

NOVEMBER 7, 1974

Things looked bad from the outside of the corral. An old boy was leading a big bay horse in wide circles. Indications were that this horse was suffering from an overwound spring as result of too much wet weather.

I asked the boy what was wrong with his horse. He said that anytime the temperature dropped below 65 degrees, a calming and soothing period was necessary to smooth the hump from his back.

There was no doubt that he was right. Had the old pony been wearing toe dancing shoes he would have been ready for a ballet twirl. I didn't want to interfere to the degree that I was offered the chance to ride his horse. So I suggested that we lead the horse in the sunny part of the corral. He was losing time leading him in the shadows.

Horses suffering from climatological changes need to be fever indexed. Back when the country was covered by pistol tails, lots of wrecks could have been solved by inventing a method of taking their temperature.

The problem was, and still is, that a horse's temperature can't be taken orally. The other end on a bronc is impossible to reach under normal conditions. No meaningful reading would be possible when the horse and the man are both cocked to jump in conflicting directions.

Thus the science of tuning broncs became a haphazard affair. Without a chart to refer to, the tuner could not gauge the tune's internal condition. Whether or not the horse was at high fever or low chill had to be measured by the altitude of the cantle or the position of the ears.

Horse breaking has been improved by the use of the telephone. The other night I overheard one of my sons relaying advice to one of his friends how to ride a two year old from the corral for the first time. Safe in my leather covered desk chair, the boy was making strong points toward introducing the young pony to the excitement of the outside world. As he swiveled around the desk, he simplified bronc riding to new high; yet while he was safely mounted in the chair, I wasn't worried at all about having to take him to the doctor for repair.

I explained the temperature theory to the cowboy that I started telling you about. He answered by pointing out a blue horse for me to catch. He said a Mexican had told him not to wear spurs on old Blue. He could have saved that advice. Thirty years ago, I learned that spurs and strange horses lead to hard ground and a throbbing head. I appreciated his concern. I didn't want to tell him, but I would have ridden the blue horse barefooted, if I'd thought boot heels would have offended his hide.

Part of the lament of the passing of the old west is the disappearance of the airborne waddie quiring a bucking horse from flank side to flank. The bunkhouse stories were so vivid, I can't separate the part that I heard from the small part that I saw.

The ground then, I believe, was not as hard and rocky as it is today. Rocks and chugholes, I know, weren't as tricky as they seem now. Muscles and bones, I'm sure, weren't as stiff, and I'm certain that it's no disgrace to leave your spurs at the saddle house instead of wearing them afoot from the pasture.

Telephone bronc riding has a promising future. Parent's magazine should be the first to accept that idea. A man must learn from the saddle; that's the rule of the horse tamer's game. But it's always best to teach from the ground.