Ray Hunt, 1929-2009

One of the world's most influential horsemen, Ray Hunt, passed away March 12. The following story on Hunt originally ran in the January 2005 issue of Western Horseman.

Western Horseman of the Year 2004—Ray Hunt

RAY HUNT learned to transcend traditional ideas of working with horses. He wasn't the first to do this, but he's the man responsible for spreading the gospel of modern training and horsemanship techniques literally around the world. Ray Hunt is the source of the modern genre of horse clinicians.

He's the man who taught students at horsemanship clinics before they were even called "clinics." At age 75, with only one lung, he still holds schools for groups of people around the globe who want to know something of what he knows about horses. With his wife, Carolyn, at his side, Ray travels and teaches, and still turns down far more requests for clinics than he could possibly provide. Yet he doesn't want to be remembered as a clinician and has little regard for most clinicians today. A bare handful of them get a sincere nod from the master.

For all that he knows about horses, Ray credits his life's journey to the late Tom Dorrance, a modest man, likeable and quiet, who understood horses as no one before or since, and who saw in Ray a person who'd listen and learn. "Tom Dorrance is the man who made it possible," Ray says. "Hondo is the horse that made it necessary." ...

To appreciate "possible" and "necessary," it's best to start at the beginning.

A Dream Come True

Ray grew up in the 1930s, in Elmore County, southwestern Idaho, between Bruneau and Mountain Home. His dad raised workhorses and was a teamster who worked his horses for various ranches in the area. Ray, his five sisters and two brothers were children of the Great Depression, and money was scarce.

"We had pigs, chickens, sheep and cows, so we had our own meat, milk and butter," Ray recalls. "There was a 20-acre garden, and Mother did a lot of canning and put it in the cellar. We had to hand-pump water for the stock. We were a farm family, and I knew I was going to be a farmer,

which was all right. But I always dreamed of being a cowboy. We rode workhorses bareback."

Ray grew up with hard work. He coped with a congenital deformity commonly known as a clubfoot, but that didn't keep him out of the silage pits and hay stacks. There was a lot of silage and hay to put up every year as feed for large herds of range sheep that wintered in the area. The labor involved stomping down silage after it had run through a chopper, and stomping down loose hay as a stack was being built. The hours were long and the pay was 33 cents per ton.

"There were times I thought I couldn't take another step," Ray recalls. "But two or three hours later I was still going. I don't know what kept me there, except it was a job; I could get some money."

Ray laughs at the memories now, which include greasing an old belt-driven hay chopper by truck light, well after dark. "I look back and I'm glad I went through it, but there's no way I could handle that kind of work again."

Winter would come and the hardest work subsided for a couple of months. During those times Ray had a little more time to ride. He fed cattle on a ranch near Bruneau, and often rode the feed grounds. It was during one of those cold, bleak days that an opportunity arose for Ray to hire on at the TS Ranch out of Battle Mountain, Nevada, a no-nonsense, straight-up buckaroo outfit with a reputation for turning out top hands.

For Ray, this was the opportunity of a lifetime, and it made him nervous, wondering whether he could measure up. "I was scared to death," Ray remembers, "but I went down there on the 18th of April, and they had my string of horses. The wagon pulled out on the 19th and stayed out for six weeks. I met some good hands there. Paul Black ran the outfit, and they really respected him - he was a horseman.

"A fellow from California, Roland Hill, owned the ranch, and we rode Morgan horses - all Morgans. At the TS Ranch, those Morgan horses were number

one, the cowboy second. You didn't really use your spurs on a horse there - you waited a little bit. We rode 'em right, too, with slick-fork saddles and no double riggin'. We used a snaffle bit, hackamore, two-rein or a bridle. If you came in there with a swell-fork saddle and a grazing bit, they wouldn't have you."

The Nevada tradition of headgear begins with a snaffle bit for young horses starting out, then progresses to the hackamore, then to the two-rein (combination pencil bosal and bridle) and finally straight up in the bridle for older, seasoned horses.

"I had one old snaffle bit, but didn't have a two-rein," Ray continues. "Of course, on the wagon we didn't ride any young horses - they were six to 12 years old - because there were some hard old circles to make. About the third day out Mr. Hill asked if I wanted to ride a two-rein horse. I said, 'Mr. Hill, I don't know anything about it.' He said, 'I'll ride with you today.'

"So somebody loaned me a two-rein, and he rode with me that day, kind of showed me what to do. I was on a horse named Richard, who stood about 15.2, weighed maybe 1,200 pounds. And I found if I dropped a hand down to my side, that horse would kick at my hand - a pretty touchy kind of horse. I tried not to do that, because I didn't want Mr. Hill to get mad.

"One of the guys said to me, 'You wait until Mr. Hill sees you roping left-handed on these horses (which were unaccustomed to left-handed roping).' Oh, no! I couldn't catch anything left-handed, let alone right-handed. But I started roping right-handed, because I sure didn't want to get run off. When the wagon pulled in, Mr. Hill's son asked if I wanted to stay. Talk about a highlight of my life!"

The 1950s were dawning, and the future looked bright for Ray Hunt.

"I couldn't believe you could ride horses all day, following cattle around out there, and somebody would pay you," he says. "Really, I was 20 years old and couldn't imagine it. What a dream come true. One of the guys said to me, 'You just wait until the work really starts.' I got a big lump in my throat, but it never started. Not the kind of work I was used to."

So, Ray earned his pay as a buckaroo, married and started a family. He and his first wife, Millie, eventually had four children: Geri, Elaine, Kathy and Joel. When the children were ready for school, they moved to California, where Ray accepted a job offer that enabled the family to be close to schools. He eventually settled into a routine in which he started colts, shod horses and day-worked on ranches in the Hollister area. Unfortunately, his malformed right foot became so painful he couldn't stand on it. Ray underwent a series of operations and was finally fitted with a walking cast. He resumed riding colts, wearing the cast, till the foot was healed.

"I got to the point where I was taking in colts all the time, riding outside horses and doing day-work," Ray says. "I was known to quite a few ranchers, and got to know their properties, how and where to ride, so I didn't have any trouble getting day-work. I went to a lot of brandings, and I could take my colts and ride them. Then later on, I started working at feedlots. I'd take four or five head of young horses down there, and found I could 'make' four or five good horses by riding one for an hour or two, and then getting another one. I got my horses pretty handy on

cattle."

Hondo and Tom

In the early 1960s, the horse who "made it necessary" entered Ray's life. The story on the horse, according to the guy who wanted Ray to ride him, is he had bucked him off and run through a fence. He had the potential of being a good horse, the man felt, and he could surely run, seeing as how he was a direct descendent of Seabiscuit, the famous racehorse. Ray agreed to work with the four-year-old gelding named Hondo.

Ray quickly surmised that Hondo did have a lot of potential, and he wound up buying him with the help of a friend for $700. "He was really a good horse, but when you saddled him up in the morning, he would buck," Ray says. "All I knew was to get after him, but then he'd just get worse. I wanted to show him in a hackamore (in working cow-horse classes), but about the time I turned a cow down the fence, I'd come back in the saddle-bronc event, and you can't show a horse in two events at the same time.

All I knew was what the cowboys said - just get a bigger club."

He asked a friend, Bill Dorrance, if he had any ideas about the horse. Bill said his brother Tom was "pretty good with horses," and he'd introduce them to each other at the upcoming Elko County Fair and Stock Horse Show in Elko, Nevada. So, Ray met Tom in Elko, and Tom said he'd stop by Ray's place in California for a visit that fall.

True to his word, Tom arrived and watched Ray lead Hondo into the barn, saddle him and then lead him to a corral. And true to form, Hondo performed as a saddle bronc when Ray stepped back. "Man, he came apart," Ray remembers. "About the second jump he was squallin' and buckin' and Tom said, 'That's the last thing in the world that horse wants to do.' And I thought to myself, 'Tom must be looking the other way.' Then he said, 'Ray, your kids will be riding him.'

"I didn't have a clue where he was coming from, but I believed him. And he wasn't saying those things to be funny. Finally, the horse quit bucking, and Tom got off the fence and just put a lasso around Hondo's neck, and then crawled back on the fence. It took a little time to get that horse to ease up to the fence, but when he did, Tom just reached out and touched him with a toe. The horse left there pretty quick. But soon Tom could get him to the fence, rub a toe against him and reach down and pet him, and that horse accepted him up there on the fence above him. But I had another 15 head to ride that day, so we quit

Hondo.

"Next day," Ray continues, "we did the same thing with him, and he got a lot better. 'He likes you, Ray,' Tom said. And I guess he did like me. He would never butt, kick, or strike-but he sure could buck. I remember times we gathered cattle in real thick brush. I'd get off and tie the reins so they wouldn't hang up, and would get on my hands and knees to crawl through that brush. That horse would put his head down and follow me right on through."

Tom had to leave after a few days. Hondo was changing for the better, but still prone to buck violently first thing in the morning. Ray, meanwhile, still needed a solid horse for day-working on the area ranches, and Hondo was his horse.

"Get there early, before the rest of them show up, and just lay your horse down," Tom advised. He showed Ray how to do it.

"That day, we laid him down in a corral filled with soft footing, so there was no danger of him knocking out his teeth or scraping off any hide. And we didn't throw him down, it was a slow process. We got his left front foot up with a rope, and of course he jumped and leaped and tried to set his foot down. The rope went over the saddle horn, and we pulled it toward the left flank and held it there.

"We wanted him to relax and just lay down, but he couldn't relax. He'd get close to going down, then jump out of it. We worked at this again and again, and he'd almost get his knee on the ground, then leap out of it. After about an hour, he tipped over and laid down with his hind end still in the air. When those hindquarters came down, it kind of scared him and he tried to get up. We just pulled the rope on the saddle horn a little, and he put his head back down and laid quietly. We gave the rope some slack for a little relief on his foot as he went down.

"Tom rubbed all over his hind leg, to relax it. It was stiff. He worked with it a little bit, and the leg relaxed. We untied the front leg, then asked Hondo to get up by nudging him with a toe on his neck, in front of the saddle horn. He got up and Tom said, 'Okay, Ray, just put your bridle on him and get on him from above, off the fence. Do what you want to do, but get on and off him with the fence.'

"So I got on him with the fence and rode him around, and he was just like he was when he wasn't trying to buck me off. Tom said, 'When you go somewhere, get there early so they're not waiting on you. Lay him down, then lead him up to something - a fence or fender on the trailer or something - to get on him. Once you ride off, if he starts bucking, just stop him and turn his head around.'"

Ray followed this routine well into the future. Hondo quit bucking, and the day came when Ray no longer had to lay him down or get on and off using a fence or fender. Even his kids could ride Hondo.

To Give Something

"Of course," Ray says, "everything he told me to do I'd never done before. I'd tried everything

else. I could do what he told me, but it wasn't easy, because I had to give something I never gave, to get something I never had. It wasn't easy. And I'm trying to help these people today. I tell them, 'You've got to give something you never gave to get something you never had.'"

All the good hands were at the first show Ray entered that spring, and Ray did put on a show, before and during the working cow-horse class. "Before the class, I was trying to lay him down in the brush while everyone else was running their horses past, whipping them over and under and trying to get 'em handy," he recalls. "I know they looked at me and thought, 'What's that farmer trying to do?' Well, this old farmer finally got that horse to lie down, and then we won the class."

Nine months after Tom helped Ray work with Hondo, Ray won the 1961 working cow-horse, hackamore class, at the Cow Palace in San Francisco.

"You could run down a fence with that horse and turn a cow around, and he'd be sliding behind and walking on his front feet. You could run a hundred miles an hour and make that 'suck' and shut 'er down. He was an athlete. All I did was ride him. I don't take credit for it. I credit Tom and that horse. He'd make an old cow bawl when he turned around. You think one's going to outrun you? You just had to run him past and look that cow right in the eye, and that cow would have to turn or run down his throat. So, he'd pick her up and take her right on out to the middle (of the arena)."

Ray and Hondo won or placed high in every show they attended that year, which wasn't bad for a horse that could've easily wound up in a bucking-horse string.

"Ray was fearless going down the fence after a cow in the working cow-horse class," says Tom Marvel. "He was always riding his horse on a slack rein. Hondo and Ray were unbeatable."

Those words mean a lot coming from Marvel, who competed against Ray in those California shows. Today, at age 80, Marvel is a Nevada ranching legend. He still works cattle horseback and starts colts. He works with his sons Joe (the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association's 1978 world champion saddle-bronc rider), Mike and Pete, and son-in-law Harvey Barnes at their ranch in Jiggs, Nevada.

"When I first met Ray," Marvel recalls, "I was running the 25 Ranch wagon out of Battle Mountain. Ray came to the ranch to start some colts for us. He could ride anything with hair on it, and there's no doubt that if Ray had wanted to pursue a pro-rodeo career, he would've become the world champion saddle-bronc rider.

"Tom Dorrance," he continues, "spent a lot of time on ranches in the northern Nevada area, and he came to the 25 Ranch, too. Dorrance was looking for someone who had the ability and could communicate his message about horses. When he saw Ray ride, he knew he'd found the right man. Ray had something special around a horse that other folks didn't have. Ray could walk into a cavvy of horses and blend into the herd."

Of all the great horsemen he's observed in his 80 years, Marvel says that Tom Dorrance tops the

list, and Ray is second.

Hondo, meanwhile, was in his prime when he died at the Horseshoe Ranch in Beowawe, Nevada, when Ray was managing the ranch's cattle operation and starting young jumpers for acclaimed rider and coach Gene Lewis. "I put Hondo in a corral one evening with two of his brothers and some other horses, and next morning we found him dead," Ray says. "An autopsy showed he died of overeating rich, green feed. It was like losing one of the family."

Mary Branscomb, well-known Great Basin author, recalls those days at the Horseshoe Ranch in the early 1970s. She explains that Ray volunteered to help her 4-H club members in Lamoille, Nevada, with horsemanship. "Ray was learning from Tom Dorrance and beginning to formulate his own method for teaching animals and people. He talked about it all the time, but most of it went over my head. Nevertheless, I wanted to learn," she writes. "We'd ride for hours.... I don't suppose we ever expressed to him how much we appreciated what he taught us."

She remembers Ray and Gene working together at jumping clinics in California. "Each day after the clinic and after supper," she continues, "Ray and Gene turned on the barn lights and got out the 'problem' horses: the ones that'd stop or rush or do other undesirable things instead of galloping nicely to their fences and jumping.

"A few of us stayed up to watch them discuss each horse, set up a jump designed for each individual, and then solve its problem. They'd stay until 3 a.m. or so riding one troubled animal after another.... Ray didn't use a flat saddle. He jumped five-foot fences - spreads and verticals - in his stock saddle with a cigar clamped in his mouth."

She recalls a colt-starting clinic in which Ray was presented with a "colt" that was "at least five and maybe nine. Never been haltered. They backed the truck to the round pen and jumped him out. It took Ray two hours, at least, but he got the horse ridden.

"At one colt-starting clinic he told me I should be willing to ride my horse down to the ground and to come up with it or I'd best not get on. Ray doesn't coddle his students.
"I'll be forever grateful that through him, I met Tom Dorrance. That has to be true for many people. It's a generous thing that Ray shares what he knows."

He Was Just There

To understand how Ray became the original horse clinician, it helps to understand the horses and people he dealt with as a public trainer. First, he had ready access to five-, six- and seven-year-old horses that'd never really been handled. They'd been branded and gelded when they were three years old and then turned out on Nevada and Idaho ranges.

"Tom would come to visit, and my horses would be like a can of snakes," Ray said. "And he'd be there a few days, and those horses would act like a bunch of lambs - and he didn't do anything! And when he left, I'd have a can of snakes again. I was doing the same things I did when he was there. That was the part that just knocked my hat off. You didn't see him do anything. He was just there.

"There was something Tom had with horses that I needed. I thrived on it. I craved it. I had to have it. Of course, riding rough horses wasn't new to me; I could survive with them. That's what they had on those ranches back then. You might not be riding the 'rough string,' but if you couldn't ride kind of a tough horse, you weren't going to work on a ranch. That part was interesting to me, and so Tom knew he didn't have to worry about me falling off or being afraid to try something he suggested. I believed in him.

The things I'd seen him do with horses - I couldn't really see it - but the outcome would be like a miracle. That was the part that really got me.

"To give something you never gave to get something you never had. I look back at myself and know I dug and dug. Tom and I would be out riding, and he'd look over and say, 'Can you feel that?' And yeah, I felt something, but I didn't know what it was.

"I nearly tore my head off with frustration at times. And you might ask, for what? Why didn't I just say to hell with it?

"Because I couldn't! Because that one horse, Hondo, had made such a change in all my horses.

"I've been struggling to learn what Tom had, and have been trying to get these younger boys to understand so they can come back and help me. Tom knew the horse's needs. 'Make the horse's needs your needs,' he said. When he wanted to 'bring some life up' in a horse, he could get it from any part of the horse - the stifle, hip, shoulder, pastern, knee, hock, wherever he needed it. But you could watch him and not see him do anything except ride. I'm still working on it. I've gained. I don't say it's the only way, but it's a way to get something done, it's a way to reach a goal, if you want to discipline yourself to do it.

"It isn't the horse," Ray says, and pokes himself in the chest. "This one has to make the change."

The revelation for Ray Hunt that things were changing came at a time he was close to giving up. After about seven years of trying to understand Tom Dorrance, he rose one morning and said to himself, "Aw, to heck with it. I'll just ride my horse for today.

"I never had a better day in my life. I saddled my horse and started off, and when I looked in a direction, that's where the horse went. I looked back, and that's where he went. I thought, 'My

God, Tom said to 'fix it up and let him find it,' but I was so busy doing that I stayed in the horse's way. And that was so powerful to me: A person can sometimes work too hard at something.

"The amazing thing is how sensitive the horse is. You can sit on his back and turn your head, and he can feel it right down through the saddle. You always try to do less and less with a horse, and first thing you know, when you think it, it'll happen. And Tom said, 'Ray, it ought to be like, when you get that horse right, you can ride him right down a badger hole or right up a telephone pole.' And that's how it works. You'd never do either one of them, but feel like you could."

In addition to the tough yet unspoiled range horses he trained, Ray had a steady clientele of spoiled horses. People brought him horses that'd buck, rear and fall over backward. They wanted Ray to "fix" their horses, and he could fix them. But the owners needed as much help as their horses.

"For over ten years I fixed those kinds of horses and I wasn't getting much accomplished," Ray said. "Someone would bring me a horse for a month. I could ride him; the kids could ride him. The owner would take him home, and in a week the horse would be back. I couldn't get the humans to change, so I doubled the price on those spoiled horses.

"And what was bad about it: If I took a horse to a sale, I'd developed a hell of a reputation for riding a bad horse. He could be a good one, but if Ray Hunt had been riding him, well, I couldn't give him away. It took a long time to live that down, but when I doubled the price on those spoiled horses, I didn't get but half as many. And when someone would bring me one, that person had a little more interest in getting along with him, because he'd put some money in him. So when he came to get his horse and ride, I'd tell him what to do, and when I saw him again, he'd say, 'You know, that worked.'

"I was working with enough of those horses that their owners finally got together and said, 'Look, let's get Ray to come and work with us.' Five or six would get together, and I'd go and work with them. So it went on like that for several years - and I couldn't wait to get there, because I'd see horses I'd never seen. I had to try them!

"Finally, I was spending so much time teaching people I wasn't getting my outside horses ridden, and that wasn't right for my customers. Bill Dorrance and I were talking one day, and I told him I was thinking about doing this teaching for a living. And he said, 'Well, Ray, you never know. You never tried.' That was back in 1971. And it just grew. I'd see new horses every week, and what Tom told me from day one related to every one of them. So I was going for my gain in knowledge probably more so than for the customers' gain. I just fell right in. I'd try to be a better horseman and try to get the humans to understand how to get the best out of their horses. And I still think it's better to back off and do less instead of speed up and do more."

Ray's enlightenment came from Tom Dorrance. So where did Dorrance learn what he knew about horses? Some say he was self-taught.

Ray pondered the question and possible answer:

"Self-taught, learned on his own, maybe so. I think Tom was born with it, and then again, maybe he just realized what could be. All those Dorrances - Tom, Bill, Jim and Fred - were very good hands. They were cowmen, stockmen, and really knew horses. But I didn't get to meet Fred - and the others said he was the best. Of those I knew,

Tom had something special inside, something the others didn't have.

"Tom was very observant, he had a great sense of feel and timing, and he wanted to keep the horse in as good a disposition as he could. Tom stayed on the outside of trouble with a horse. He wanted to get along with the horse. That mental part is just as important as the physical part.

"Tom knew before the horse knew, what was going to happen. If things started to happen that he wanted, he'd just let it continue. But if he saw something taking place he didn't want, he could kind of regroup and make something more useful out of it. Because the horse isn't doing something to be wrong - it's all a sense of survival for the horse.

A Better Way

Ray Hunt has been learning and teaching - trying to pass the torch - for more than 40 years, and he's succeeded, probably much more than he realizes. He's mentored young hands through the years, fellows who expressed a desire to become cowboys and true horsemen, and were willing to listen and learn. Top hands Tom Curtin, Bryan Neubert and Joe Wolter are three of them.

Joe has this to say about Ray: "Bryan Neubert and I went to work for Ray at the Soldiers Meadows Ranch north of Gerlach, Nevada, and the first time I saw Ray on a horse I noticed that his horse acted differently than the other horses. Ray put life in a horse - the horse was alert, his ears were up, the body posture was of a horse going to do a job. I've been striving ever since to reach that level with a horse."

John McDermott, a lifelong cowboy and roper from northern Nevada, living in Lamoille, tells another story about Ray:

"John Welch and I were breaking colts back in the '70s for the TS Ranch over Battle Mountain way. We were doing our usual routine with those broncs: run the horse into the round pen, rope and catch him, put on the sack hobbles, sack out the horse with a slicker, take off the hobbles, pull down your hat and step on, hope for the best!

"We were sent by the TS to the Hadley Camp, north of Carlin, to observe Ray Hunt starting broncs. Ray said to me, 'John, you might weigh 126 pounds soaking wet. How the hell do you

think you can out-muscle a 1,200-pound horse?'

"Ray began working with the colts, moving them around. Soon he had all of us horseback. This method seemed so easy there appeared to be nothing to this colt-starting. Ray had convinced two real cowboys, who were riding horses for a living, that there was a better way to deal with a horse."

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