THE CUTTING EDGE

With A Sixth Sense Called Cow Savvy, This Horse Earns His Keep

For each role the horse plays, every sport or job or function, there is a special story: there is a history, a unique set of mental and physical requirements, a particular area of health and management problems to be explored.

The fact that the cutting horse was instrumental in the building of the American West and the appeal of cutting as a spectator sport today are too well known to require much discussion; but the talents and problems of these animals—a closer look at what sets them apart from other equine athletes and what they have in common—may provide insights into the patterns that are universal to all phases of horsemanship.

By Janet S. Herring

He can read a cow like we read the morning headlines.

Like a chessmaster, thinking six moves in advance, he has his opponent psyched cold.

He crouches, leaps, lunges, feints, parries, wheels, dances like a boxer, combining offense and defense in one smooth glide.

Pounding to the rhythm of batwing chaps and slackened reins slapping hide and leather, a cutting horse is a pro athlete in a pro game. He is bred and trained for what he does; he is taught and conditioned like any other equine athlete. But he brings with him something else—an indefinable sixth sense called cow savvy, and what in any human competition would be called a love of the game. This quality turns a decent athlete into a valuable working animal, and an excellent athlete into one of the most prized pieces of flesh on four

legs. A finished cutting horse—a true professional—is as rare as a ruby, and about as expensive. This horse knows his business and he is determined to dominate; he is confident that he can move anything anywhere.

The use of horses to herd and manage cattle began somewhere beyond the reach of history books. In the United States it grew up, a child of necessity, on the dusty open ranges of the Southwest. Moving into a milling herd of Longhorns, separating one—for doctoring or branding—and keeping the terrified cow from reentering the herd is no easy job. A really good horse can move through the herd like a sailboat on a lake, cutting any cow shown him with barely a ripple.

Obviously, a skilled and successful execution of this maneuver reflects prestige on both horse and rider; working cowboys of the old West treated a horse with cow sense with both respect and pride. And since the human instinct to bet is about as strong as the equine instinct to band together, it was inevitable that at some point—a day well over 100 years ago—wagers were laid on certain horses' abilities, siring one of the most popular and profitable sports of modern times.

Ears pinned back, he fixes the cow with a steely glare.

Today, cutting competition starts in an arena with a herd of 15 to 20 cattle, who are first quieted or "settled" by two officials on horseback, called herd holders. When the contestant's name is announced, he rides his horse into the waiting herd and "puts him on a cow," signaling the horse which cow to cut from the herd. As the rest of the cows naturally crowd back into the fence, the cutting horse and rider drive the lone cow forward to a safe distance from the herd. Two "turnback" horses and their riders face the cutter, waiting to direct the cow back toward the performing horse and rider should she try to bolt. Once the cow has been selected, the rider's job is done—the rest is up to the horse.

Now the action part of the competition begins; it's up to the horse alone to counter the lightning moves of a yearling heifer dodging and twisting every which way in her efforts to return to the safety of the herd. The challenge for the horse is to stay head-to-head with the cow and intimidate her into submission; the challenge for the rider is to stay on and leave the horse alone. The rider holds his rein hand just ahead of the saddle, clear of the horse. He grips the saddle horn tightly with his free hand and leans back to stay on board through the whiplash stops and split-second turns. When the horse's powerful shoulders brake as his front end instantaneously drops away into a half or three-quarter turn, it takes a skilled rider to stay up and not disturb the horse's rhythm.

It's unquestionably the horse's show. Ears pinned back, he fixes the cow with a steely glare. In any other activity, he would be alert for his rider's cues, waiting for his signals to move left, right, forward; here in the cutting pen or arena it's just the horse and the cow.

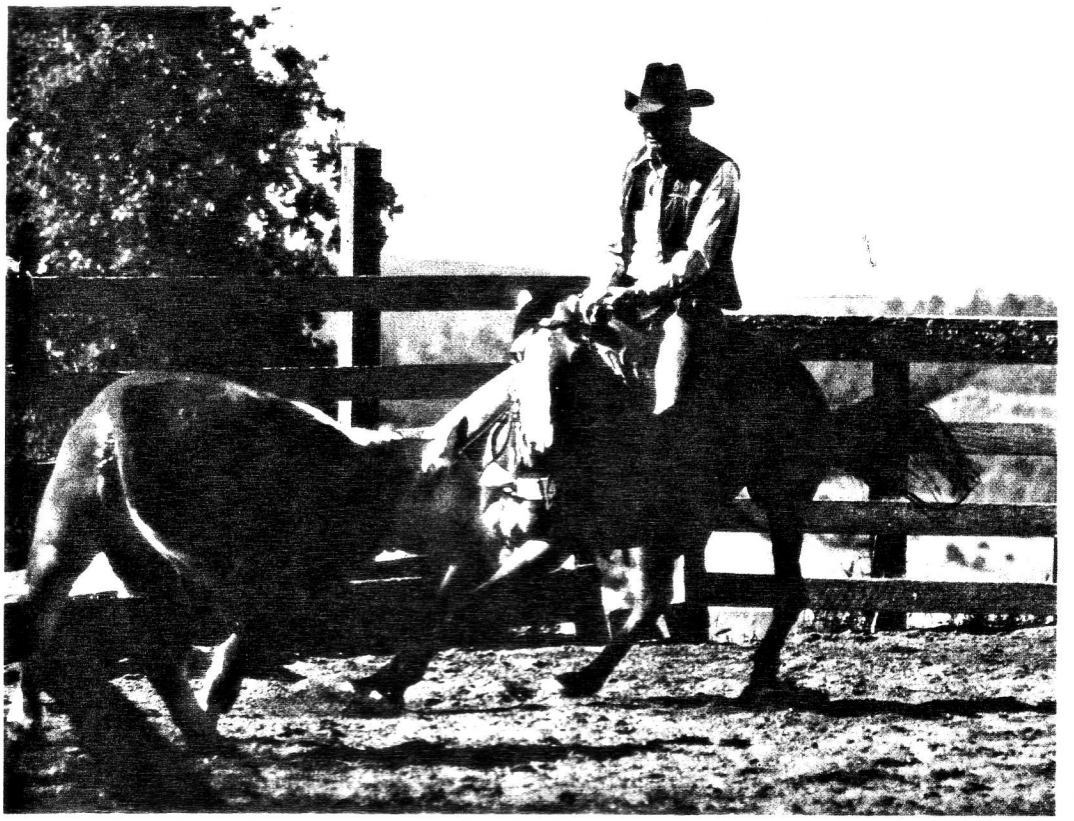
She makes a move toward the herd. He swings around to cut her off. She trots to the left, but he appears in front of her. She tries the old double back-redouble gambit; crouched and pivoting from the hindquarters, he matches her swing for swing. She circles and breaks to the right. He darts between her and the herd, snakes his neck out to block her, startles her with his intense scowl. Anywhere she tries to go, the horse is there first.

How? Telepathy? Body language? Simple habituation? Heredity seems to play a part in the acquisition of cow sense, but no one can guarantee it, or explain why.

"Cow sense—we just call it 'cow'—seems to be the innate ability to key onto a moving object, and a great ability to learn," says Gary Potter, DVM, behavior specialist at Texas A&M University.

"But," he continues, "the greatest variable is training. The best trainers ride the best horses. Period. Of course, they always pick the best raw material available; the best athletes and the easiest to teach. But the horse does what he does because there are consequences he'd just as soon avoid if he doesn't. And 'cow' doesn't have to have anything to do with cattle at all—he'll work a duck, a chicken, a man, a machine, whatever you set him on, once he's been trained. But you'd never see a green horse, even with all the bloodlines in the world, just herding a cow for no reason. There's nothing mystical about 'cow': it's athletic ability, trainability and a trainer who can spot those things and make the most of them."

"But it's interesting," points out Maryland trainer Ned Hunt, "that 95 percent of competitive cutting horses today are registered Quarter Horses, and many of those are from one of a small handful of lines. You can teach an Arabian to cut, sure, but in some horses it's almost instinctive, like a retriever's mouth. You'll train them for the moves, just going back and forth on the herd like a windshield wiper. And you do this for maybe a month, maybe six months, and then suddenly one



Head-to-head with her cow, 1978 Futurity Co-champion Star Dek is positioned with her weight in the rear, ready for a quick pivot.

day he just turns to that cow and bears down. And once he gets the hang of it, he never burns out. Tell me one other sport where you can take a horse's bridle off, and he still does exactly what he's supposed to. Jumpers, racers, polo ponies, you never see them work unbridled—but a cutting horse can."

Getting the horse ready for the cattle is where man plays a major part. Each trainer/rider has his own trade-secret techniques. Some use goats for practice because they're quicker than cows and can wake up a lazy horse. Then there's the mechanical cow, a robot-like motorized vehicle resembling a

For Fun And Profit

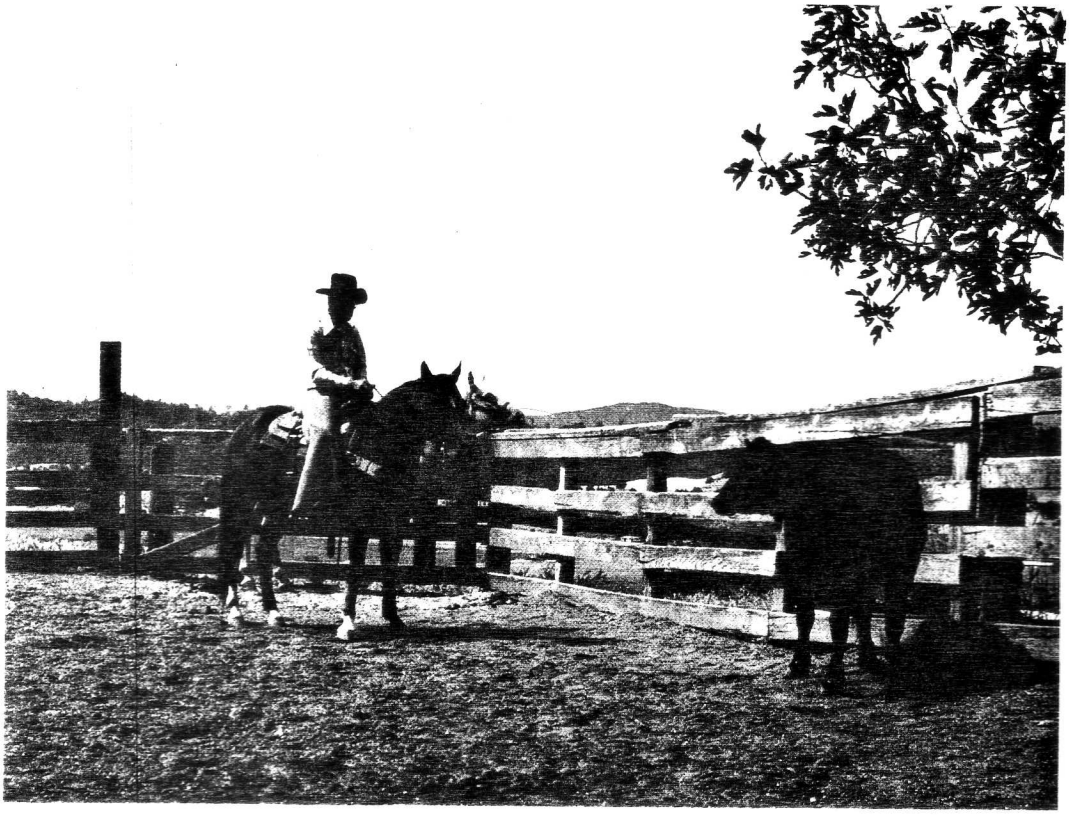
The first recorded cutting contest offering actual prize money was held July 22, 1898 at the Cowboy Reunion in Haskell, Texas. In 1908, cutting moved indoors for the first time to the old North Side Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas. The National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) was born in 1946 with 15 members. The cutting contest then came under a national set of standard rules.

Since that time the growth of the association has been nonstop, reaching 4,200 members in 1979, with 80 affiliated clubs. Today there are over 3,500 cutting horse classes throughout the nation each year, for horses and riders of all levels. In addition, several breed registries sanction cutting classes at their own shows. While the sport is dominated by Quarter Horses, other breeds including Arabians, Morgans and Appaloosas have also done well.

Today, competitive cutting is second only to racing as the richest horse event in the world. The 1978 NCHA Futurity had a purse of more than $350,000 (futurities are for three-year-olds, while maturities are for four-year-olds). The price of the horses themselves has tripled since NCHA was established 33 years ago; $75,500 was the price tag on the champion gelding, Royal Santana. Outstanding cutting horse stallions are syndicated today as in the Thoroughbred industry. Cutting even has its own Triple Crown: the NCHA Futurity in Fort Worth, Texas, the NCHA Maturity or Derby in Waco, Texas and the National and World Open Cutting Horse Finals in Las Vegas.

During a two-and-a-half-minute competition performance, a cutting horse should work a minimum of two cows. At least one must be brought from deep in the herd to prove the horse can move a cow out and drive her ahead, rather than just skimming an easy mark off the side of the herd. While the horse performs, one or more judges mark him on how well he cuts and controls the cow. Scores from each judge range from a low of 60 points to a high of 80 points—an almost unheard-of score.

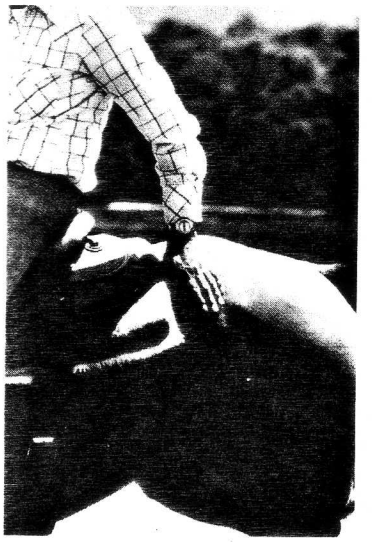
The primary sin in this contest is, of course, "turning tail" to a cow. Penalties are also incurred when a horse fails to separate a single animal; picks up additional cattle from the herd; gets out of position or surrenders to the cow; bites a cow; or lets the cow push him back into the herd. The rider can also be penalized for visibly reining or cueing his horse. While some of these points are more or less arbitrary judging standards, many are pure practicality in light of the fact that sick cows or fat market steers were often the target for cutting horses in actual ranch operations. Running—instead of *holding* the cow or steer—would weaken a sick animal or wear off valuable fat.



Horse and cow stand motionless, ready for the showdown.

cow; some trainers swear by them—some swear at them. Mechanical cows are most commonly used when cattle are in short supply or a horse has a particular problem that needs to be worked out with repeated correction. (After a cow has gotten used to the man-horse beast, she is no longer frightened or interested, and she loses her value as a "competitor"; thus the cow goes sour in a month or two, while a cutting horse almost never loses interest.) Whatever the practice target, most riders start young cutting horses in either a hackamore or a snaffle bit with running martingale to help keep their heads low. They progress to the hackamore, or else a regular bridle with a low port bit, typically a Texas-style grazer or sweetwater bit.

Heredity, intelligence and desire are the three primary ingredients in a cutting horse candidate. Bloodlines produce the good conformation, the athletic ability and most importantly the horse's ability to learn—to think for himself. Says Ed Vanoni, who raises and trains cutting horses on his 1,800-acre working cattle ranch in the foothills of northern California, "A cutting horse can't always wait for the rider to tell him what to do or he'll be late and miss the cow. He's got to be able to think for himself." Physical potential is essential, too. "You want an athlete. You can usually get an idea from the way they play with other colts when they're babies. If a colt naturally drops back and



A pat of affection and a word of praise for a job well done.

turns away when another colt kicks at him, chances are he'll be good at stepping back to work off his hocks to sweep from side to side after a cow. A colt who continually leaps high in the air or falls down getting away from his playmate probably wouldn't do as well." Vanoni talks frankly about what he likes in a cutting horse. "Usually, they're smaller than others and close to the ground. This lets them gather themselves easier, more naturally, like a spring. If they're built to do this naturally they won't get hurt. They have to be consistent and set

straight and true across the cutting pen or arena." Most cutters seem to agree that 14 to 15 hands is the right height for a horse in this line of work; Lynx Melody, last year's Futurity winner, was only 13 hands, three inches.

Says Arizona trainer Gene Suiter, "I want a good athlete and a good mind even more. I prefer a big horse with a small horse's action." As Suiter speaks, a young mare is led up and saddled. Suiter takes the reins and continues, gesturing with his hands: "See, here's an example. She's not as well conformed as some, but what an athlete! Her neck is too short, but she's a winner anyway. Desire to win makes her a winner." Brushing the mare's forelock aside and rubbing her forehead, he says, "It's what's here that counts. It's what's between those big brown eyes."

The desire to work—what Suiter calls intensity—shows in the horse's ears and facial expression. "An intelligent horse usually works low-headed," he explains. "You want a horse that's supple and free-moving. Then you have intensity, without tension. A brittle mover has a manmade style. It's not natural. A good cutting horse needs a good hind leg with a strong hock because that's the first place they're apt to break down. And they need lots of bone for balance."

Indeed, most veterinarians agree that the hock is the cutting horse's Achilles heel, because it is the main pivot point during performance. Says Dan Roberts, DVM, of Wichita Falls, Texas, "You see more hock troubles [in cutting horses]. Not so much curb[0], but more damage to the hock joint itself, because a lot of the time these horses have all their weight on one leg."

A good cutting horse always has his hindquarters beneath him, his back and neck arched into an almost feline posture. He sometimes seems to hover, not unbalanced but balanceless on his hind legs, before exploding into a sudden lope, a full circle or a determined dive. He will throw himself onto his forequarters and slide knee-deep in flying sand, reversing direction the next moment by pivoting from one outstretched foot. Now he appears to bend his body around the cow, holding her motionless for an instant before whipping completely around to block her startled jump backward. Ideally, the horse's center of gravity remains practically disengaged, while all the work—and stress—falls to the delicate gears meshing wildly in quarters, shoulders, hocks and pasterns.

"It amazes me how sturdy these horses are," says Jack Woolsey, DVM, a practitioner in Santa Rosa, California. "You put a 200-pound man and a heavy stock saddle on a young horse, then ask him for his life. A racehorse couldn't do it.

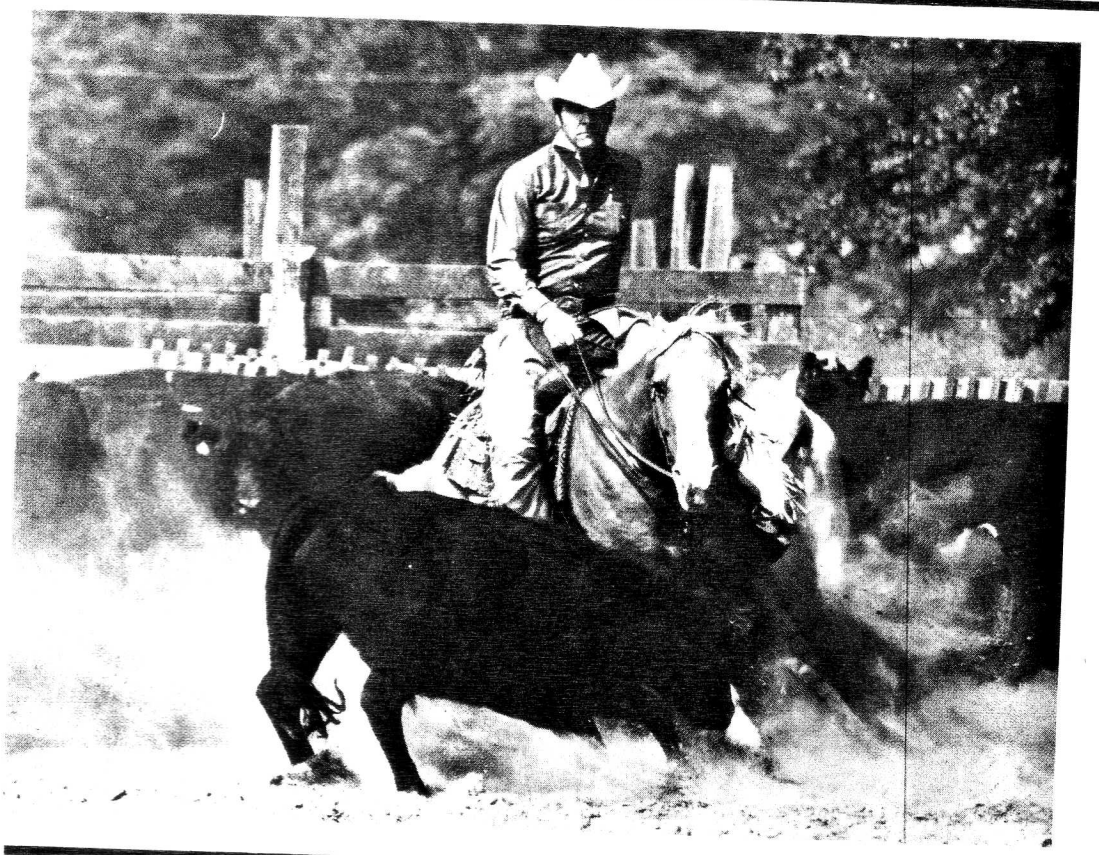
"During the momentary stops and starts, a man on a cutting horse can feel when his horse is out of gas and can pull him up before he gets hurt. That's in practice, of course—at a show, he's asked to keep on." This practice of stopping before it's too late is, Woolsey contends, one reason cutting horses seldom go lame in spite of the tasks they're asked to perform. "Cutting horses are expected to last. Racehorses are here and then gone."

The ligament at the back of the hock takes a lot of strain when a horse sets down hard and turns after a cow. This ligament would seem apt to become inflamed, swell and "spring a curb." Surprisingly, most veterinarians don't regard this as a major problem with cutting horses. They point instead to the check ligament—which runs up behind the front cannon bone and connects to bones in the back of the knee—as a trouble spot that becomes inflamed when a front foot is used repeatedly to push off into a turn.

He sometimes seems to hover, not unbalanced but balanceless . . .

Like others involved with cutting horses, Woolsey emphasizes the conservative use of drugs. "If a horse reaches a major performance and he's tender, he might be given bute like a baseball player takes aspirin for a sore arm." As for other pain-killing and mood-altering drugs, "I've never even had a cutter ask me for a long-acting tranquilizer." Woolsey believes most cutters are hesitant to work a lame horse because "a cutting horse in pain might get sour, associating his work with his pain." Robert Norrie, DVM, Woolsey's partner, adds, "It's hard to equate what a cutting horse does. The force factors [when the horse stops and turns] are unknown because a cutting horse's moves are so unpredictable. Certainly the hock and the areas on up above the stifle, the hip and gluteal muscles[0] sustain a lot of trauma. When these horses come around on their back ends and roll back over themselves, a tremendous amount of twisting and torqueing is involved. There's little muscle tearing, but muscle stretching does happen. There aren't a lot of tendon injuries. Front end injuries are usually from the horses stepping on themselves."

Lighter shoes, Woolsey suggests, might eliminate some foot and leg problems by allowing for more



Ned Hunt on Miss Vandel, working low and close.

natural foot movement. The heavy shoes, he believes, have a pendulum effect, exaggerating movement and causing the legs to collide, which can result in splints or bruises. Lighter shoes might allow a more natural foot movement.

Andrew K. Currie, DVM, who sees a number of cutting horses in his Houston, Texas practice, contends that the cutting horse faces three special problems in trying to stay sound. "One is the varying footing these horses have to work in, from deep mud to slippery sand. Second is the length of time they stand in a trailer going to and from shows. Another thing is the Cutting Futurity. It's done wonders for cutting [as a profitable sport], but it does get horses used hard when they're young. They undergo a number of stresses before they're mature.

"Quick, sharp turns can stretch a tendon and cause a nagging kind of pain, like tennis elbow. When they do get hurt, these horses aren't rested long enough. We don't have the type of physical therapy for them that we do for humans to help them heal with weight off the injury. You can't put a horse on crutches and there are no isometric exercises for them. I am of the opinion that a lot of wear and tear can cause the bursa, a fluid-filled shock-absorbing pillow in the lower hock area, to become inflamed and painful. It's called bursitis, and it happens in all other athletes. A horse may be a little short-moving in the morning and then work out of it. If it goes on a long time it can involve the bone and cause spavin[0]."

There are stories of racehorses who finished a race on heart alone after breaking a leg in the final furlong. Cutting has its heroes, too. War Olee, six-time West Central Open Cutting Horse of the Year, is one such legend. At the 1976 World Championship Quarter Horse Show, he faced tough cows. Only those who knew him well noticed any hesitation; his rider later said the horse seemed "a little off." The stallion had fractured a bone in his left hind leg, but he never let up until his cut was done. Later, looking at the X-rays, veterinarians were amazed that the horse hadn't stopped. Similar fractures, they said, had crippled horses. Eventually, the break healed; War Olee cut a few more times, then was retired to stud.

There is no other equine sport in which the horse makes as many decisions or is given so much responsibility for his own actions: the cutting horse occupies a unique position. His job began in the days of long, dusty cattle drives, rounding up herds that covered half a state. And to this day, the cutting horse performs a task that cannot be done better by man or machine—no modern stockyard, cattle prod or jeep can cut and herd a cow like a pro.