



# EYE & EYE

Bill Riddle explains how adjusting to your horse's natural instincts builds better lines of communication and improves performance.

Story by SUSAN MORRISON ● Photography by ROSS HECOX

**J**UST AS THE LANGUAGE BARRIER can be a concern for international travelers, communication problems can also arise between a rider and horse. Learning how the horse thinks, and even how it sees, can be a big benefit to every rider.

Bill Riddle has spent more than 30 years training cutting horses, and along the way he's discovered certain equine characteristics that help him overcome that communication gap. In fact, those traits have helped Riddle successfully develop training and teaching methods that give his horses and his customers consistent lessons.

Much of his philosophy is based on how a horse sees and thinks—the natural tendencies that cause a horse to react the way it does to handling or training. Once that's understood, it's much easier to teach a horse to do whatever its job will be, whether that's cutting, roping, reining or trail riding.

"Horses are herd-bound animals and animals of flight," Riddle says. "Their eyes are on the side of their face. They see with mono-vision, which means they'll use one eye at a time most of the time. So, you're riding an animal of flight that sees completely different from the way you do. We'd better think about how they think about this training process if we're going to be successful."

For starters, he says, it's important to understand how a horse's vision and its tendency to flee from pressure impact how it learns.

## ● PREDATOR AND PREY

Riddle, who roped calves and bulldogged for many years before he started training cutting horses, says it was a Doc Bar mare that caused him to begin to understand that horses think differently than people. Docs Otoetta was inducted into the National Cutting Horse Association Hall of Fame in 2008, the same year Riddle received that honor. But getting the mare trained was a tedious process that was successful only after Riddle began to understand how Docs Otoetta saw things.

"I went to work for Albert Paxton, and they had her broke and let me train her and show her," Riddle recalls. "That mare was wild, she wanted to overdo, she was quick, she was cowy. I won the NCHA Derby on her in 1981, and the next year John Paxton took her and hauled her for the World [Champion-

ship] in the non-pro. He set a new earnings record. She was a great mare."

But getting her there wasn't easy.

"In April of her 3-year-old year, this mare had begun to do things so hard that for 30 days I did not work her on a cow," Riddle says. "A girl that worked for me took that mare to the pasture and walked her. For 30 days, either she or my wife walked her. I started her back after that just like she was a 2-year-old. I made her wait and get comfortable with a cow again, then I started back training her."

"That mare made me realize that every horse was different, didn't think the same, and you didn't train every horse the same way."

During those early days as a cutting horse trainer, Riddle says he "was looking for a pattern" in training horses. While working for his brother, Terry, he observed that his sibling was successful letting each horse do what it did best. He realized that his brother was looking at each horse as an individual, and although horses share certain traits and learn in similar ways, "you've got to figure out what that horse is thinking," he says. One thing to keep in mind is that horses don't reason.

"Horses don't stand in a stall and think, 'You know, I had a bad day yesterday. What can I do to improve?'" Riddle says. "If you tie a horse up, he won't stand there and think, 'If they ever untie me, I'll never make that mistake again.' They just don't react like that."

That's why it's vital to remember that horses are prey animals, herd animals, and react completely different than do humans or, for that matter, dogs.

"We're predators, like dogs or cats," he says. "We're not animals that herd up for protection like cattle or horses. A horse, when you threaten him, will go through a series of things. If he's a wild horse, he'll run until you corner him, and he'll always turn his butt to you and kick at you. If you make him turn his head to you, he'll paw. The last thing he'll do is bite you. The last thing a wild horse wants to do is confront you."

"But pen up a bobcat and see what he does. His eyes are in the front, he's a predator and he'll come get you."

As predators, Riddle says, people have a different way of thinking than do horses.

"If you want to rope calves on him, if you want to jump fences





**Clockwise from top left:** Teaching a horse to yield to pressure starts early in training. Riddle likes to flex his horses when he first steps on to be sure they're paying attention and waiting for his instructions. This exercise also teaches a horse not to walk off when the rider gets on. ● If a horse walks past the flag, Riddle still uses his legs to ask the horse to turn around, but supports that with his hands to prevent forward motion. ● Riddle wants his horse to respond to leg pressure by turning around rather than moving forward. He knows that's working when he can turn without even picking up his reins.

on him, if you want to cut on him, if you want to bulldog on him, you have to teach him to do something that's not natural," he says. "Have we bred them to do those things? Absolutely. But we still have to ask him to do something that's against his nature. How do we do that so he's confident?"

The best way is to use those inherent tendencies to your advantage.

#### ● GIVE AND TAKE

Imagine a horse being chased by a predator. It will run as long as the pressure is on. Once it outruns the predator and the pressure is off, the horse stops and catches its breath. It feels relief. The same concept applies to training.

"Horses naturally learn through pres-

sure and release," Riddle explains. "The biggest reward you can give any horse is just to be still on him."

Starting with that premise, he teaches a horse to yield to pressure without trying to escape it.

"We must teach a horse to not want to run when he feels pressed," he says. "Once a horse decides that there's a way to deal with the situation other than fleeing, you're way down the road to getting him trained."

The key is releasing pressure at the right time, Riddle adds.

"You see horses that, when you take hold of their head, they throw their head up," he says. "When the head goes up, they're resisting pressure. If you turn them loose while their head is up, how do they get away from pressure? By raising their head.

So now you've taught that horse something that is detrimental to the rest of his career. Whatever horses learn first is what they'll go back to when they get scared."

The pressure-and-release technique is something the trainer works on gradually, looking for that moment when the horse begins to understand that it doesn't have to run or even go forward when pressed.

"When a horse gets to the point that when I press him [with my leg] and he'll turn instead of trying to go forward, he's beginning to agree with me," Riddle says. "He doesn't need to run away. He begins to yield. It's the same when I pull on his face. If he gives me his nose instead of pulling against me, then he's beginning to agree. He's learned that if he gives me his head, I'll turn him loose. Then I begin to build

a horse that will flex at the poll easier, that will step back, and that will move his feet when I ask him."

Pressure and release only works, though, if the release is given at the right time.

"Timing becomes important," he says. "After you've done it a long time, you feel that. When you first begin, you have to really concentrate on it."

The agreement that Riddle is seeking also comes from the horse's natural desire to follow a leader.

"All horses understand alpha," he says. "If you watch horses in a herd, there's always one horse that runs the show. There will be a dominant horse, and everybody else lines up on the totem pole from the strongest to the weakest. In training, if I will be alpha—and consistently alpha—the horse will understand. The more consistent I am, the faster I can train a horse."

#### ● CONCEPTS TO CATTLE

In Riddle's case, the knowledge of how a horse thinks and sees applies to how he works his horses on cattle every day. His goal is teaching a horse to move laterally from the pressure of one leg, without going forward. This is a necessity in the sport of cutting, when often the horse's position needs to be adjusted slightly without the use of the reins. Much of the time, he teaches this using a flag rather than cattle, especially early in a horse's career. And he teaches his amateur and non-pro customers the importance of using leg pressure before picking up their hands to move a horse laterally.

The trainer has watched many people use their hands first, followed by their feet, but that goes against the rules of cutting. Because you cannot pick up your hand after you've cut a cow, but can use your feet to cue your horse, Riddle says, "I'd better be teaching a horse to yield to my legs."

That's the value of teaching the horse to move away from pressure without getting scared and going forward, he reiterates. But it's important to insist the horse reacts at the first request. If it speeds up or doesn't move over, he'll reinforce with his hand.

"If I'm going across the pen and need to adjust my line to the flag or to the cow, and want to move away, I take my inside leg—the leg that's next to the flag or cow—and ask the horse to move away,"

he says. "But when I press, he speeds up. What should I do? Press again? Kick? Most people lift their hand and just move their horse over [with the reins]. That's entirely wrong."

"If that horse speeds up, pushes against my foot or just doesn't change course, I equate that to telling one of my children to come help me in the garage, and they say, 'Aw, Dad, I don't want to.' If I don't do anything, next time I ask that 'Aw, Dad' is acceptable. And there's no room for that in horse training. I'm going to ask that horse one time to get off my leg. If he doesn't, I'm going to pick up my hands so that he can't speed up, and I'm going

to move him where I intended for him to go in the first place with my leg."

It's the same pressure-and-reward system that Riddle has been using all along, so he's careful to give the horse a break when it does the right thing.

"You're looking for a horse that will let you use him," he says. "He needs to know the difference if I want him to step away or if I want him to step toward the cow or the flag. I've taught this horse to respond to pressure, but if he won't move over when I ask him, I pick up my hands to hold him, move him over with my leg, and then take all the pressure away. I've rewarded him."



A horse's natural tendency to be dominant with its right eye often causes it to look into a flag or cow when traveling to the right.



Right-eye dominance can cause a horse to fade into the herd and look away from the cow when moving to the left. That's why it's important that the horse respond to left leg pressure—stepping toward the cow and not forward.



## ● ABOUT BILL RIDDLE

FOR 16 YEARS before he entered the cutting arena, Bill Riddle made his living teaching history and rodeoing on the side. Bulldogging and calf roping were his favorite events before he went to work for his brother, cutting horse trainer Terry Riddle, in 1977.

In 2010, Riddle rode Dear Gussey—a mare owned by his wife, Anne—to win the Tunica Futurity. He made numerous aged-event finals on Dear Gussey and on Eyez On Me and Miss Stylish Pepto, both owned by Glenn and Debbie Drake. In 2010, he won the senior division of the NCHA Futurity on the Drakes' Stylish In Stockings, the mare pictured in this article.

Riddle has won more than \$4.4 million in his career. He's active in the National Cutting Horse Association, which he served as president in 2007. He is an American Quarter Horse Association Professional Horseman. In 2002, he was presented the Zane Schulte Award, created by Tom and Barbra Schulte of Brenham, Texas, to honor their late son and recognize trainers for integrity, service and leadership in the cutting industry.

Riddle presents clinics at his ranch in Ringling, Oklahoma, and around the country. He recently completed a DVD for Back Fence Videos titled *Beyond the Basics*. Subjects covered include training concepts, working 2-year-olds and older horses, working the flag, working cattle in a round pen, and preparing to show. The video is available on the web through [billriddlecuttinghorses.com](http://billriddlecuttinghorses.com) or [backfencevideos.com](http://backfencevideos.com).

## ● NATURAL TENDENCIES

Just as people are naturally left- or right-handed, horses have a tendency to prefer one side over the other, especially when it comes to vision. Riddle says most are dominant with their right eye. He takes that into consideration when working a cow or the flag, and finds that horses traveling unevenly across the cutting pen are a common problem caused by right-eye dominance.

"If I get a phone call from somebody who needs some help with a horse I haven't seen, I can tell you before the conversation is half over what I'm going to tell that person: Make sure you can get the horse off the cow going to the right, and make sure you can get him up to a cow going to the left," Riddle says. "Also make sure he doesn't move until that cow moves far enough that you're convinced the cow is leaving."

If a horse is dominant with the right eye, he explains, as it moves to the right between the cow that's been cut and the herd, it usually wants to hold its head more toward the cow because it can see the cow better with that dominant eye. If it doesn't turn its head slightly or veers away from the cow, it has to rely more on the left eye, which feels uncomfortable.

"It's harder to get them to [move away from] a cow going to the right than it is going to the left," Riddle explains. "When they stop with the cow [going to the right], they're turning their head and watching that cow with their right eye. As that cow leaves [going to the left], they'll want to turn quicker because they need to turn their head to see it. When they go to the left, they can see

that cow easily with their right eye."

That vision also tends to make a horse, when moving to the left, veer slightly away from the cow when it stops. That can cause problems on the left side of the pen, which all goes back to the release of pressure, Riddle explains. The horse tends to step away from the cow because it can see it easily, and it naturally wants to get away from pressure.

"As the cow turns around and leaves, what happens? That pressure that sent the horse to the left is leaving him," he says. "Remember, the release of pressure is what he's looking for. All of a sudden that pressure is gone and it feels good to the horse without that cow. I have to make sure the horse understands that it's better to be with the cow than somewhere else."

To combat the aforementioned problems, while moving to the left Riddle teaches a horse to stay a little "short" or "inside the cow"—not letting his horse get past the cow's nose—and to turn its head and shoulders slightly toward the cow when it stops. Consistency is again key to

getting the horse to do the right thing every time.

"Horses don't reason," Riddle says. "They learn by you doing the same thing over and over again, the same way."

That starts when a horse is young and learning to work cattle, he adds, and also goes back to pressure and release.

"You stop him on a cow and then turn him loose," he explains. "You pull him through the turn, and as he starts through the turn, you release. You stop him; that's the pressure. When he stops, you release him. We teach the horse that if he stops, I don't pull. If he turns, I don't pull. And we teach him if he goes past a cow, there's more pressure than there is at the cow."

When Riddle feels that point needs emphasizing—if a horse walks or trots past a cow and doesn't stop—he'll go lope for 15 minutes, and then return to the cow. The horse discovers that there's more pressure—steady loping—away from the cow than there is if he stops with a cow.

"Remember, his greatest defense mechanism is to run, and running starts with

walking," he points out. "If he says, 'I think it's better out there in the arena than with the cow,' I'll say, 'OK, let's see if it is.' And I'll lope and then go back to the cow. Pretty soon you can't make him go by a cow."

These lessons Riddle teaches will last a horse a lifetime, and the trainer believes inconsistencies in early experiences will hurt a horse in the long run. Someone who doesn't grasp the concept of pressure and release can set the horse back in its training, whether they're training for cutting or other events.

"Those breaks in communication early in a horse's life compromise that horse, usually for the rest of his life," Riddle says. "The alpha—the team leader—has to be you. Now you have to have a plan and know what to do every time. The horse is going to run from pressure, so you have to apply pressure that stops his tendency to run and turns into the action that you want him to do. The desired response is where you release the pressure, and you hold the pressure until you get that desired response." 🐾

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