

## **TRAINING TIPS FOR COWBOY MOUNTED SHOOTING**

As you continue in the sport of Cowboy Mounted Shooting, it is extremely important to remember that your mount's indoctrination into shooting events must be done with some common sense and caution.

If you already own a horse that you wish to use for this sport, you will need to test him for a tolerance to gunfire. Since you already own a horse, this step needs to be taken slowly. It would be a shame to ruin your chances of using your own horse because you tried to rush him and thus scared him beyond recovery. We recommend taking the horse to matches and letting him "hang out" around the gunfire. Being held close to the arena is wonderful training. Setting balloons is another great way of introduction. This will allow you to observe the horse's reaction and adjust accordingly. If he shows little or no trauma to the gunfire, try riding him around the other horses. This gives your horse confidence and lets him see that the other horses aren't bothered by the noise. The next step will be very easy if you were able to allow your horse to acclimate to gunfire at some practices first.

To start shooting off your horse try the following ideas. A good way to start a horse is with the use of a .22 caliber "Starter Pistol". We recommend you get an assistant for the first gun test on any horse. One person fires the gun while the other person rides the horse. We believe this is the best way to start the horse to new sounds or things that are potentially scary to the horse. The premise is that a well trained horse knows that the rider will punish him if he does wrong or misbehaves, but the horse isn't sure if this new sound is a threat or not. Therefore, in most instances, the horse is more concerned about the rider than the new noise. While the assistant is firing the .22, give the horse something to do and think about. Ride your horse!

We usually start by putting the horse through a simple exercise, like a slow lope around in a circle (use of a round pen is ideal). If the horse has never been around gunfire, start by having the assistant stand outside the round pen and fire off a few rounds when the horse is at the farthest point away from him. We continue to slowly move closer and closer to the horse, until the gun can be fired in the center of the circle I am loping around. Be sure to lope the horse in both directions so that "both sides" of the horse learn that the gunfire won't hurt him.

We also let the horse smell the gun after it is fired. We rub it on the horses' neck to show that the "smelly gun" won't hurt him. If the horse is responding satisfactorily, the gun can now be handed to the rider to fire from the back of the horse while continuing to lope in the circle pattern. The rider then fires the gun behind him and upward (overhead) to allow the least amount of concussion to the horse. Fire only one round, then praise the horse, stroke his neck, etc. Continue in this fashion until you are firing off two or three rounds in a row with little or no bolting, spooking, etc. Again, be sure to fire the gun off both sides of the horse. This is very important.

At this time, if all has gone well, we repeat the entire procedure with the .45 caliber revolver loaded with the blanks you will be using. This step usually goes much faster because the foundation of praise is already established. At this juncture, we bring out a couple of poles with balloons and try shooting the balloons as you ride past them. In this fashion, continue to fire from the hip (don't get any closer to his head until much later in his training to avoid "ringing his bell" and ruining a potentially good shooting horse) while still allowing the horse to experience the balloon breaking at the moment the gun goes "bang". The balloon blowing up is always a surprise to the new horse in the beginning!

We would like to take this opportunity to advise the use of earplugs for your horse. These are highly advisable for the new shooting mount. In most cases, the earplugs will help the horse adjust to the sound and will allow you to advance your training schedule much faster than without them.

If you have access to a gun trained horse, use him to train the new mounted shooting horse. We ride the trained horse and fire the gun. Ride the trainee around while the shooting is going on. The idea is to work your way closer and closer to the shooting. The goal is to be riding next to the gun horse while the gun is being fired on the opposite side from the trainee. If you can do this, it is time to try shooting off the back of the new horse.

Now that you are well on your way to having a gun broke horse, you are ready to begin the job of becoming a team for this new sport (YES - you and your horse are a team - IF YOU'RE NOT, YOU SHOULD BE!). At this point, you and your new horse should be working on being around as much gunfire as possible and gaining confidence on as many aspects of mounted shooting as possible. If the horse is still having trouble with balloons, try tying lots of balloons around his stall or paddock. This works especially well if the balloons can be secured around the feeder. The horse has to go past the balloons to eat. Since a horse is always hungry, this will gain you the quickest possible results. You could also turn a horse out in a round pen with a few balloons to play with, or hang one/some from the saddle and let him run off his fear. This happens quicker with each turnout with the balloons attached to the saddle. Eventually the horse will ignore the balloons (the desired result!).

We feel it is important to vary the horses' training. Hopefully, you will not find yourself in the position of "Every time you take the horse out of the stall, it's to go shoot balloons!" This will definitely undermine your efforts. Try to give the horse a break now and then. I like to go on trail rides for a change. This is very relaxing for both the horse and rider. It allows you to bond with your horse and get to know him in a way that can't be duplicated in the arena. While on your trail rides, be sure to practice navigating some natural obstacles. For instance, at a wide spot in the trail, navigate a turn around a tree or bush (instead of a barrel). It will also be helpful to travel toward obstacles up ahead on the trail instead of meandering wherever the horse wants to go (duplicates the traveling in a straight line between barrels on some of our stages).

The speed is not the issue here, control is. Be sure you are traveling where **YOU** want and not where the horse just happens to be heading. The difference is very subtle. The operative point here is: Be sure you are choosing and not the horse.

Continue to practice on various patterns with the guns and holsters of choice. Be sure to go through all the motions just like a real stage. Try dry firing (check with manufacturer's instructions or talk to other experienced shooters for further information on dry firing your make of gun) at the targets while navigating the patterns. **Do not** start this exercise at full speed! That would be detrimental to both the horse and rider. Start at a trot or lope and help the horse navigate the turns on the course of fire. As the horse gains confidence in "running patterns" or turning the barrel/poles, the rider can increase the speed of travel. If the new horse has difficulty traveling forward willingly, try following a seasoned or well-schooled horse around the course. This seasoned horse need not be a gun-trained horse, as you are only dry firing at this time. We have found that a horse that lacks confidence will usually travel forward willingly when given a confident horse to follow. Try not to overdo the following aspect to the point of dependence though. Practice your rate of speed around the obstacles while simultaneously practicing the drawing and holstering of the guns. This helps you acquire your timing in regards to the speed of the horse, as well as fine-tuning the use of the single action guns with the most efficient use of the holsters to suit your specific needs and style

Try not to use the same patterns all the time. Try to mix them up for your sake as well as your horses'. I don't want my horse to memorize the patterns; I want him to listen to me and wait until I tell him to turn. In this manor, the horse won't become confused when he sees a familiar pattern, but you have been told to run it in a different way! Try to train the horse to be aware of obstacles, and to expect a signal from you as one approaches. In other words, when my horse & I come to an obstacle, he gathers himself up, because he knows something is going to happen (turn, circle, pass between, etc.), but he waits for my signal as to which way we are to go. Obviously, this training method takes longer, but is well worth the effort.

Concurrently with the aforementioned training, be sure to get in as much gun practice as possible. One point we would like to bring up again; **do not burn out your horse doing the same thing all the time.**

**THE KEY TO THIS GAME IS A GOOD HORSE, A GOOD AIM AND**

**PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!**

**Your Friends and Riders**

**Of**

**The Florida Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association**

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