



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Getting started

The world has known some famous horses. Alexander's horse Bucephalus, for instance, who had one blue eye, a star on his forehead, and died after the battle of Hyaspes in 326 BC. He was celebrity enough to be buried with honors, to have his tale told down through history, and to this day has a province in Punjab named after him.

Comanche is another famous horse. He was ridden by Captain Myles Keough at the Little Bighorn and found two days after the battle, badly wounded. Captain Keough, of course, didn't survive the fight, but his horse did, and was ultimately nursed back to health and retired by the Army. Comanche is now stuffed, like another famous horse named Trigger, and on display at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum.

The list of famous horses is virtually endless.

Somehow, in a twist on the natural order of things, the world's most successful predator, and arguably its

most successful flight animal have — in the best cases — been able to merge into a single creature and accomplish amazing things.

Horses are believed to have been first domesticated somewhere on the Eurasian steppe about 5,500 years ago, but our appreciation for them goes back much further. Our Paleolithic ancestors found them fascinating enough to paint them on cave walls more than 30,000 years ago.

Which brings me to Remi, a two-year-old colt down in our barn. I fell in love with him from the moment I first saw him. He was only six days old, but alarm bells immediately started ringing in my head. My blood pressure spiked. I momentarily lost the capacity for intelligent speech.

Standing there, watching him show off his newfound legs in the tall grass, I was also doing a lot of math in my head. It occurred to me that he might be the last colt I'll ever start. That's just a result of hope and calm calculation: hope that he lives a long and healthy life, and the fact of my own advancing age.

The first colt I started was an adopted two-year-old mustang I picked out of a corral at the Litchfield Wild Horse Corrals in California. I'm not even sure why I did that, other than that for \$100 it was in my financial wheelhouse, and I figured it couldn't go terribly wrong. And it didn't. I hauled him out to the big desert ranch where I was working and in the evenings, after the cow work was done, would run him into the willow corrals

and sort him out.

There were some others. A horse I called Super Dave, after Super Dave Osborne and his talent for pulling stupid stunts. A passel of rough-string horses on a big Nevada ranch. And I started a few horses for my granddad — including one that bucked me off in front of a school bus full of cheering children.

My grandfather started more horses than I can count. But he was also of the old school of horsemen who thought that a horse was meant to be "broken." He had tremendous success with cutting horses even when his methods were often, to the modern eye, unreasonably or unnecessarily severe. Toward the end of his life I know that he had regrets about those methods, because he told me so.

The whole "natural horsemanship" approach was only then filtering out into the broader world and I think, given the chance to do it all over again, he would have changed his ways considerably.

Anyone who has ever started a horse from the ground up, and ultimately swung a leg over for that first ride, can appreciate what the moment means. It's singular in a way that not many things truly are. After a long courtship, it's something like that very first kiss in a long, loving, and mutually beneficial relationship. I like that analogy because the first ride comes with no small measure of apprehension, and plenty of room for the unknown. And we want it to be perfect.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Craig Rullman and Remi, working together.

No fuss, no muss, and certainly no bucking.

There was a time I rode bucking horses on purpose, though that ended with broken ribs and a wedged vertebrae on a horse called 8-ball at an Apache Junction, Arizona, rodeo.

But Remi and I are doing something else. And mostly, that requires that I not be an idiot. It is entirely too easy to be an idiot with horses. Moreover, it takes a long time — and a few stiff drams of humility — to really learn that.

A smart person once said that starting a horse is like looking in the mirror. If you don't like what you are seeing in the horse, look at yourself. There's more to it than that, of course, but I think that's close enough to the truth to have tremendous value.

With horses — and in human relationships, too — we do so much better when we stop insisting on

ourselves, and our piety, and merely listen. A good horse really can teach us to be better humans, and they often do, if we just shut up and listen long enough.

Maybe I'll never start another colt. It's impossible to predict. The world heaves around and we can't possibly know what's in the offing. But a couple of days ago I walked Remi out into the round pen and we went after our groundwork routine.

I was watching him closely and after a few minutes I realized he was trying to tell me something. I wasn't sure what, and then I realized, in a gift of crystal clarity, that he was just bored. He was ready for more and he wanted me to know it.

So, out there in the sand, under the bluest May sky, I took another look at the cinch, poured sweet promises into his ear, then put my foot in the stirrup and swung aboard for that first kiss.

And it was heavenly.

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