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Confidence Booster

Professional cutting horse trainer, Dustin Gonnet, shares five steps to building confidence in a young cutting horse.

By DEANNA BECKLEY

1. Solid Foundation

Confidence is one of the most important attributes a trainer can instill in his prospects and it starts from day one.

“The biggest thing is a good, solid foundation – a good start. I like to see my young horses where they can stop, back and turn properly, and do it all with a soft feel, not get worrying about their face or about what you’re doing,” says Gonnet. “As the training goes on, I try to maintain that as much as possible. We all know with training you have good days and bad days, but on those bad

days you have those basics and foundation to go back to. You use this to remind them of all those steps of how to stop, back and turn properly all with a cow or flag.”

Gonnet likes to start his 2-year-olds in January or February of their 2-year-old year. While some may feel this is early, he believes if you start them too late you’re constantly playing catch-up. “I like to get that early start so if they get sore or sick and need time off I can afford to give them a month or so off without falling too far behind. I don’t want to have to put the crunch on, it’s a lot harder on them that way.”

Gonnet puts a minimum of 30 days riding on his young colts before they see a flag. Walking circles, teaching them how to move their front end and to stop and back – all the basics. He then moves to the flag, but he still goes back to the simple dry work. “Providing the weather is nice in the winter months, I also like to get them out and just go ride them out in the field. I’ll do that quite a bit till spring time.”

Gonnet likes to have his horses work the flag for a month or so, depending on the horse, before moving on to cattle or buffalo. “After the flag, I’ll introduce my horse to a cow on a one-to-one basis. I’ll put one cow in the pen and just track it around. It’s really basic – I just get on the hip of that cow and keep it real slow. I might do it five times, 10 times or just once – it totally depends on how that colt reacts to it all.”

With lifetime earnings already exceeding \$600,000, Gonnet has developed a successful program that works on any horse.

He does this exercise until his horse feels comfortable and learns to rate a cow – adjusting his speed to keep up or slow down with the cow, gradually working up to where he can work his horse in a small group of cows. “Each horse reacts to a cow differently – some horses are scared of them, some run right up on them. Regardless, I make sure I keep everything slow and simple so they feel comfortable with each step they take and don’t lose any confidence in what they are doing.”

2. Relation

One of the areas Gonnet sees riders get in trouble is by doing too much on a cow, causing their horse to second guess and lose confidence in their job. “A cutting horse needs to be broke and they need to listen to you, but they also have to relate it to a cow. I see a lot of people, even myself sometimes, forget to relate their training to a cow. If the horse isn’t listening, try taking them off the cow and go do some dry work and then go back to your cow, so that cow always means something to the horse. Sometimes riders start messing with their horse too much and they pull their horse off the cow too much. This causes them to start losing contact with the cow and then their horses’ confidence goes away because their horse is no longer confident about what they’re supposed to do. It’s really important to keep that confidence and those basics so that when you work your horse on a cow they have that basic foundation that makes it easy to ask them to do what they need to do on a cow.”

3. Hauling

Gonnet believes that a horse’s nervousness that is often perceived to come from a cow is actually just from being in new places and a change in their environment. “I haul my horses a lot. Just the change of scenery can make a horse on edge. Even the loping pen – some horses get real nervous when other horses lope up behind them. If you can get them to relax and stay calm in any scenario it will help you when it comes time to work a cow. I will take my horses to weekend shows just to lope them around – all the commotion from all the people and the whole cutting scene will actually take a lot of that nervousness out of them in all aspects. I also take my horses to brandings where there are calves all around and you’re roping off them – that all makes them a lot quieter and easier to cut on. The cutting is just one part, you have to get them ready to show, get them to



Dustin Gonnet has been starting colts professionally since he was 11-years-old. At 16, Dustin left home and started working for the PFRA community pastures. When Dustin was 19 he decided to change careers and went to work for cutting horse trainer Doug Reinhardt of Irricana, Alberta. He worked there for two years before branching out on his own. Dustin now owns and operates Gonnet Performance Horses located southeast of Cayley, Alberta. Dustin has numerous cutting championship titles to his name. To learn more go to www.gonnetperformance-horses.com.

Cowgirl Creations

the show, and you have to get them broke to do all that.”

4. Take it Slow

One of the keys to building confidence in a young horse is knowing when to step forward or when to step back. “Every horse progresses at different rates,” says Gonnet. “If you have a real nervous type horse that panics if a cow comes at him, I will do a lot of sitting and waiting. I’ll make that horse sit there or I won’t let my turn-back help bump that cow very much. I’ll drive up and make it really “cow related”. With a lot of those horses, I’ll ride them in a big group of cattle and just move cows around and try to put them in some situations that when they’re in a cutting situation they don’t panic. With most nervous horses, believe it or not, the less you do the more you get.”

Gonnet will also work his young horses a lot with two hands instead of always one. This better helps give the horse some assistance when needed. He will bend them around in front of a cow and soften them

Gonnet is a firm believer that taking the time to build a solid foundation is the fastest route to a confident, solid show horse.

up. This helps take out a lot of that worry even though you’re not doing much. Shorty Freeman’s biggest saying is, “sit and have a smoke.” That has some merit to it. If you just sit on that horse and let them look at a cow instead of always having that cow do something, that nervousness will eventually just go away.

5. Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff

Horses, as humans, all make mistakes. It is important not to make a big deal over a minor mistake with a young horse. By overreacting, you transfer this energy on to your horse, causing him to overreact in different situations. “If I get a horse that overreacts to a situation I basically try to slow everything back down and make it more correct and make it so that cow is a comfortable spot to be. I want that horse to understand the cow is a happy place.”