

COMPETITIVE CUTTING HORSE FAQs

A cutting horse must be naturally athletic. Just as not everyone becomes a pro football or baseball player, not every horse is cut out for cutting. In addition to cat-like reflexes, flexibility and the ability to pivot on a dime, a cutting horse needs the right mentality. Good cutting horses are born with what cowboys call “cow sense” or “cow smarts.” Just like a good hunting dog can retrieve a bird and deliver it, a cutting horse understands what a cow or calf is thinking and where it’s going to move next. Then it can mirror those moves to keep the animal separated. About 99 percent of cutting horses are quarter horses.

How valuable is a cutting horse?

A good cutting horse can cost \$25,000 to \$35,000. Add another \$25,000 or so for training. Breeding fees can top \$25,000 for a good stud. “It’s not like golf. You can’t go to Walmart and spend a hundred dollars and if you don’t like it then throw the clubs into the pond,” Caloudas says.

What exactly does a cutting horse do?

A cutting horse works with a rider to separate a calf—typically a yearling weighing anywhere from 350 to 500 pounds—from a larger group of cattle. The horse positions itself between a calf and the herd, and mirrors its moves to prevent it from rejoining the group.

How is a cutting horse trained?

First, trainers have their horse follow a group of calves until the horse focuses on them. Next, they walk the horse parallel to a herd while moving around an arena. The horse gradually is guided closer to the cows, but still moving parallel to them. Eventually, when the rider asks the horse to stop at the front of the pack, the cows turn. A trainer then teaches a horse to follow a calf through its turn, so it’s facing the other direction. As the horse gains skill, the rider guides it to work a calf out of a herd and then practices those maneuvers. Some trainers use mechanical calves to assist in training.

What do cutting horse riders do with their legs and hands?

Probably not as much as you think. The rider places a hand on



Photo by Martha Mericic

Constantine Caloudas rides the horse Playgirls Deal during the 2017 Bluebonnet Cutting Horse Association competition in Brenham. The event is not associated with Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative.

the front of the saddle horn to brace so when the horse bows down and mirrors a calf’s moves, the rider won’t be pitched off. Usually riders stay quiet on the horse, using their legs slightly to encourage the horse to move one way or the other if needed.

Where can the public watch cutting horse action?

Many National Cutting Horse Association events have been cancelled because of COVID-19, but the 2021 schedule includes the 3 Amigos and Senior World Tour events in Gonzales on Jan. 1-3, Jan. 15-17 and Jan 29-31, and the Jared Lesh Cutting event in Whitesboro on Jan. 21-23. Find information at nchacutting.com. The American Cutting Horse Association’s 2021 schedule includes competitions in Belton on Jan. 2-3 and Jan. 15-17, and in Brenham on Feb. 13-14 and March 20-21. Check for updates at: achacutting.org. Nueces Canyon Ranch also offers private group tours and demonstrations by appointment for a fee (barbecue included.) Find information at nuecescanyon.com.

— Pam LeBlanc

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ing lessons as a girl. I’m more comfortable on a bicycle than a rocketship of a horse.

My heels sink in the stirrups as I sit up. But for cutting, that’s not the right thing to do, Caloudas tells me. A slouch posture — “kind of like you’re hung over,” Caloudas says — is more appropriate. His son Dylan, who also works at the ranch, demonstrates perfectly, hunching in his saddle, prepared for any move the horse might make.

Cutters also brace one hand on the big horn of the large western saddle to keep from pitching forward if the horse slams on the brakes suddenly.

I may not know what I’m doing, but the horse does. When facing off against a pen of mooing cattle, it’s good to know who’s in charge.

I pat Karlos on the neck. We’ll let that calf relax for another day. ■



Constantine Caloudas gets horse Karlos to take the bit so he can put on the bridle.