

## SEMANTICS

by Mark Rashid

I'm not going to be doing colt starting in my clinics anymore.

Actually, that's not really accurate. A more accurate statement might be that we will no longer be calling the work we do with young, unstarted, horses in clinics "colt starting". Instead, "colt starting" will now be just another portion of the horsemanship part of the clinics. It's semantics, I know. But I'm hoping it might help with some issues that I've come up against in the last few years regarding some folks who bring their horses to one of our clinics for "colt starting".

I consider a young horse's "start" under saddle one of the most important times in its life, and we only have one shot at making right the first time. That is why I am always so amazed when people bring an often times unprepared youngster to one of our clinics, then want to hurry through the starting process just so they can get on the horse's back by the end of four days. It just doesn't make sense to me. What these people don't understand is that the getting on part is actually the easy part of colt starting, providing we've done all of our preliminary work properly. That is, all the work leading up to actually getting on the horse's back. It's when that preliminary work has been rushed, or when the horse doesn't understand what is happening... that's when the trouble begins.

As most people who know me know, I try very hard never to go any faster in a clinic situation than I would if I were at home working my own horses. What does that mean for the horse? Well, it means that I won't progress to the next stage in a young horse's training until I feel the youngster truly understands the stage we are in. For instance, if the youngster doesn't understand lungeing, I probably won't progress to ground driving. If he is having trouble with the saddle pad being put on his back, I certainly won't put a saddle on him...and I most certainly wouldn't let anyone get on his back. I know it sounds funny, but I have actually had people at my clinics tell me that they wanted to get on their colt, even though the colt was terrified of having a saddle on his/her back!

When it gets right down to it, I think perhaps clinics themselves have given folks, what I consider to be, the wrong idea when it comes to starting colts. A great number of clinicians start colts in their clinics, and the vast majority of clinicians (certainly not all) start colts in very much the same way. That is, the colts are often started in a group in the round pen...many are saddled within the first day and in some cases even ridden. By the second day the colts are often being ridden at a walk, trot and lope. By the third day they might be out of the round pen and in a big arena and sometimes by the fourth day the colts may be out on the trail or pasture or even trailing cattle. Now before going any further, I need to stress that I am not saying there is anything wrong with the way these horses are started. In fact, there was a time when I started youngsters much the same way. It's actually a pretty common way of starting horses, particularly in a working ranch situation when the youngsters need to be started quickly so that they can be out there working to earn their keep.

However, there are some distinct differences between the way these colt-starting clinics are run and the way I work with the youngsters at my clinics these days. The first and possibly the most important difference is the time factor. I get very few people in my clinics that are in a working ranch situation. They don't need their colts to be working that day because they need to go out and gather the herd. Most are just backyard horse people whose long-range goal is to have a nice safe horse for pleasure and trail riding.

Along those same lines, in other clinics the colts are often worked for three, four and sometimes as many as five or six hours per day over a four day period. This is accomplished by working the colts in a group. In comparison, I only work with one horse at a time - just as I would if I were at home working my own colts - for an hour to an hour and a half per day over that same four day period. So when the colts in the group may be getting up to 24 hours worth of work in a four day period, the colts I work will get about four to six hours of work during that same period.

Again, I have to stress that this is about the same amount of time I would be spending with my colts per day if I were working them at home. Very seldom, well actually almost never, do I work a colt more than two hours per day when I'm at home. And if I don't do it at home, I certainly won't do it in a clinic. Not that there is anything wrong with working a colt longer if one chooses to do so, particularly if the colt is mentally and physically ready for it. It's just that I choose not to for a variety of reasons. The most important is that I feel by working shorter periods over several days it gives the horses time to think things over and soak in what is happening.

The problems that I have seen since being on the road is that a number of folks have been to some of these other clinics where the colts are doing quite a bit by the end of four days. These folks then bring a colt to one of our clinics and expect the same kind of results, not taking into consideration the differences in the clinic format, along with the differences that we use in the starting process to begin with. Add that together with the fact that a number of the colts that are brought to us might not be very well prepared for starting (i.e. they don't lead well, don't yield to pressure from the ground, have never seen a saddle pad or saddle, etc.), and suddenly a four day colt starting clinic turns into a two day problem solving/two day colt starting.

Yet it is often these same folks that want, and in a few cases almost demand, that their horse be hurried along so that they can be on and riding by the end of the four days. After all, it is a colt starting clinic. I just don't understand it. If the horse isn't ready, what's the point, clinic or not? Why "sneak a ride" on a horse that isn't prepared? We haven't really accomplished anything by doing that, and more times than not we run the risk of something bad happening. And it's always at the expense of the horse.

I tell people all the time that we get an education by listening to our horses, and we get experience when we don't. I guess part of my job is to help people get the education, because experience will come. It's for that reason that we will no longer be doing colt starting at our clinics.... Or at the very least, we won't be calling it that anymore.