



Vaquero Horse TRAINING TIPS

Dive into the vaquero tradition: Bill Van Norman explains the tools of the trade, including the hackamore, spade bit, snaffle bit, two rein, and bosal.

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The Vaquero Tradition

I GREW UP IN TUSCORORA, NEVADA, JUST North of Elko in the northeastern part of the state. This is buckaroo country here in the Great Basin. You'll see some people wearing flat-topped hats and using 50-foot ropes, and you'll also see many of our horses trained in the vaquero tradition.

In the next few columns, I'll introduce you to this method, which takes a horse slowly from the snaffle bit to the hackamore, then to the "two rein" and finally into the spade-bit bridle.

Growing up, I was lucky to be around some of the best horsemen in this part of the country. I learned a lot from Randy Bunch, a good cowboy from Battle Mountain, and Melvin Jones, who was from Carlin. Melvin won the Cow Palace reined cow horse class in San Francisco once, but he was such a good showman that he probably could have won even if he was riding a low-class horse. You could pick up a lot by watching him.

Then, 32 years ago, I married my wife, Geri, and found another mentor in her dad, Ray Hunt. Ray used to come cowboy with us quite a bit, and I felt fortunate that I could watch him handle tough situations as they came up – things that you wouldn't necessarily get to see in a clinic setting. Tom Dorrance would come spend a week or two every summer with us, too, and he'd help us with the horses.

Their natural horsemanship theories were real eye-openers, because we'd been used to doing things a rougher way. But their ways make better horses. I remember Tom telling us to lay each of our snaffle-bit reins over a finger – not holding onto them at all – to see if we could rein our horses with hardly any pressure. You're giving your horse a chance to read you, and if you never try that, you'll never know how sensitive your horse can be.

We want our colts to start reading us from the very beginning. When I'm riding a 2-year-old with nothing but a halter and a lead rope on his head, I like to get him to where when

I start taking the slack out of the lead rope, he'll look in that direction, and his body will follow. He's reacting before you take a hold of his face. If you can develop that feel as the training progresses, you'll have a well-broke, responsive horse.

We ride our horses for a couple of years in the snaffle, and by then, we should be able to work a cow, rope off them, run them wide open, or do whatever we need to do.

When the horse is able to do all those things, he's ready to move into the hackamore. In some parts of the country, these rawhide or leather nosepieces are called bosals, but here, they're hackamores. They're useful because when you use a direct rein (pressure on the right rein, for example, when you want to turn right), the hackamore puts pressure on the opposite side of the face, just like a bit does. We keep the horse in a hackamore for about a year.

The next step is the two-rein, which is a smaller pencil hackamore used at the same time as a mild bit, usually a half-breed style. You've got two sets of reins, and you start by keeping the bridle reins loose and controlling the horse mainly with the hackamore reins. Gradually, you'll start to use the bridle reins more and get the horse used to responding to the bit.

After about a year, or as soon as he's comfortable with the bridle, we move into the spade-bit bridle, and we should have a finished, well-broke horse.

These vaquero methods take a lot more time than some, but they give the horse time to adjust at each step along the way. You just have a lot better-broke horse when you're finished. ■

By Bill Van Norman

Training horses this way takes time, but it's worth it.



INFORMATION

Bill Van Norman and his family's Van Norman Ranches were the recipients of the 2001 AQHA-Bayer Best Remuda Award, which honors the tradition of raising well-bred, well-trained ranch horses.

W

Right From the Start

WHEN YOU'RE STARTING A COLT, ONE OF THE most important things is to keep him from having bad experiences. If something happens to make him throw his head up and run off, he'll remember that, and he might even revert back to it later. That's why calm, gradual training will get you the best horse.

We start our colts in the winter of their 2-year-old year. We halter break the babies when they're weaned, so these colts already know how to give to pressure a little bit and move their hindquarters.

As we're halter breaking the babies, we want them to learn to trust us. We're careful not to use movements, like slapping them, that might scare them. We just scratch and pet them until they start to trust us.

As I'm doing this, I hold the lead rope with my opposite hand instead of tying the colt up. This teaches him a lot, because if he gets scared and tries to leave, I can use the lead rope to arc his body around and slow his momentum. This lays the groundwork for the one-rein stop we'll teach him later.

As a 2-year-old, he'll get a refresher course about yielding his hindquarters. Then I'll get him used to the saddle the same way I got him used to people – taking my time, with slow, gentle movements.

When the horse is comfortable with the saddle, I'll put it on him and turn him loose in a small corral with two or three other colts. He can run, roll, buck or do whatever he needs to do to get used to the saddle and the stirrups flapping around. Pretty soon, he'll get used to packing the saddle.

The next day, we'll saddle the colts up and put a smooth snaffle bit in their mouths without reins. Just like with the saddles, we want them to get used to the sensation of having a bit in their mouths. We'll sit on the colts then, just holding a lead rope attached to the halter as a single rein. There might be five or six of us in the corral bumping around together.

We'll ride them for a couple of days like that,

using the lead rope to steer a little bit. When we put the reins on the snaffle, we'll start steering a little bit like we did with the halter.

I like to get the colt to start looking right as I start to pick up on the right rein. When I pick up on the left rein, I want him to look left. Once you get him to where you can point him in any direction, it's pretty easy to give a little push with your legs and make the colt's body follow his head. These are the beginning steps of getting him to guide.

It's important to remember to never pull on both reins at once. That encourages the horse to push against your hands, and green horses tend to pull on the reins, stick their head in the air and open their mouths up when they're stopped with two reins. Gentle pressure on one rein will give you a more reliable stop.

When I pick up on a rein, I do it slowly, with the pressure increasing gradually. A phrase I learned is "feel *of* him, *for* him and then *with* him." Give the horse some time, and pretty soon, he'll start reading you and stopping before you even get the slack out of your rein.

If you used both reins, especially at first, or took hold abruptly, you would get your horse stopped, but you'd have his mouth open and his head up. And that works against the lightness we're trying to establish. ◼

By Bill Van Norman

A good foundation

paves the way to a

well-broke horse.



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Solid in the Snaffle

NOTHING IS HURRIED IN THE VAQUERO tradition of training horses; things take as long as they take. We like to give our colts time to adjust mentally and physically to being ridden.

We typically put about 10 rides on our 2-year-olds in the winter, getting them used to yielding to pressure on the snaffle bit and used to being ridden in general. Then they're turned out for about six months.

It's funny, but their new knowledge must really soak in during that time, because they don't seem to forget anything they've learned. And when they come back, they're ready to do some light cattle work.

We start working cattle on them every chance we get. A horse will learn as much in one day cowboying as he would in five days in an arena. There are just so many opportunities for learning.

If you've got to chase down a cow, your horse has to speed up, then slow down to keep pace. If you're holding a herd, you're going to be just sitting on him for a while, and you can practice picking up slowly on one rein – feeling *of* him, *for* him and then *with* him – to get him to give his head. And sometimes, on the way back, I'll put the reins in one hand and get him used to neck reining by steering him through the sagebrush. He'll naturally go around the brush, and I'm giving him the neck-rein cue to go along with that. I feel like giving a horse a job is the best way to get him broke.

In the spring of their 3-year-old year, we'll start roping a little off these horses. You have to be real careful not to get them in a jam, or get a rope under their tail. Just like everything else, if you're slow and are careful not to give the horse a bad experience, he'll pick it right up. After about 10 calves, he'll do whatever you want.

We'll keep the horses in a snaffle bit for a couple of years, until they can do just about everything. We expect them to guide, slide and work a cow – everything that is needed

from a good ranch horse. It's important that they have a good foundation in the snaffle bit, because we'll be building on that.

When the horse is solid in the snaffle, I move him into the hackamore. Hackamores are a lot like bits; different horses like different types. I like to have anywhere from five to 10 of them around so I can find a good fit and one the horse feels comfortable with.

What we call hackamores in buckaroo country are simply rawhide or leather nosebands – not the metal “mechanical” hackamores. I like soft kangaroo hide or leather hackamores, personally, because a softer hackamore will give you more feel. A horse will usually be as stiff as the hackamore you put on him.

And it's important to have it fitted correctly. We like our hackamores to fit like a good hat would on the sides, so that when you pick up on the reins, he feels it and can respond lightly.

In the hackamore, I don't try to teach the horse any more than what he already knows. It's just getting him used to a different way of doing things. If you direct rein with a hackamore, it puts pressure on the opposite of the horse's face, just like a bridle.

He'll stay in the hackamore for about a year, and we'll just put some miles on him and help him gain confidence. By now, he'll be dragging calves to the fire and preparing for his transition into the two-rein bridle. ■

By Bill Van Norman

It's important to have the basics down before moving on.



HOLLY CLAMAHAN

Time for the Two-Rein

By Bill Van Norman

F IN MANY PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, PEOPLE don't ever use a two-rein bridle. But here in the Great Basin, at least among the cowboys who adhere to vaquero traditions, this set-up is a crucial step in a horse's learning process.

Our methods give a horse plenty of time to adjust, both mentally and physically, to each step along the way – from the snaffle bit to the hackamore to the two-rein and, finally, to the spade-bit bridle, when the horse is considered well-broke and finished. As previous columns discussed, horses stay in the snaffle bit for a couple of years, then in the hackamore for about a year. When they're working lightly off the hackamore and have gained experience and confidence, it's time for them to move to the two-rein. They'll stay in it for up to a year, and it teaches them how to carry a bit and work lightly off it.

The hackamores we used in the second stage were soft leather or rawhide nosebands, fitted snugly on the sides. When we move to a two-rein, we use a thinner pencil hackamore, or bosal, used with a mecate, or horse-hair reins. A second headstall with a mild half-breed bit goes on top with a pair of rawhide romal reins.

I like to give the horse a little more room around his bosal, because I don't want him to feel locked down. He's got a lot more equipment on his head now, and he needs room to play with the bit and get used to it. The short-jawed half-breed bits I use don't have much leverage, so they don't exert too much pressure on a young horse's mouth. And they have "crickets," or rollers, in them that encourage a horse to salivate and keep his jaw

loose. I always use as mild a bit as possible, because I want the horse's mouth to stay soft.

I should say that we make sure our horses' mouths are ready for a bit before we put them in the two-rein. You don't want them to have wolf teeth, which could rub on the bit, and the canine teeth in male horses should be floated so that the bit won't catch on them as it goes in and out of the mouth. It's important to practice good equine dentistry, so the horse doesn't have any negative experiences with the bit.

The two sets of reins are held in one hand, with the bridle reins held looser, so that the bosal reins make contact first. The horse is already used to working off a hackamore, so this is nothing new for him; he just has to get used to the hardware in his mouth.

I won't do any fast work at first, probably something like fixing fence, where I'll be riding straight and stopping to get off every once in a while. The horse's job is to learn to steer from the bridle and accept the pressure of the bit without tossing his head.

If he does try tossing his head when I put pressure on him, I'll generally just hold the pressure until he gives to it. If he throws his head and I release the pressure, he just learned to keep throwing his head.

Gradually, I'll begin to use the bridle reins more. If we're doing slow, easy work like trailing steers, I might just drop the bosal reins over the horn. This eases the horse toward his transition into the spade-bit bridle. ■



This set-up allows for an easier transition into the bridle.



The two-rein consists of a thin bosal paired with a half-breed bit, shown above.

Worth the Wait

SLOWLY BUT SURELY, A HORSE IN THE TWO-REIN bridle will start learning how to handle a bit with a light mouth.

This double-rein set-up puts the horse in a pencil hackamore, or bosal, with a mild half-breed bit on top of it. At first, the horse works only off the bosal, and the bridle reins are kept loose while he gets used to having a bit in his mouth. Gradually, the bridle reins are picked up during slow, easy work, and the horse begins working off the bit. The idea is to keep him light and responsive through the whole process – what we’ve been trying to do from the start.

When he’s comfortable with the half-breed bit, after about a year, it’s time to remove the bosal and move into a spade-bit bridle, the final step in his learning. These bits have a little more authority, but they’re not harsh when used correctly. Spade bits have a “spoon” in the mouthpiece that works off the roof of the mouth. They’re designed so that a light touch sends a clear signal and the horse can respond quickly. Like the half-breed bits, spade bits also have “crickets,” or rollers that the horse can move with his tongue. That movement keeps the saliva flowing and keeps the horse’s mouth wet and his jaw loose.

The crickets make a recognizable sound when a horse is working them, and to me, a horse is not bridled until he rolls that cricket. Friends of my dad’s had stories about old-time Spanish vaqueros who tied their horses up to hitching posts while they went to bars at night. The streets were just solid with the sound of crickets. Those horses were rolling those crickets, wanting to go home.

If a horse doesn’t naturally take to rolling a cricket, you can put molasses or sugar on the cricket. That will get a horse to start salivating. A lot of people nowadays are annoyed by horses rolling the crickets, but when I was a kid, they wanted them to roll those crickets. I still do, because that tells me the horse’s jaw is loose and relaxed.

To keep the horse from getting tense or scared of the bit, it’s important to find one that he’s comfortable with. I generally like mild bits, where the mouthpiece doesn’t stand up too straight and the jaw has a little curve. Most of my bits don’t have too much leverage, either. Longer shanks, from the mouthpiece down, create leverage, and that puts more pressure on a horse’s mouth than you’d think. I like shanks that are about 4 1/2 or 5 inches from the mouthpiece down and 2 1/2 inches from the mouthpiece up.

You need a bit that’s mild enough that the horse can pack it comfortably, and if you want to flex him or ride him up into the bit, he can do that.

Once a horse is comfortable with the spade bit and working lightly off it, he’s a valuable animal. By this time, he has spent at least four years under saddle, and we have never rushed him through any of the steps. But it is well worth it.

Out here on the ranch, situations change so fast that we have to have well-broke horses that will respond quickly and confidently. It’s worth our while to spend that extra time. □

**By Bill Van
Norman**

*It takes time to make a
finished bridle horse,
but it’s worth it.*



My son Troy Van Norman’s horse works lightly in a spade bit like the one shown above. It’s the final step in a horse’s education.

HOLLY CLAWHAN



They Ride **Good** HORSES

**The Van Normans ranch in the
Great Basin area of the Northwest.**

They are horseback every day.

And their remuda is one of the best.

Story and photos by Jim Jennings

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WHEN I ARRIVED IN ELKO, NEVADA, THE EVENING OF JUNE 10, I called Bill Van Norman to see what time he wanted me at his house the next morning.

“Oh, about 6 o’clock, Jim.”

“Bill,” I asked, “what time does it get daylight here?”

“About 5.”

Relieved, I realized that at 6 a.m. it would be light enough to take pictures. Back home in Amarillo, two time zones away, it’s barely light enough to see at 6 in the morning.

Bill added, “By the way, Jim, did you bring a jacket? It snowed two inches here this morning.”



Bill Van Norman handles the livestock part of Van Norman Ranches. He and the others in his family are horseback nearly every day of the year.

Not only was I two time zones away from the 90-degree heat in Amarillo, I was 3,500 feet higher and several hundred miles farther north. Elko is in northern Nevada, and although the small community of Tuscarora, near which Van Norman Ranches are located, is only slightly north of Elko, it is even higher, up around 6,400 feet.

But the snow didn't last, and shortly after 6 the following morning we were in Bill's pickup truck, climbing a mountain. We were looking for a group of yearling colts, turned out for the summer in a mountain pasture. Bill wanted to show them to me. He was proud of them and wanted me to know why Van Norman Ranches was last year's winner of the AQHA/Bayer Best Remuda Award. The Van Normans ride good horses.

It was Bill's father, Charlie, who put the ranches together. He and his wife, Della, bought a small homestead in Independence Valley, near Tuscarora, in 1945, and through the years they added to it. In later years, their sons, Bill and Robin, and their respective families, took over operation of the ranches. When Charlie died in 1996, and Della in 2000, the ranches were firmly established and continue to operate today.

Van Norman Ranches is a cow outfit. They run about 1,400 cows, calve in the spring, usually in April, and carry those calves throughout the winter. They are then sold as yearlings the next fall.

But winter comes early in northern Nevada and lasts a long time. Most years find the Van Normans feeding their

cattle by mid-December, and they don't quit until the middle of April, when the snow melts. There have been years when they had to start feeding as early as the first of November, and the demands are high, from one and a half to two tons of hay per cow. Winter temperatures can get as cold as 40 below zero, but that's rare. Most winter nights are in the 10 degree range, and daytime temperatures are usually in the 20s and 30s.

Cow outfits in the Great Basin – that high desert, sagebrush sea that touches the states of Utah, Idaho and California, but lies mostly in northern Nevada and eastern Oregon – are typically big and cover some rough country. Horses are a requirement, and the Van Norman Ranches is no exception.

Bill and Robin's dad, Charlie, grew up in northern California, where Charlie's father was superintendent of the Gerlach Livestock Company. Good horses were a way of life on the Gerlach, and when Charlie came to Nevada, he brought that tradition with him.

Charlie and Della bought the geldings they used as they were establishing their ranches, but when Bill returned from the Army, he introduced a new line of thinking to the family. He felt they should start raising their own. They knew the kind they wanted to ride, so why not start breeding them? In 1969, Bill leased a band of mares and a buckskin stallion named Johnny Carlo from Melvin Jones of Carlin, Nevada, and they had their start.



All of the mares are pasture-bred, with the stallions being turned out in May. The Van Normans, who have about 50 broodmares, raise all their own ranch horses.

Johnny Carlo went back to Nick Shoemaker on the topside, and Joe Bailey on the bottom. He was foundation bred, and sired cow horses that had good bone, size and disposition. As Charlie and Bill continued to upgrade their horse herd, those were the characteristics they were looking for.

And the breeding of their horses today reflect those characteristics. Most of their 50 broodmares are descendents of Doc Bar, Doc O'Lena, Doc's Lynx,

Mr Gun Smoke, Poco Leo Bars, Bert, Bueno Chex and Colonel Freckles. Stallions the ranch is using include Colonel Zippo Pine by Colonel Freckles; Madonnas Blue Bee by Flying X6 out of a Jackie Bee mare; Little Elmer Fudd by Little Lena Doc; Red Bandana Two, a Leo-bred stallion; and Showstoppin Boon by Peptoboonsmal.

All the mares are pasture bred, with the stallions turned out in May. They raise all the horses used on the ranch, and ride mostly geldings, although they try to ride all the fillies that go back into the broodmare band, and will occasionally ride a mare for ranch work. Those not used, are sold, either by private treaty or in their annual sale.

As mentioned before, winters are harsh, but the horses are



Tillie Van Norman always rides and works alongside her brothers. In the branding pen, she takes her turn both roping and handling the branding irons.



Robin Van Norman splits duties with his brother, Bill, and handles the ranch's farming operation.

accustomed to it. Bill says, "We don't feed our mares much hay or grain. There's normally plenty of grass in the hay meadows in the summer, and during the winter, if the grass is down there, they'll paw that snow off.

"Besides," he continues, "they winter with the cows. When we feed the cows, the mares push in there and get some hay. But two months before they foal, they start getting alfalfa.

"These mares were born here, and they know how to survive. You go to California or Texas and buy one, and bring her up here, she's going to die if you don't take care of her. It takes them a couple of years to get accustomed to the weather."

Bill and his brother, Robin, are partners in the operation, and according to Bill, it's an ideal situation. They farm 10,000



Ty's wife, Ronda, has a calf roped and is headed to the branding fire, while Bill comes around for a heel catch. Traditions in the Great Basin dictate that when working cattle, all calves are headed and heeled, and most ropers use ropes of 50 feet or more. Notice the additional coils of rope in Ronda's hand.

acres, most of which is hay that is fed to the cattle during the winter. Farming is what Robin enjoys, so he takes care of that end of it, while Bill is in charge of the livestock. Each thinks he has the best deal.

Bill's whole family is involved in the ranching, including his wife, Geri, their daughter, Tilly, sons Troy and Ty, and Ty's wife, Ronda. It's a family operation, and when there's work to be done, everyone is horseback.

In the Great Basin, cowboys – or buckaroos, as they are called there – take many of their traditions from the early day California vaqueros. That includes their equipment and how they ride their horses.

"We will start riding our colts in the spring of their 2-year-old year," Bill says, "but we will only ride them about 10 times and then turn them out for six months. We'll start using them when they are long 2s. They'll still get some breaks, but from then on they are pretty much a part of the string.

"We'll ride them in a snaffle bit until they are 4 or 5 years old," he continues, "and then put them in a hackamore (bosal) for a year or two. Then they'll be in the two-rein for a couple of years, and then into the bridle.

Bill explains that with the two-rein, the horse is ridden with the hackamore, but under the hackamore is a full bridle with a curb bit, usually a spade or half-breed. The horse might carry the bridle with no reins attached to the bit for a few days, as he learns to hold it in his mouth. Then the reins are added, and for the next year or so he is ridden with both the bridle and the hackamore. As the horse gains experience, the reins to the hackamore are used less, and those to the bridle, more.

"We believe their teeth aren't mature enough for a bridle until they are at least 6 or 7," Bill says. "Of course, there are a lot of horses that are not done that way, but if you've got a nice horse and you plan on showing him in the bridle, it's definitely the best way to go."



Ty is the oldest of the Van Norman children. He and his wife, Ronda, live and work on the ranch.

It's midmorning as we drive down off the mountain. We have already shed our jackets in the rapidly warming morning, and Bill figures that Ty, Troy, Tilly and the others have the cattle gathered and are at the branding pen, which is the plan for that day. Bill's mind hasn't been far from there all morning. Even though our mount so far has been the pickup, he has been wearing his chinks (chaps) and spurs since before 6, and his horse is patiently standing in the trailer waiting on him.

Bill jumps his horse out, pulls up the cinch and steps aboard. As he shakes out his rope, he motions for me to follow him into the branding pen. He wants to show me another reason why Van Norman Ranches was judged to have the best remuda. 🐾



Troy is in vet school but spends vacations on the ranch.



Ronda joins her husband horseback on the ranch most days.