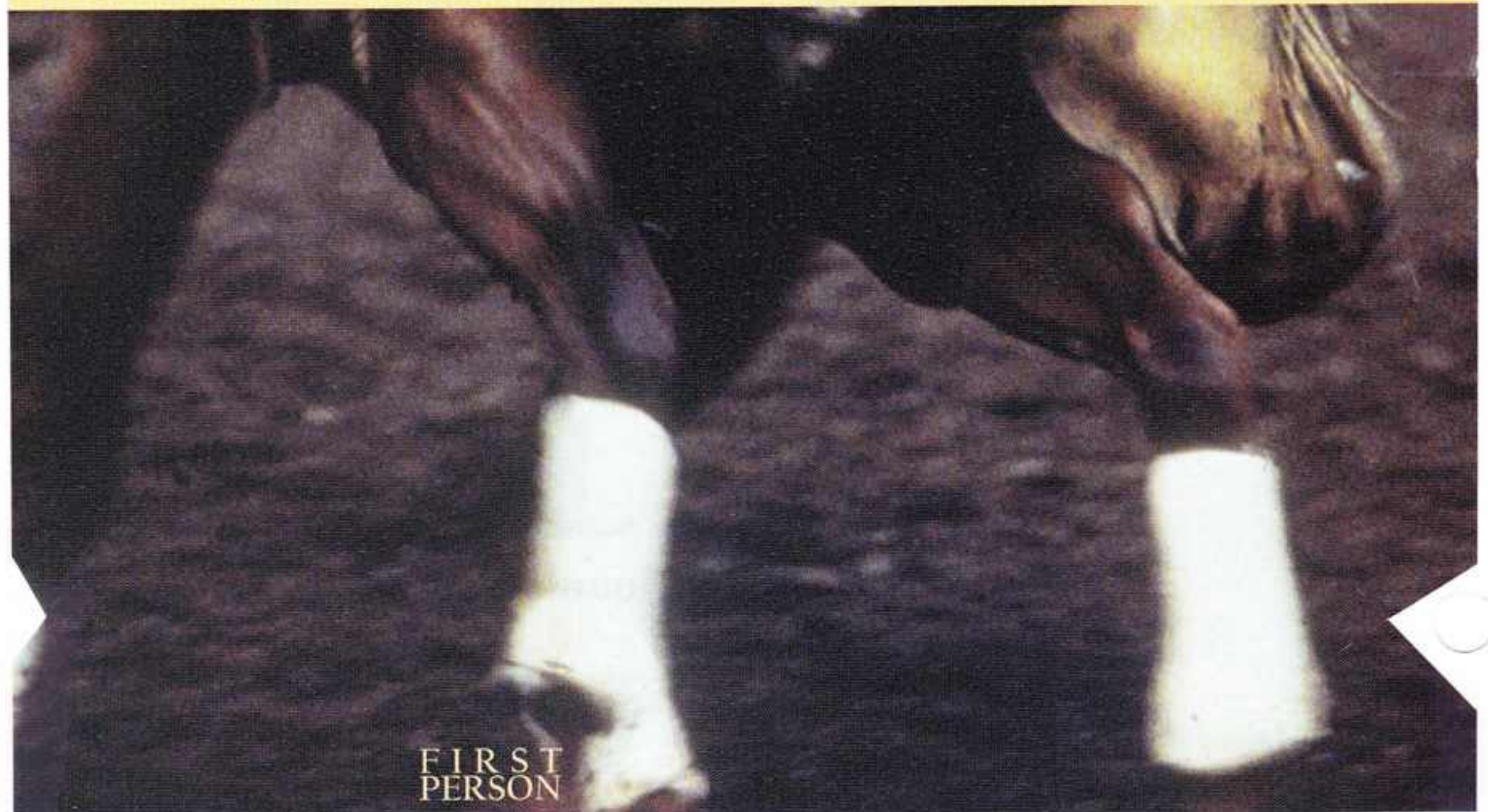




An English rider tries out a new riding discipline –



FIRST
PERSON

Cut Out for Cutting?

BY ANNE LANG

and gains a humbling perspective on bovine savvy

There's a game we used to play in the schoolyard called Keep Away, where a gang of kids throws a ball back and forth over the head of one hopelessly outnumbered kid, who attempts (mostly in vain) to grab it. I hadn't thought of Keep Away for years – until recently, when I climbed aboard my first cutting horse and tried (mostly in vain) to “keep away” a cow from its pals in the herd. The hopelessly outnumbered one? Me. And the cows were laughing, I swear. It was the schoolyard all over again.

Okay, let me back up a bit. Despite being a longtime, dyed-in-the-wool English rider and the perfectly contented owner of a Quarter Horse hunter, I still harbored occasional fantasies about trying out some western skills on a borrowed horse. Team penning looked pretty cool. Barrel racing: now *that* must be a rush. And cutting? Gee, how hard could it be to trick an ignorant cow into leaving the other ignorant cows and going for a jolly little romp?

Well, I got my chance to find out just *how* hard it could be – and that cows are by no means ignorant – when world-class cutting champion Leon Harrel agreed to give me a lesson at his

Flip and out of the Nu Bar mare Nu Niner Bar. Besides being well-known sires, Colonel Flip, I learned, finished third in the 1983 NCHA Futurity, and Nu Bar was reserve world champion at the 1974 AQHA World Show.

The mare's name, Nine Days Wonder, would be an apt description of my cutting ability if I'd been given that long to learn the skill. ("It's a *wonder* she couldn't learn to cut a cow, even after nine days!" they'd say, shaking their heads.) Fortunately for Harrel, the mare and the cows, I had only this one afternoon.

After Harrel wisely watched me take a few spins around the indoor arena to make sure I really *could* ride

what his explanation was for that phrase, but I'm sure it's considered a simple enough exercise even for a greenhorn like me. And speaking of horns, Harrel reminded me that once the cutting process began, I would need to grab that particular part of the saddle – not to *clutch* it like a truck's stick shift, but to *push away* from it. (Easier said than done when the action's heating up, I later discovered as I shamelessly clutched for all I was worth.)

"Use only your lower legs to steer the horse, and don't pin with your knees," Harrel's lesson continued. "Your horse should mirror the cow; that is, whichever way the cow goes,



The cows' baleful eyes were on me, and I was convinced I could already hear

training center in Kerrville, Texas.

Upon my arrival, Harrel sized me up. I'd taken pains not to look "English" on this occasion, donning faded Wranglers and leaving my fringeless chaps at home. But Harrel immediately zeroed in on my riding sport-sneakers – you know, the trendy kind you're supposed to be able to wear in *any* kind of saddle.

"Can you get spurs to sit on those heels?" he asked, not unkindly. *Oh. Um, well, my horse back home doesn't need...* "Never mind, we'll just see how these work," he responded, handing me a pair of large, metal contraptions. I obediently strapped them on.

Next I was introduced to my small but kinda flashy-looking partner, a 10-year-old chestnut mare by Colonel

(okay, so my neck-reining was a little awkward; I had to resist the urge to post the trot; and those stirrup leathers felt *awfully* long), he told his assistant, Scott McCann, to "bring in the cows!" A dubious-looking McCann glanced my way, then opened the gate and let about eight cows trickle in.

"No, let 'em *all* come," Harrel called to McCann, who shrugged, then obliged. I'd say the herd numbered about 15. Their baleful eyes were on me, and I was convinced I could already hear their soft, milky chortles. ("Hey, looks like we got us a *city* girl today, gang! Let's frustrate her real good, huh?")

Harrel was suddenly all business, the consummate instructor. "We're gonna be cutting to *shape* today," he began. I confess, I can't exactly recall

your horse moves with it like a mirror image. Ride with your toes out, your knees relaxed, your rein hand resting just above the withers, and your shoulders slumped." Shoulders slumped? Oh boy, I was gonna *love* this. So far, it was the antithesis of all the English rigidity that had been ingrained in me for years. My hunt-seat trainer would be horrified, I thought with an inner grin.

"And last but not least, remember to *breathe!*" Harrel said. I nodded mutely. Did he somehow know that holding my breath over a course of jumps – to the point of practically fainting by the time I reach the out-gate – is one of the many riding foibles for which I'm notorious? (I would soon learn to be thankful when the cow would pause to rest during a run. The

three of us – cow, mare and me – would stand stock-still for a few precious moments, panting like punchy prizefighters before the cow would again spin on its haunches and take off. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.)

Anyway, following an awe-inspiring demonstration on the cutting horse he was riding, Harrel finally set me loose on the cows. Or was it the other way around?

All right. Let me say this right off the bat. It's not the *cutting* part of cutting that's difficult; I managed that little maneuver every time. It's the *keep away* part of cutting that's difficult. Near impossible, in fact! That's



their soft, milky chortles. (“Hey, looks like we got us a city girl today, gang!”)

what I was miserably starting to think as I cut cow after cow, keeping some away for maybe 20 seconds; others for maybe 30. I murderously began to envision the enormous STEAK I was going to order for dinner.

Through all my false starts, Harrel never lost his patience. Nor did McCann, quietly riding turnback on the other side. But my little mare; well, she lost patience with me about a half-hour into our session. It wasn't helping that, control freak that I am, I simply couldn't maintain a passive upper body on a moving horse. Dang it, I wanted to *drive* with those reins! *Steer* toward that steer! Nine Days Wonder had just about thrown in the towel when Harrel gently suggested that he get on her and “sharpen her up a little.” Gratefully, I

dismounted and handed her over.

The transformation was incredible. Harrel and this obviously well-seasoned mare only cut a cow or two, but the ensuing performances were textbook-perfect, near as I could tell. I suddenly remembered that I was in the hands of one of America's foremost cutting masters, and it gave me fresh resolve to GET IT RIGHT at least one time before leaving.

We waded back into battle. Two, maybe three more cuts, and a couple of actual runs that lasted longer than the usual nanosecond. Harrel and McCann perked up, calling out encouragement.

My mare was starting to pour it on now, and I was finally starting to relinquish her head once we got rolling. The downside was, I was nearly dumped on some of the sideways lunges. *Arggh! The ultimate humiliation!* Then I heard Harrel reminding me to “Watch the cow! Keep your eyes on the cow and you'll keep your balance!” It sounded too simple to work, but it *did*.

I was charged with adrenaline now, and felt I could go on forever.

the mare. After awhile, I tried not to let it sink in that we'd been out there for several minutes on the *same* cow. I tried instead to melt into the saddle, letting Nine Days Wonder do her job. As if from a long way off, I heard excited shouting from Harrel and McCann over the sound of labored breathing and pounding hooves.

More lunging, more running – I'd found the rhythm, and it was exhilarating! I felt at one with my horse. We were a team! We were keeping away the cow! We were – oh my, at least *I* was – running out of breath, and reluctantly had to stop. I was shaking all over and grinning from ear to ear. Nine Days Wonder slowly swung her head in my direction as if to say: “Well, it's about time you got a clue, lady.”

But the final reward was Harrel telling me: “You got it! You did! Shoot, we could turn you into a fine cutting horse rider in about three days if we had the chance.” Yeah, three days of round-the-clock marathon sessions, maybe. I shook off the negative thoughts, choosing instead to savor

Both the mare and I were dripping wet. The next cow we cut was a little brown one with... oh, such a sweet white face! Stop it, I told myself. *This is your opponent, not a Hallmark card cover.* But as it turned out, Sweetie Face delivered my epiphany.

Sweetie Face ran from side to side. Nine Days Wonder ran from side to side right with her. Sweetie Face lunged. The mare lunged. Sweetie Face ran and lunged some more. So did



Although her primary sport is riding over fences, writer-wife-mom Anne Lang of Austin, Texas, jumped on this assignment.

the compliment – and the vivid memory of that triumphant run.

In summary, I can definitely see why they say that the sport of cutting is addictive. I've heard it said that golf is addictive, too, but I've *tried* golf. Sorry, you won't find me in any 12-step golf programs now, or ever. I've tried cutting, and you know something? I want to try it again. And again, and again, and...

I wonder if there's any cow in my hunter? ☺



Laid-back Leon Harrel of Kerrville, Texas, holds cutting camps where even a novice with no horse of his own can learn to cut.