

The Californio Horse

Classical Horsemanship on the Trail and in the Cow Pen

— by Sabine Shurter —

About three years ago, I went on a scouting ride in the Banco Bonito area of the Valles Caldera National Preserve. One of the participants was Ron Breines, the director of the preserve's riding program.

He rode his horse in something called a rawhide hackamore and a horsehair mecate. His western saddle did not have the usual, pronounced swells. Instead it had a high cantle, a very large horn, and was equipped with so-called bucking rolls and silver stirrups—a slick fork saddle with a “Wade” tree. He was also wearing “chincaderos” or “chinks.”

His outfit caught my interest, and after talking to Ron for a while, I was astounded to hear him explaining advanced concepts of classical Dressage he used in cow work. Then he explained that his outfit also provided the basis for a very different style of western riding and cow work called *Vaquero* or *Californio* style.

Ron has become a mentor and good friend and has helped me to learn more about the Californios. Most important, I have learned more about my own horses, have developed a better feel for them, and have learned to appreciate ground work in the roundpen. My young horses are no longer ridden with bits but with rawhide hackamores: the initial stage of training horses Californio-style. And, I have taken up ranch roping—quite a concept for an almost 50-year old-woman who has ridden English all her life and never thrown a lariat.

Recently, I went to Southern California to ride and learn with Pat Puckett, a master of the *reata* (lariat or lasso) and the bridle. He has worked on ranches with horses and cows all his life and is a great admirer of classical masters such as Nuño Oliveira.

I also have learned that “Horse Whispering” is not an illusive art. It is

based on concepts picked up and further developed by the old Vaqueros of Alta California. Once taught only to protégés by masters, sometimes in complete secrecy, the art is now available to anybody who is willing to listen and learn.

The origins of Californio style

The Californio style has its roots in riding styles that had developed over the centuries on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, i.e., the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa. The predecessor of the Californio's rawhide hackamore was developed by Moorish riders to train their Berber and Arabian horses. These Moorish horses became the foundation for the Lusitano and the Andalusian horse. Many of the horses later brought to the Americas were of the same stock and formed the foundation of the

first mesteño bands in the North American west.

For centuries, the Iberian riders, who were taught by the Moors, were known and appreciated by rulers and war lords throughout old Europe for their superb horsemanship in battle. Their riding style was founded on the principles of lightness and responsiveness needed for a superior war and/or bull-fighting horse.

When the Spaniards conquered the New World, they brought horses, cattle, and the Iberian riding style with them, which then spread north into Alta California and Texas. The Californian Vaqueros integrated many classical European horsemanship principles that had been introduced by the early Spanish padres, dons, and soldiers into their cowhorse training. They adapted these principles to the rigors of working and roping wild cattle and horses (and even grizzly bears) in the open range on the wild south coast of California long before the land became part of the United States.

Both the Californio style practiced in *Alta* California and the cowboy style, which originated in Texas, were developed in the old west and were based on the need to manage more or less wild cattle roaming the open range. Both styles of cow management have their roots in the Mexican Vaquero and Charro traditions, which can be credited with developing the art of roping, unknown in Spain, and with applying classical riding principles to cow work.

While the Vaqueros of California, and later the **buckaroos** of the Great Basin (Northern California, parts of Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, and Utah), honored and furthered the Vaquero riding and roping style, the cowboys in Texas and neighboring areas adapted to their specific cattle management demands. After the war



This young mare is wearing a larger diameter hackamore, a Wade tree saddle with bucking rolls, and a rawhide reata tied to the saddle. The thick mecate reins are tied up to prevent the hackamore hanger from slipping over the horse's head when tying the horse.

with Mexico and the battle of the Alamo, the Mexican life style, including the Vaquero style of horse-training, fell out of favor in Texas as Anglo influences found their way into the Texas cowboy style of horsemanship and cattle handling.

How the cowboy style came to New Mexico

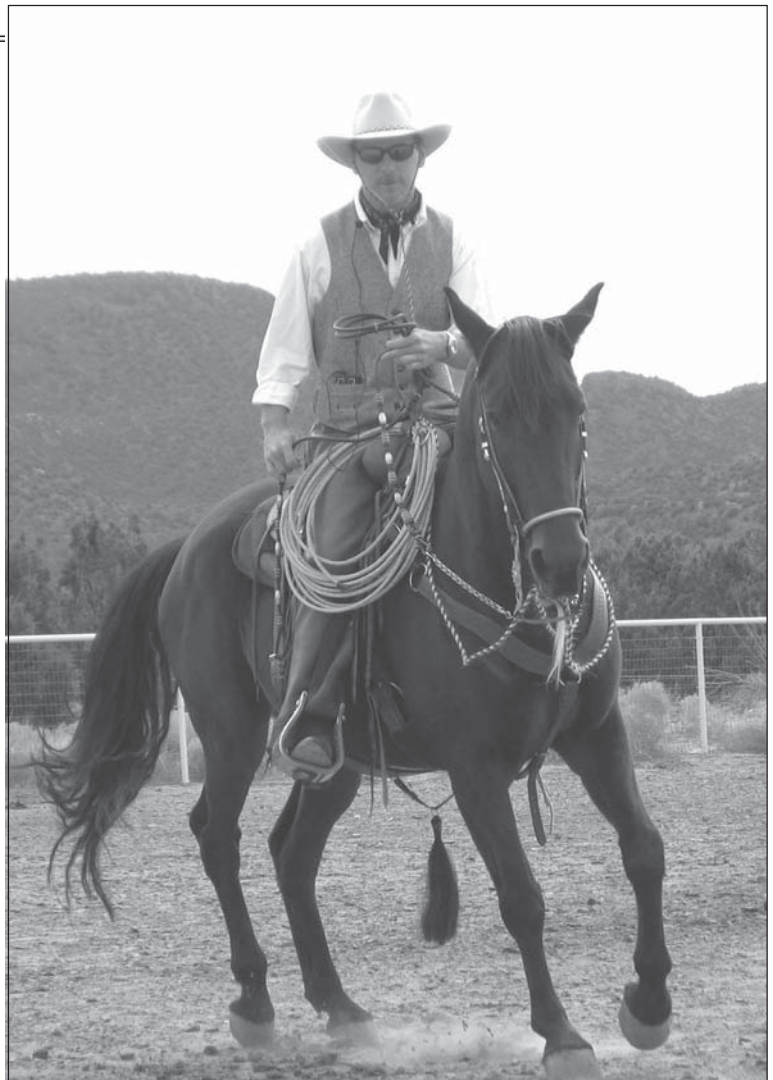
Although New Mexico has been heavily influenced by Spanish and Mexican traditions, the cowboy style of western riding is most prevalent in the state. This begs the question: Why have Vaquero horsemanship traditions not survived as well in New Mexico as they have in California? The answer is the cattle industry, which would have needed excellent cow horses, simply did not prosper well enough in early New Mexico.

One important reason was the permanent threat of raids by the Utes, Apaches, Navajos, and Comanches that put stock owners in ever present danger of losing their herds. Another reason was that possible markets for beef hides, tallow, and meat were distant or non-existent in New Mexico. In California, ranchers could sell tallow and hides to the Yankee traders traveling with their ships up and down the California coast. Such trading opportunities did not exist in early New Mexico.

By 1874, most Indian raids were subdued and ranchers could raise their herds with a much greater sense of security. The demand for meat had picked up and even ranchers in New Mexico could profit from this development. By that time Texas had started to develop its cattle industry and, as a close neighbor, New Mexico was open to Texan influence.

At the same time, the era of the great cattle-raising missions and Ranchos of California had passed. The California cattle industry had suffered great losses due to a prolonged drought in the mid-1800s. In addition, a change in fencing laws put the burden of containing cattle on the rancher. This made raising cattle unprofitable and put many ranchers out of business.

Many large cattle operations such as Miller & Lux moved east and north into North and Central California and the Great Basin. The California Vaqueros moved with these herds, taking their traditions and horsemanship into the Great Basin area. There the **buckaroo style of cow work** and horsemanship developed and prospered. This horsemanship style is closely related to the Californio style of training the reined stock horse.



Ron Breines of Ponderosa NM rides this more advanced horse in the "two rein" set-up. The horse moves off his left leg with minimal use of rein cues. The Santa Barbara style half-breed bit sends a slight signal to the horse's mouth applying no leverage whatsoever. If the horse were to have problems with sorting out the bit signal, Breines would move back to the mecate reins attached to the bosalito.

Training a horse Californio style

The Californio style of working with horses and cows is very different from the Texas cowboy style in its equipment, cattle management, horse training methods, and time spent on training the cow horse.

The traditional Californio goes through several phases when training his horse to become a bridle horse. After extensive groundwork using body language to effectively communicate with the horse (much as is now also taught by natural horsemanship clinicians), he starts his colt in a large diameter (1 or 3/4-inch) hackamore made of rawhide with a rawhide core and a 22-foot horse hair mecate rope rein.

The hackamore works very differently than the snaffle. For example, the rider never pulls on both reins at the same time because this will spoil the horse quickly and teach him to disrespect the hackamore.

Great care is taken to maintain softness and lightness in the horse, just as envisioned by the classical dressage masters such as Robichon de La Guérinière, Antoine de Pluvinel or

Nuño Oliveira. Attention is given to working the front and hindquarters properly and to gaining control over each of the horse's feet without jeopardizing the horse's natural lightness. It is all about feel, balance, and timing as explained so well by the great horseman Tom Dorrance. Leverage and muscle strength are used sparingly by the rider from the beginning.

The rider maintains a balanced classical seat, often with long legs. As the horse is taught to respond to the cues of the hackamore and the rider's legs and weight shifting aids, he progresses through increasingly smaller diameter hackamores and mecates. Eventually he can be ridden with minimal cues in a 3/8 inch or 1/4 inch hackamore and mecate.

Next the rider can progress to the "two rein" set-up (see photo on page ??) where the horse still wears the 3/8 or 1/4 inch bosalito and mecate in addition to a well-balanced "half-breed" or "spade bit." Although some trainers prefer using the snaffle before progressing to the hackamore, ideally the horse has never before been ridden with a bit. His mouth has



This 8 year old gelding is bridled with a half-breed bit with traditional Santa Barbara cheek pieces. Although "straight-up" in the bridle, he carries a pencil bosal or bosalito with a horse-hair get-down rope which is only used for leading and tying the horse. To avoid hurting the horse's mouth or ruining the expensive reins, the rawhide romal reins of the bridle are never taken down or used for tying the horse. With the rider in the saddle, the get-down rope is loosely tied to the side of the saddle. This Wade tree saddle has no bucking rolls and the lariat tied to the saddle can offer the rider a good grip without having to resort to the saddle horn. See photo, page ?? . The horse is groundhobbled to keep him from wandering around and getting into trouble.

been untouched and has remained as "soft as velvet."

At first the rider will use only the mecate reins to signal the horse, then slowly start to use the bridle reins. The bridle reins are attached to the bit with rein chains, which are used to balance the reins to the bridle. Again, he will spend a long time riding his horse in this set-up until he feels that his horse responds well and solely to the romal reins, even in difficult situations.

Next it is time to move the horse straight into the bridle, i.e. riding him solely with a half-breed bit or the old Spanish spade bit. At this point, the horse works on mere, ever so slight, signals given by the romal reins and the rider's body cues.

The bit is *never* used for leverage or pulling. It only helps the horse maintain collection and head set while working with fully engaged hindquarters, even at high speeds. This riding style promotes schooling of the horse's mind and body so that he can use his body to its greatest potential.

Training a horse Californio style is time-consuming, with the handler/rider working "on horse time." Making a fine bridle horse takes up to five years and sometimes longer. Any short-cut is likely to be a set-back. Any mechanical device used to make the horse do things which he is not inclined or not physically able to do are frowned upon and should be avoided.

There is no magic bullet to accelerate the training. The horse is prepared with ground work to further school his body and responses and to minimize dangerous surprises when first mounted. A Californio is proud when his youngsters do not buck on their first ride, although he will handle it well if one breaks in two.

Every step from the different sizes of hackamores into the "two rein" and then into the bridle must be followed and a horse must never be asked to do in the bridle what he cannot do in the hackamore.

Roping styles

Two different roping styles developed, one in Texas and another in California. Both the cowboy (from Texas) and the Californio learned their art from the Mexican Vaqueros. While the Californio retained the Vaquero's artistic roping style, the cowboy developed a different roping style using a 30 to 35 foot rope made of nylon, which he tied hard and fast without allowing it to slip.

The Californio preferred a 60 to 80 ft. rope with a large loop. The rope was dallied (wrapped) around the horn and eased out to prevent the cow from being jerked back when reaching the end of the rope. The reata, made of strands of rawhide, was the preferred tool although other materials such as nylon are now used as well. It was mandatory to dally the reata and let it slip because otherwise it would break.

While the cowboy used a few shots which were sufficient for handling cattle, the Californio had many shots in his portfolio and each shot worked best from a particular angle or distance.

The ranch roping style of the Californio was quite different from what we see at today's rodeo contests. For the Californio, time was of little essence and the cow was supposed to experience as little stress as possible. An intricate well-laid shot was by far favored over a quick and simple shot.

This was born out of the need to doctor cattle singlehandedly in wide open country. While working on his own, the Californio can lay down a cow and tie it with a figure 8 shot assisted only by his well-trained bridle horse.

Because ranch roping style is often slow paced, even people who have never laid their hands on a lariat in their entire life can learn to handle a rope and work with cows. Some horse trainers who have no need for working cattle find the lariat useful for working with their horses in the round pen, teaching them to ground-hobble and desensitizing them to anything that could catch their legs or suddenly touch their body and spook them.



Pat Puckett of Aliso Ranch (Ventura CA) is this eight-year-old Thoroughbred with a spade bit "straight-up" in the bridle. Even during this rather hectic cutting session, collection, soft reins and a good head set are maintained. Although the Californio cutting horse has speed and cow sense, the rider does not turn over the responsibility to the horse but gives cues to the horse while working cattle.

The art of the Californios had almost been forgotten, but thanks to horsemen such as Tom and Bill Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Pat Puckett, Buck Brannaman and many others this style of horsemanship with ancient roots is experiencing a well-deserved comeback and has caught the attention of horse people around the world.

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Learn more about Californio horsemanship

- ◆ californioranchhorse.org
- ◆ elvaquero.com
- ◆ patpuckett.com
- ◆ ronbreines.com
- ◆ thecalifornios.com

Why Californio Horsemanship?

This article does not explain all the intricacies of the Californio style of horsemanship. Like any classical approach, the Californio style requires a lot of time with the horse, and the rider must put considerable thought into his training approach. However, it is worthwhile for anyone who wants a well-trained, well-mannered horse that responds willingly *without being dull*.

This style complements the horse and its natural abilities. It does not subjugate nor pamper the horse. It trains the horse to be a reliable and content working partner.

The Californios train their horses with cow work in mind. However, a Californio-style trained horse excels in many disciplines as his foundations are well laid. Like many well-trained ranch horses, the Californio horse is a joy to ride on the trail, in the cow pen, or in the arena, and is easy to handle on the ground whether he is lead, groomed, loaded, or shod.

National magazines such as *Western Horseman* have published articles about Californio Horsemanship and trainers such as Mike Bridges. Ed Connell's books on training the hackamore and bridle horse are selling well. Clinics offered by Californio trainers in New Mexico such as Ron Breines are well attended.



Ranch team roping: The roper in the front is getting his reata ready to throw a heel shot. The roper in the (right) background, a Vaquero from Baja California, is holding the head rope tight by dallying it around his saddle horn. The rider on the white horse stands by to assist as needed. This is not a timed event and emphasis is on well performed shots and putting as little stress as possible on the heifer.