


A question of fencing: Is your pasture horse-safe?

PERFORMANCE HORSE

A man wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt, a tan cowboy hat, and sunglasses is riding a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. The horse is in motion, possibly performing a sliding stop, as it is kicking up dust from the arena floor. The background consists of a wooden fence and some greenery.

Road Tested

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Rock Hedlund spends the better part of any year hauling veterans like Shut Up And Cut. Younger prospects also tag along for a well-rounded education.





Road TESTED

Rock Hedlund makes it a priority to keep his veteran and rookie horses fresh, sound and still learning as he hauls them to shows. Article and Photos by Annie Lambert

Chasing year-end points and purses is equivalent to an endurance contest. Weekly shows have truck odometers endlessly turning. Horses and help can wear out and younger horses can lose training days. However, cutting horse trainer Rock Hedlund of Acampo, California, has designed a training program around his road warrior schedule.

With one of his main horses sidelined by an injury, this year's schedule has been lighter than the 17 preceding years, but Hedlund still has customers hauling for year-end honors in several non-pro and amateur divisions. So, he and his wife, Landy, along with son Cody, continue to beat the pavement. The primary objectives remain set in stone—keep the horses that are being hauled fresh and sound, the customers winning, and make sure the younger horses continue to progress in their training.

Road Schooled

Hedlund has only two suggestions for keeping his 3-year-old trainees in a progressive education program while he is spending so much time away from home: Have great help at home and/or bring those babies along for the ride.

"We're on the road, hauling for Pacific Coast [Cutting Horse Association] or National Cutting Horse Association year-end awards, at least three weekends out of every month," says Hedlund. "Since most shows

are three or four days and you have a travel day going and coming, you can miss a lot of time on your young horses. You have to keep a good assistant trainer and a strong work staff at home. By the same token, if you don't leave the right people at home, it can do your horses a tremendous amount of damage."

Good help can be hard to find and harder to keep around, so, although Hedlund is pleased with his present staff, during his years of traveling he has incorporated training his 3-year-olds into his hauling program. The futurity-bound babies take their studies on the road, absorbing a bonus education as they tag along.

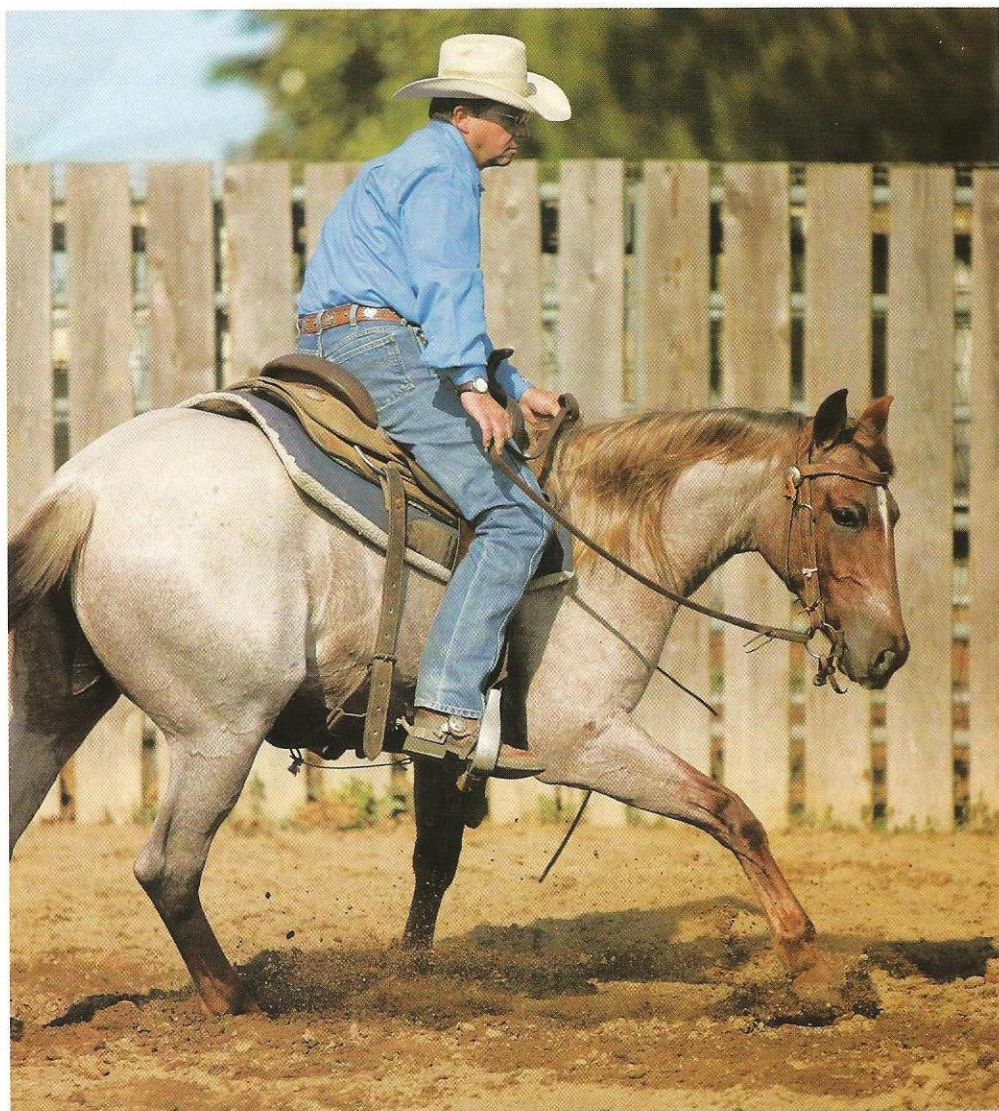
"The plus side of taking those 3-year-olds with you is that they get exposed to so much more," Hedlund says. "Different situations like climate changes and different types of cattle and a variety of distractions all play a big part in my young horse program. Those horses that get hauled and trained on the road usually turn out to be pretty good horses that can handle a lot of adverse situations.

"When you go to that show pen the first time or two, they're pretty much ready; nothing is really going to throw them off target. They've experienced about everything a cutting horse could see over a year's time."

Occasionally, and when he has room, Hedlund will haul his 2-year-olds to local shows later in the year, as well. Those youngsters learn to load, unload and stand tied to the

Three-year-olds are schooled in horse show practice pens as they prepare for situations—bad ground, tough cattle or inclement weather—they might face during their cutting careers.





This 2-year-old has trained under the best of conditions at Hedlund's ranch, but later this summer she'll be toted to a few shows and learn to handle less than desirable conditions.

trailer. They also learn to be comfortable in a strange stall, around strange horses and, therefore, begin the process of becoming show horses.

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But taking extra horses down the road means Hedlund's owners must be willing to pay the incurred travel expenses. Charges for mileage, stall rental, shavings, practice pen fees and extra employee wages can add up. Rock thinks the extracurricular experiences are worth the added costs, however. Just learning to work a variety of cattle types, he believes, is worth a

few dollars more.

“A lot of times you aren't going to get to work the best cattle in a practice pen,” Hedlund points out. “Practice pen cattle are usually

those that have already gone through the show pen, maybe once, maybe twice. Or, they sit in that practice pen for hours and get thrashed. Those 3-year-olds have to learn how to handle it.”

Hedlund opined that cutting cattle have changed over the past few years, forcing horses to play a more defensive game. Nearly extinct

are cattle with “feel” that will respect a cutting horse and its moves.

“A lot of times we have to go show our horses on cattle that aren't as good as cattle we train them on at home. They just run and run and run,” Hedlund says with a shrug. “I hate to say it, but there have been times we've worked some pretty sour cattle at home, just because I felt my horses would be more prepared when we went to the cutting.”

Hedlund also concedes that, while it is hard to gain confidence in young horses when working bad cattle, learning to handle those tougher situations can help in the long run.

“We spend a lot of time at home working these young horses in what we think is going to be the best situation we can get,” says Hedlund. “We have our ground just right and use good, fresh cattle. Then we go to a show and the cattle aren't as good and we get upset. That is something we've got to learn to overcome, and our horses have to learn to handle any kind of cattle or any situation.”

Overall, says Hedlund, training 3-year-olds on the road is a good thing, even though there may be pros and cons. You can lose some of the spark—the show pen presence—a horse working under perfect conditions can keep. But, young horses that are early veterans become more disciplined, and learn to work defensively and survive when pitted against tough cattle.

Weekend Warriors

Ah, the glory days of the aged events. As the 3-year-olds look forward to their first futurity experiences, many in the graduating class begin a transition. Once through their 6-year-old year, and sometimes sooner, cutting horses generally find themselves packing an amateur or non-pro through weekend shows and possibly hauling for those sought after year-end awards. Not that there is anything wrong with being a weekend horse; it just takes some getting used to for most equines.

“It's probably going to take a year of transition for an aged event horse to learn to deal with what happens at the weekend level,” Hedlund says. “It takes the right kind of horse, too. A very successful weekend horse has to learn to cut without a lot of loping between each round and to go cut without any practice pen time.”

Because he shows his older horses—what he calls the weekend or hauling horses—almost every week, Hedlund tries to freshen them up between shows. After working hard at a weekend show those horses will probably get turned

out, ridden through the vineyards and pastures on the ranch and just loped more than being schooled hard on cattle.

“That weekend horse has to learn we might get him schooled at home and then he’ll go to the show and get shown four or five days in a row without getting worked [on cattle],” Hedlund explains. “Turning my hauling horses out when I get home from a show is a big, big plus. We’ll turn them out for two or three days, bringing them in at night. It keeps them fresher.”

Changing the training routine for most older horses is like mental retraining, says Hedlund. Those seasoned aged event horses know how to be schooled and shown, but they must learn to comply with an entirely new schedule.

“It’s a whole different routine,” Hedlund says of the transition. “You might lope your weekend horse a half-hour or 45 minutes; you get them loosened up and go cut. At the aged events you wouldn’t dare do that; there’s way too much money up.

“At aged events we usually have four or five head of cows per cutter in every set. At the weekend level you might get two-and-a-half or three cows and they might have been used or not good to start with. Your cattle selection options are going to be way down, especially if you draw deep in a bunch. That horse is going to have to learn to handle some tough cows and tough situations.”

“My son Cody’s horse, Shut Up And Cut, is an example of one that made the transition,” Rock adds. “Cody has shown him for about six years. ‘Hotshot’ has stayed sound and consistent in the pen because we have managed him well and take very good care of him. Our vet checks him, and all our horses, once a month for soundness issues, he gets turned out and he gets loped on his off days. We might work a cow on him once before we go to the show. He

“These horses only have so many stops and turns in them. They are going to wear out.”

stays fresh and he enjoys it; he looks forward to working cows.”

The longevity factor—keeping hard-working horses sound as they age—is high on Hedlund’s priority list. The constant pound-

ing eventually takes a toll and, as he reminds, “These horses only have so many stops and turns in them...they are going to wear out.”

Having a veterinarian go over all his horses on a monthly basis is only part of Hedlund’s soundness and longevity program. Hedlund

Rock Solid Thoughts

Experience is a great teacher and Rock Hedlund has accumulated many helpful ideas over the years. Here are just a few:

Non-pro participation:

- It is great for a customer’s horse to be saddled and warmed up so all they have to do is walk to the herd. However, those riders will not be as competitive as the person who spends some time on his horse. Learning how to prepare that horse and get him ready to go cut gets the rider ready too. You can’t ride down there and just be a passenger. It has to be teamwork and riders have to work with their horses.
- Non-pros are often business people. When they come for a lesson they are on their cell phones, still doing their business. I suggest that they turn that phone off for an hour and focus their attention on the lesson. They’ll get a whole lot more out of it and will have a better understanding of their horse and what we’re trying to accomplish.
- One of the worst things an amateur, non-pro or youth can do when hauling for points and year-end awards on any level is to watch the standings. Standings put an extra amount of pressure on competitors that they don’t need. They start trying too hard and start trying to force things to happen. The best thing to do is go to cutting after cutting and not pay attention to those standings.

Loping horses:

- It is pretty standard in our industry to lope down aged event horses and have them tired enough not to take that extra step, to have them where they will be right with us. As weekend horses they can’t take that much loping when showing more often; you won’t have any horse left. I think 90 percent of horse injuries can be attributed to the loping pen. You’ll likely end up with leg problems and sore backs.

Correcting horses:

- Horses need to be rewarded when they do good and reprimanded when they are wrong. But the horse has to understand exactly why he’s getting into trouble or you are fighting a losing battle—he won’t learn between right and wrong. Give them a break when they make an honest mistake. If they know how to do something correctly, but aren’t performing, are you sure it isn’t something you’re doing, something the cow is creating or might the horse be sore? We want to teach horses in the most positive situation we can.

Air ride hauling:

- I put air ride suspension under the last trailer I bought and think it has made a tremendous amount of difference in my horses. Whether you are traveling long distance or just on the road often, your horses need to be comfortable. I believe they stay a lot more relaxed with the air ride.

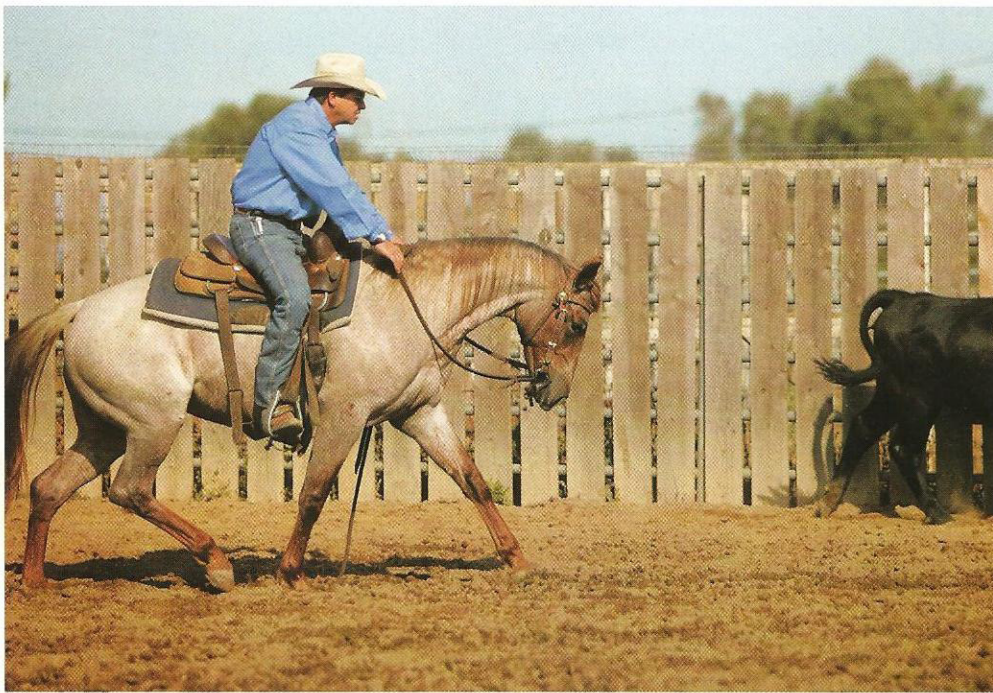
out when they hurt,” Hedlund says. “It is important on younger and older horses, but I put big emphasis on the hauling horses; I’m obligated to know when one is at his best or when he is not. If a horse has a hock issue, I need to know and manage that; I don’t want to have to inject that hock any more than I have to.

“If I can manage it with Adequan or Legend or some kind of feed supplement, that’s what I’ll do. I try to do preventative medicine, instead of waiting for that horse to get really sore, then fixing him. I try to manage the problem as we are going down the road.”

Hedlund also helps his equines weather the hot summer months by putting them on electrolytes. The younger horses especially, he says, won’t drink as much as they should because they are unfamiliar with traveling conditions. The trainer also keeps his horses’ diet consistent, feeding Purina’s Ultium and Strat

adds that medical insurance to his dedication toward keeping horses fresh. Another important factor is listening to what those equines are explaining to him.

“You have to learn the signs that horses put



This youngster appears zoned in on her cow, but she'll learn to play a more defensive game when she is on the road at 3 next year.

egy at home and while away.

"Those are two feeds that I find really help me when I'm at home and on the road," Hedlund says. "It keeps that extra edge they need as hauling and training horses."

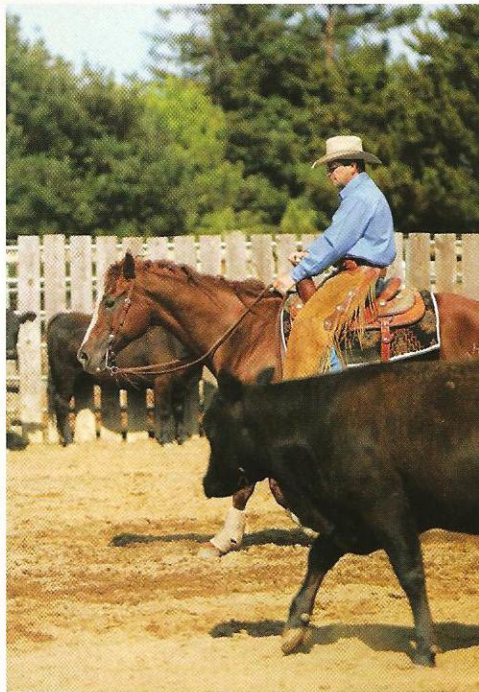
Avoiding Potholes

At a cutting, Hedlund is focused on showing, getting his cows cut and winning some money. This can be a problem, he admits, when he is schooling the younger horses during or between go-rounds when on the road.

"You get focused on so many other things when you're trying to school babies during a show," says Hedlund. "It is hard to put on your 3-year-old training hat and go work those young horses in the best situation, then put your weekend hat back on and go down there and make that older horse mark a 75. It really takes a lot of mental preparation to do that."

There have been cuttings where the practice pen was in such a bad state, a negative situation, that Hedlund wouldn't work his 3-year-olds in them. Either the pen was not set correctly, where the angles gave advantage to the cattle, it was so dusty the cattle were hard to even see, the ground was rock hard with no cushion, winds were blowing 50 miles-per-hour or 110-degree heat prevailed.

"Those types of situations are not a positive for you or your horse," Hedlund concurs. "A lot of times at a weekend show you might be

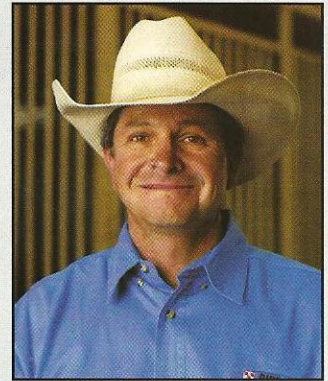


Shut Up And Cut, 12, is a seasoned veteran that successfully navigated the transition to weekend warrior and now enjoys turnout days and light training between shows.

better off to go work a flag, if one is set up. That is a controlled situation. There are a lot of times when you might take younger horses and just ride them around or sit in the herd while you're settling cows on them. All those things are important factors that these young horses have to deal with."

Overall, says Hedlund, any horseman must know his horse and be able to read any health

Rock Hedlund



Rock Hedlund found great success as an all-around competitor during his youth in Gardnerville, Nevada, before setting his sites on the cutting horse industry as a career. In addition to several year-end awards as a young competitor, he won the American Quarter Horse Association Youth World Championship in 1981 on Diamond Lena Bars.

The following year, Hedlund started training horses in his native state and eventually went to work for Chester Dennis. In 1990, he went out on his own once again, spending four years training out of the Rapp Ranch in Napa, California.

Rock, his wife, Landy, and son, Cody, now reside on their ranch and training facility in the Central California town of Acampo.

Hedlund has earned nearly \$1.4 million, according to Equi-Stat records. He has numerous AQHA, NCHA and PCCHA titles as well as being a finalist at the NCHA Futurity. He won the 1992 AQHA Senior Cutting World Championship, was an NCHA World Champion in 1998, a PCCHA Open champion in 1999 and in 2001 was an NCHA Reserve World Champion. In both 2001 and 2002 he made the NCHA Open Top 15.

Hedlund has served the cutting community as a director of the NCHA for six years, has been a PCCHA board member and is currently president of that association. He is also a NCHA AAAA-rated judge.

issue or training situation—at home or on the road.

"As trainers, we have to become really good horsemen, to understand our horses and know what they are telling us," Hedlund says. "They'll tell you when the training situation isn't right, when they are uncomfortable or when they don't feel good. We have to learn to read those signs. You have to know your horse, wherever you are." ♡