

*A cookie-cutter approach to training doesn't work for Matt Miller. His role as coach is to show his horses how to play smart and solve their own problems.*

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**By Matt Miller with Julie Bryant**

**Photos by Julie Bryant**

# The Natural



Matt Miller anticipates family working traits, but brings out the best in individual horses by tailoring his approach. Here he asks a young mare to hustle while helping her maintain position on the cow. He's providing support at this stage.

ONE OF THE MOST ATTRACTIVE THINGS ABOUT CUTTING HORSES is the “cow sense” they display when they work, that instinctive ability to watch, stop and move with a cow. Many of us have seen video footage of riderless cutting horses that go into the herd, cut out a cow and keep it away from the rest. Who doesn’t want to ride a horse like that?

A horse’s breeding tells me a lot about its potential and what I might expect. It’s my job to bring out the best in my horses – to help them be competitive. That’s why I tend to see myself more as a coach than a trainer. When I know a horse is bred like “X,” I might expect him to be a little hot, or a little “shouldery,” or really “cowy,” but hard to contain. I might expect another horse bred like “Z” to be a little slower, but with a big stop and really good movement, even if it takes a bit more training to help him take hold of a cow and be smart about it.

But one thing I learned from Pat Earnhardt is that everything about cutting is cow related. The horse is a “cow horse” that cuts. And I like to make a cow horse. Whether I’m riding a Dual Rey, a Metallic Cat, a High Brow CD, or whatever, I strive to adapt and use my knowledge and experience to adjust to what an individual cutting horse prospect needs.

When I first started training, there were a lot of guys who worked every horse identically. Their better horses would be successful, while others didn’t make it. But I had my own horses, and as a non-pro, I didn’t have a choice. My horses had to succeed because I couldn’t afford for them not to. That’s all I had – which is why I treat every horse as an individual. I try to get into my horse’s mind and help him do his job to the best of his ability – not to the best of my ability.

And getting help has been really important to me, especially when I’ve had trouble getting to a certain point with a horse. I’ve sought help from guys like Bubba Matlock and David Stewart. And when I bought a horse from Clint Allen, he really opened up my eyes to a whole different way of preparing horses to show, as opposed to just training them.

## The Pattern

THE BASICS ARE IMPORTANT. SO WHEN I TALK ABOUT “PATTERN,” I am talking about teaching a horse to hold a cow. Typically, we want to see the horse stopping and staying square with the cow every time, and then shaping and turning with the cow.

But I believe it’s a mistake to rely on the pattern too much. For me, it’s more about preparing my horse for competition.

I want to teach my horse to understand the cow. I want a calm, comfortable, confident cow horse. I want to get to the mental side. If my horse misses a stop and turns a little sideways trying to hold a really tough, fast cow, I’m OK with that. My horse is being responsible for his job – he’s doing his best to hold the cow, even if he loses form.

The cows we work today are very tough and unpredictable; they’re not as easy to hold as they used to be. Horses that are too strong on that pattern may struggle to read a cow because they’re too worried about being correct and keeping the person on their backs happy. The problem comes when a horse gets in a tough situation and the pattern is so ingrained, the horse is blown.

## No Worries

I DON’T WORK EVERY ONE OF MY HORSES EXACTLY THE SAME way. If I have a horse that has a great stop, but maybe doesn’t move as well, I focus on his strong point, the stop. Then I manage the other parts that aren’t as strong, and make them

smooth and confident. Using this method, a horse can become competitive enough to make the finals by gaining points with those stops.

Or let’s say I have a horse that’s cowy and smart, but not real athletic. Well, I let him be cowy and smart. I capitalize on that without worrying about him demonstrating correct form all the time.

Correctness and form are important, but we mess up when we worry about it too much. For example, when a horse misses a cow, maybe we

make the horse stop, shape and turn back with the cow. But by doing that every time, we can translate small misses into large misses.

Instead, when my horse misses a cow, I teach him that he needs to hustle. He turns around and has to get back to it. By having a horse that works really hard after he makes a mistake, we make up for it. It’s the same when coaching kids. They prove to you that they’re sorry by trying to be better and hustling that much more. But if the horse is too worried about correct form every time, he won’t have that sense of urgency to come back and cover that cow.

If my horse thinks he can’t stop and turn unless he does it perfectly every time, then we’re going to lose a lot of points and cows. You can only do that if you cut perfect cows – and



Tracking cattle is a basic maneuver that teaches the horse to adjust to the cow’s speed, direction and rhythm. She’ll soon figure out she can control it.



Here you can see Matt's mare is starting to hunt the cow on her own. As she curls back, his hands soften on the reins, rewarding and encouraging her effort.



Matt has allowed his horse go past the cow, so she learns to cover the mistake herself. See how she's lifting that right leg and getting ready to hustle.



Matt gives his mare time to pause and breathe between challenges. Once she stops the cow, the momentary rest equals a reward.

perfect cows are not going to happen.

My horses learn the pattern and how to hustle as 3-year-olds. But I can use these methods anytime a horse loses his edge or gets complacent about his work. Truthfully, a horse doesn't want to hustle, so I make him think about it whenever he misses or gets outrun by the cow.

I want my horse to think about one essential thing: holding that cow. When a situation gets tough, I don't care how he does it. Once he understands he's going to have to hustle, he's going to do whatever he can to control it. That's when I know I can show my horse on a bad cow, and when I do, I'm showing the judges my horse is trying hard.

It's equally important to reward my horse for hustling, especially when he's young. I always make sure to give my horse time to relax and breath after hustling. I let him know I'm there for him. I am a place of security, and giving him that restful moment solidifies that for him.

I use my abilities to bring out the *try* in the horses I train. The great ones will do it correctly by being smart and responsible, and I've been fortunate to have a few. But the ones I get my biggest sense of success from are the horses that are a step below, the ones that need to be "coached" to learn just how much they can handle.

## Turn Signals

ANOTHER EXERCISE I USE IS THE COW'S TRAVELING DIRECTION. I'll turn my horse the opposite way, break across the cow, and then give him some slack. I put my horse in a position that says, "OK, you're over here, and the cow's going the other way. Now, how are you going to fix it?"

Instead of me telling the horse every time, "Oh no, no, no, come back to that cow. Come back over here." I give the horse a chance to be confused and a little hesitant. That's going to get his mind thinking, "Well, I have to get back to that cow." And he'll start moving.

It's the same with a horse that wants to quit or run past a cow. If the horse has never had the experience, he won't know how to fix it. Putting a horse in that uncomfortable situation matures him. If I send my horse across that pen when that cow is trying him really hard, he experiences it. He understands that the work gets harder when he misses it, when he makes a mistake.

I want to be smart, too. It's a balancing act. Your horse knows you are there for him, supporting him and providing him a place of security. But you're also there to let him learn and be responsible for his actions. When I'm working, I'll run my horse by a



**Matt's goal is to sharpen a horse's natural instinct to watch the cow. As coach, his job is to instruct without distracting the horse from the game.**

cow one time. Then, on the next cow, I'll stop with the cow and give the horse a chance to figure out the next move. If he misses, I'll just leave my hand down. When he's behind that cow, I'll hustle him back across the pen so he learns that "Wow, it's a lot of work when I'm not thinking."

I've learned that by doing this, the horse becomes much stronger mentally. It gives him fortitude. He knows that if he's thinking smart – and being smart – it's going to be easy. He's reading the cow. It builds his confidence. If something happens, he won't panic because he knows, "I've got this. I've done this before. All I have to do is go back over there and catch that cow."

When it happens in the show pen, it's an easy fix. It looks to a judge like the horse knows his job. Yes, there might have been a mistake, but that horse really tried his guts out to catch a tough cow, as opposed to the judge thinking, "Oh, that horse missed and now he's waiting for somebody to turn him back around. That's a big ol' miss right there."

## **Keep It Fresh**

IT'S IMPORTANT TO GIVE HORSES A BREAK FROM THE PRACTICE arena. We go out and gather cows and ride through the woods here. It keeps them in a good place mentally. These horses are like my kids. There are some that drive me insane when I can't get into their minds and get them where I want them to be, so I have to try different things.

Amanda CD is a great example. I never worked a horse in a hackamore. I was never taught that way. But I had a little rope nose hackamore that my wife got me for Christmas one year, so I put it on Amanda CD. She worked outstanding in that

hackamore, so I ended up using it on her quite a bit.

If I have a horse that I'm having trouble getting through to, I might teach him to be more like a reiner. I mess with him enough to break through to his mind. I might teach one to back up using my feet, not my hands, or vice versa. Or I'll teach a horse to turn around using only my feet – things that might seem silly to some folks. But in the end, it's helping the horse

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understand that I am on his side, and he can trust me to help him do his job.

I write down the things that have been effective for me with different horses. Then when I get another one that reminds me of that horse, I can go back to my journal and recall what methods I used to get through to him and try those same things.



**Matt puts a prospect in a bind so the horse will learn how to handle difficult situations. Once the horse understands position and control, coaching is all about building “try.”**

I also video my horses and refer to it later. I can look at it and think, “Oh yeah, that’s how I broke through on that. That’s how I got into this horse’s mind and adapted to it.” It might work, it might not, but it gives me a better starting place than going into it totally blind.

I try not to let myself get in a rut with the way I train. We all have strengths and weaknesses. Some horses will be stiff going to the right, others will be stiff to the left. Some stop better than others, while others move more cleanly. But you can ruin a horse by focusing too much on those things, so I’m learning to live with minor imperfections.

The biggest thing is to be open-minded. There’s a perception that the top trainers know what they’re doing, and that they’re set in their ways. It’s not true.

### **Start a Conversation**

I’VE FOUND IT WORTHWHILE TO LET GO OF my pride and ask for help. I had a successful year last year, but there were some rough moments, too. We were at the West Texas Futurity and I won the 3-year-old division, but I had a bad show with the horses that were my aces, the ones that had been winning and making every finals. In fact, the first finals I missed on Amanda CD was at the West Texas Futurity.

I tried to do some things different for my own benefit, but I didn’t feel like I was getting where I wanted, so I threw pride out the window. I sat down with Sean Flynn and said, “Talk to me. Tell me what I’m doing. Tell me what you see. What would you do on this horse?” Sean suggested working the flag, taking it slow, then quick, tricking my horse a little bit, backing her off, and backing her in a circle. I tried it and it helped. We ended up winning three more cuttings right after that.

Deep down inside, most trainers like the challenge. We like the conversation with other trainers. “Here’s what I think you can do to fix that horse, or here’s what I think you can do to make yourself better.” If you’re too proud to ask, then



The cow gets just a little ahead of the horse, which happens a lot in the show pen. Matt lets mistakes happen. Cutting is not simply about teaching a horse to work a pattern. A cutting horse has to learn to read the cow.

you're always going to be left where you are – in a rut. Just ask, “What do I need to do?” Expect a brutally honest answer, and don't be offended by it. You don't have to take all the advice, but it gives you something to try.

Nobody's perfect. We don't train our horses perfectly every day. Everything doesn't just click. I don't expect that from my horses either. I expect them to make mistakes. I expect

them to have bad days, or bad shows, or a bad month. I expect it and I'm ready for it. It goes along with being a coach. 🐾

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## MEET THE 'COACH'



Matt Miller started training cutting horses when he was showing his own non-pro horses. He's now an NCHA \$2 million open rider.

One might think that winning \$2.8 million and being a member of the National Cutting Horse Association Open Riders Hall of Fame makes Matt Miller an excellent trainer. Or perhaps the fact that full sisters Sweet Lil Amanda and Amandas CD have earned nearly \$450,000 in just two years makes him a great trainer. Or maybe the Poolville, Texas, horseman could be called an outstanding trainer because he is a regular fixture in NCHA aged-event finals.

But, no, Matt doesn't see himself as a trainer. He sees himself as a coach – a person whose job it is to take what comes naturally to the equine athlete and bring out the best.

Originally from Arkansas, Matt found himself in the saddle as a youngster riding with his dad, Danny Miller, and trainer Tim McCloud, whom he credits with giving him the foundation he relies on today. For a time, Matt put the saddle away while he enjoyed the things most teens enjoy – sports, school and girls. But after a trip to Millsap, Texas, one summer, he went home, packed his things and returned to Texas for good.

Matt continued to hone his skills and hit his stride when he and Travs Scooter, a mare he trained himself by Smart Little Scoot, won the 2006 NCHA Non-Pro Futurity, earning \$48,923.

In 2009, he segued into open competition and found the environment more challenging and rewarding. With advice from mentors like Lloyd Cox and Clint Allen, Matt began to see the horse as a student to be coached. It was an approach he was willing to try.

Matt has been particularly successful with horses sired by High Brow CD, including the two aforementioned mares, and another, Sweet Baby Marie, with whom he won the 2016 West Texas, Idaho and Southern Futurities, for total earnings to date of nearly \$61,000.

Matt also sees value in getting involved with the business side of the sport. He currently serves on the NCHA executive committee and is past chairman of the Limited Aged Events Committee. Matt and his wife, Megan, a member of the Non-Pro Hall of Fame, have two daughters, Emery Kai, 6, and Harper McCall, 4.

– Julie Johnson Bryant