

A NEW KIND OF CLINIC

Really, it happened at the last minute. Well, not the last possible minute, but close.

I had planned on spending the weekend watching a reined cow horse clinic given by Sandy Collier and hosted by the Colorado Reined Cow Horse Association. I had my first exposure to reined cow horses at the World's Greatest Horseman competition last summer, and was eager to learn more about this event.

When one rider phoned in ill the night before, a spot opened up and the question was posed across the dinner table, "Would I like to ride in the clinic?"

My first instinct was to say, "Uhh, no thanks. I'd rather watch and take pictures," which translated roughly to "I don't know the first thing about what to expect at this kind of clinic and that scares me, so no way!"

But instead I said, not very convincingly, "Sure."

A seasoned mount was selected from the remuda for me. I knew that he was about as solid as a horse can be, and so my nervousness slowly changed to excitement. It's a wonderful feeling to have such confidence in the horse beneath you so that you can relax and know that he'll take care of you and cover for the most blatant of your mistakes.

Sandy did an excellent job at teaching to all levels. She was able to explain, in broad terms, the basics for beginners and pinpoint tiny corrections for the more experienced riders.

The two-day clinic focused on refining the skills necessary to compete in reined cow horse events, which include riding a reining pattern, herd work with cattle, and taking a

cow down the fence. Most of the riders were very familiar with reined cow horses, so the pace was fast.

In the morning, one at a time they would work on perfecting their circles, stops and spins, examining in detail where mistakes were being made and how to fix them. In the afternoons we worked with the cattle, boxing them to show control and then taking them down the fence.

Learning something new is always a challenge. As a fellow participant said to me while we waited our turn to work on stops, "This is just as much about getting us out of our comfort zones as it is about training our horses."

He was right, and for me the most rewarding portion of the clinic was loping down the fence (you're supposed to go much faster than I actually did) after a cow. To say that I really turned and circled the cow would be a stretch of the truth, but after going down that fence without any fear in the bottom of my stomach, the rest didn't matter.

It was good, too, to feel that feeling of being utterly lost, not knowing exactly what you were supposed to do or where to be. It's frustrating, it's maddening, but that challenge of figuring it out is intoxicating.

I'm fairly certain that I won't be getting ready for any futurities in the near future, but the experience of riding in Sandy's Clinic was a very valuable one. The horse I was on took good care of me, and allowed me to gain some confidence while trying something new.

For more information on reined cow horses, visit the National Reined Cow Horse Association Web site at <http://www.nrcha.com>. There you can find contact numbers for associations in your state, upcoming clinics, and a detailed explanation about the origins of the association. Or call 559-992-9396 if you do not have access to the Internet.

Sandy Collier can be reached at 805-688-1084 in Buellton, California.