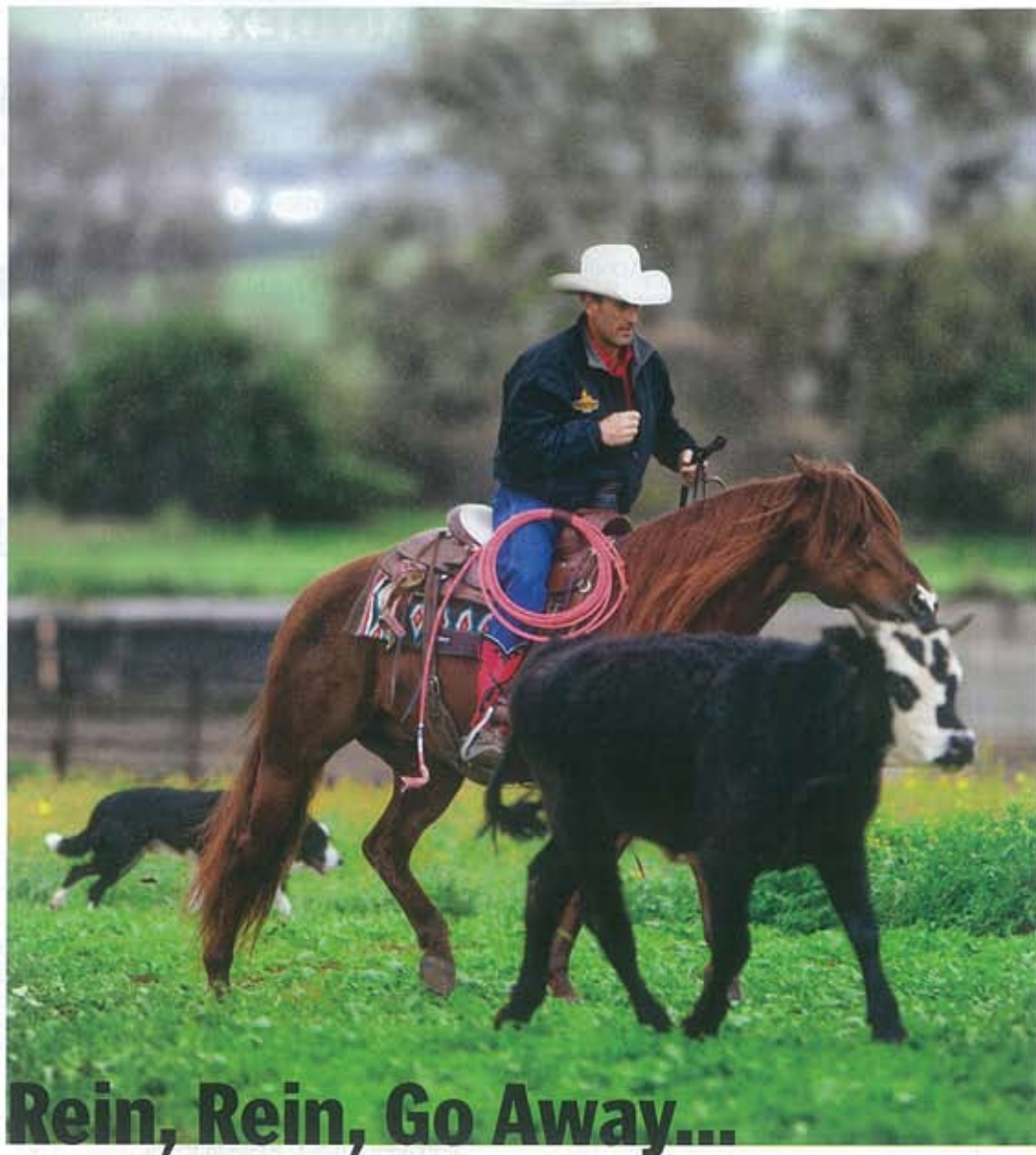
Russell and Tanna, along with Ted Robinson and John Ward, founded NSHA in 2005 and continue to help manage that organization. The couple resides on their 228-acre ranch with sons Colt, 6, and Ace, 5.



consistent. The trick, he says, is quiet repetition. It is hard not to get frustrated, but you have to control the occasional urge to become angry and overpunish in the process.

"You have to get after horses, especially horses that have had problems," he acknowledges. "But you've got to get after them just enough to get the job done and then leave them alone so they can mentally absorb what you're trying to teach them. Make it easy for them to understand."

"If you punish them when they don't understand what you want in the first place, both you and the horse get apprehensive. Pretty soon your maneuver has no [flow], because it is all about you making them do everything. You're trying to get them to where they figure out what your signal is and just go do their jobs." ♡



## Rein, Rein, Go Away...

Taking training article photos is a dicey business. Sure, there's the rare occasion when everything comes together, but more often than not there's a fly in the ointment. The main culprit, of course, is the weather.

Photo by Darrell Dodds

**W**hen photographing Russell Dilday and Topsails Rien Maker at his Porterville, California, ranch for this issue, it looked like we lucked out. With the help of bright sun and blue sky, we got the shots we needed for the article, but neither of us were happy with our cover choices and decided to give it another try the following morning before I headed to the Fresno airport.

The objective was to get a shot of Russell turning a steer on the fence bridleless, but an overnight rainstorm dampened that idea. Shortly after sunrise the following morning, we stood in

the shelter of his tack room, drinking coffee and waiting for a break.


"Since we can't use the arena, maybe we should rope a few head out in the pasture," Russell suggested.

"Can you do that bridleless?" I asked.

"I dunno, I've never tried," Russell responded with a grin, "but I'm game if you are."

Although Russell had more confidence in his ability to do his job in a pasture full of slick mud and wet grass than I did, I packed my gear to a spot he recommended and waited. Soon, Russell cut a steer out of the herd and drove

it in my direction at full speed. As the steer ducked and dived to elude the sorrel stallion, "Slider" shadowed his every move. If there's ever been a better example of a horse tracking a cow for the sheer fun of the chase, I've never seen it.

A few clicks later I had my cover, thanked Russell for his time and hastily headed to the airport. As I was pulling out of the driveway, I noticed Russell's assistant saddling a 2-year-old colt for Russell to take to the roundpen. When you are a horse trainer, there is no room for being a fair-weather cowboy. 

## Meet Buford

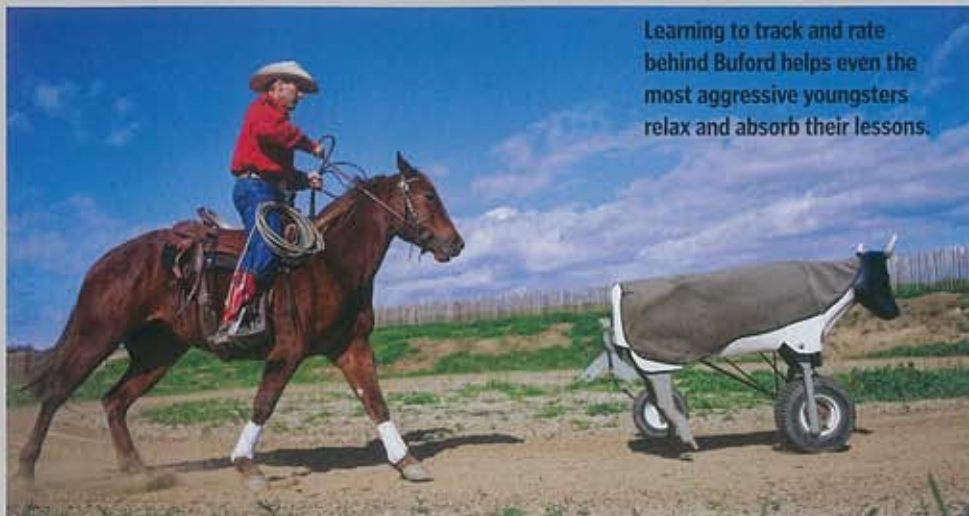
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