

“I Survived My Rookie Year.”

THREE
TOP
BEGINNERS
SHARE
THEIR
SECRETS
TO SUCCESS
IN THE
SHOW PEN.

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WHEN IT COMES TO LEARNING HOW TO SHOW A REINING HORSE, have you ever felt there was a secret you were missing out on? Some hidden piece of information that would unlock the mysteries of how to stay out of the penalty box, beat the show-pen jitters, or win that first buckle? Well keep reading because three of last year's top rookie reiners are going to let you in on their secrets to surviving the rookie year.

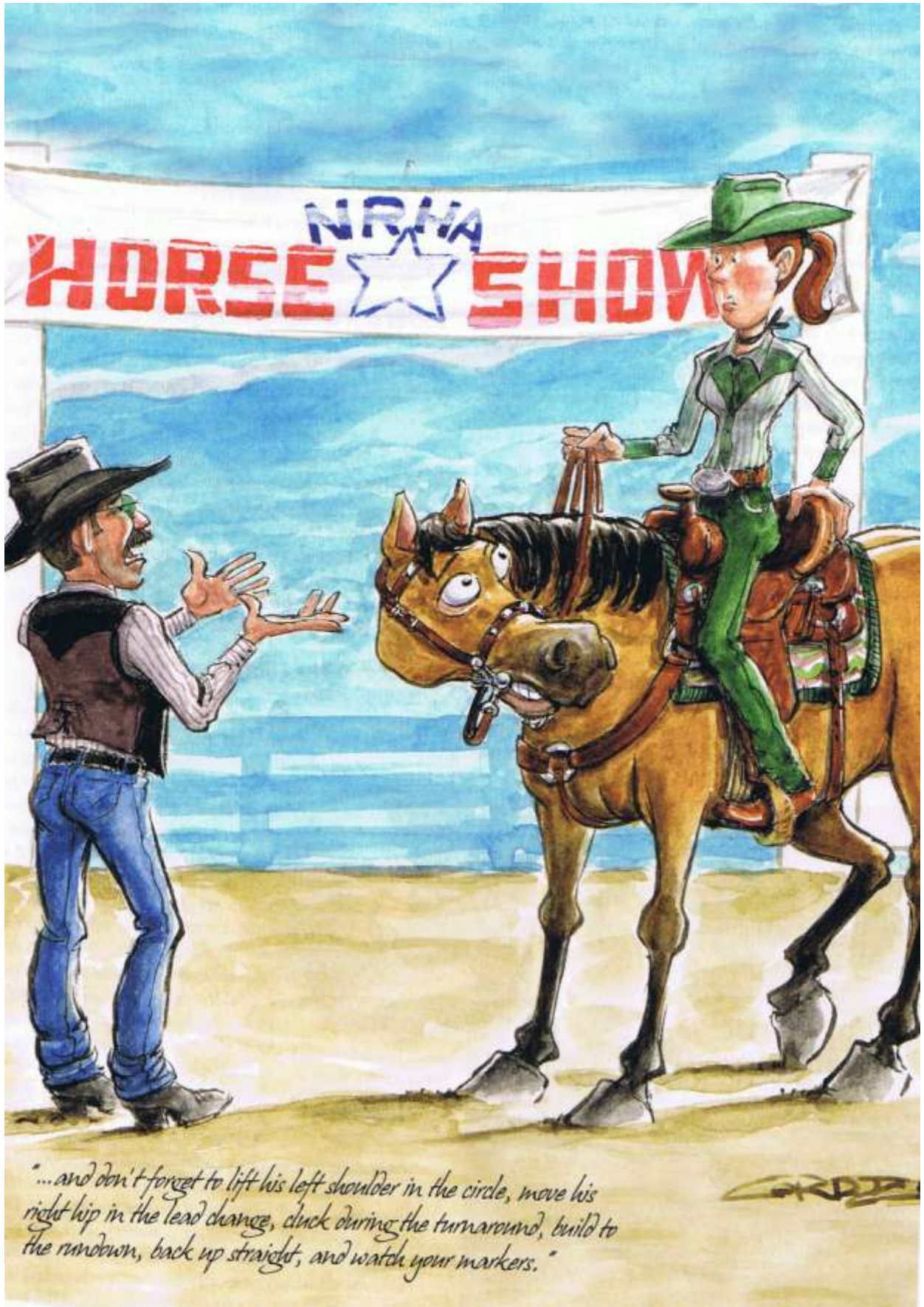
Secret #1: Mistakes Happen

It's no secret how the Southwest U.S. North American Regional Affiliate Finals' rookie champion Maria Baker survived her rookie year: a positive attitude and a propensity to laugh. These qualities were put to the test at a show last year when, as Baker explains, everything that could go wrong, did. "I had a nasty fall off of a horse in the warm-up arena. I hooked my spur on a dog gate and crashed to the ground cutting my elbow open and nearly scaring my horse to death; and to top it all off, I split my jeans wide open in front of the snack bar at lunch time while dismounting. Yes, the picnic tables were full." With those incidents in mind, entering the show pen didn't seem quite as intimidating and Baker used each incident as comic relief for the rest of the weekend, deciding that it was better to laugh at her foibles than get uptight about them.

The technique worked. Instead of letting each problem rattle her, Baker put everything out of her mind and focused on what she could manage within the confines of the show pen. It brought her a reserve title for that weekend.

"Fun" remains a key component of Baker's show plan. "My coach, Johnette Burman of Menifee, California, always says to me 'Go show your horse and have fun' and that's what I try to do," says Baker. "We try to show within the best of our ability—not the ability of someone else."

Baker, from Rancho Cucamonga, California, admits to suffering from acute show-pen nerves and has considered all kinds of options from hypnosis to breathing techniques. But what has gradually lessened their grip has been simply time and persistence. "We humans



"...and don't forget to lift his left shoulder in the circle, move his right hip in the lead change, duck during the turnaround, build to the rundown, back up straight, and watch your markers."

tend to be insecure and it really takes a lot to step into the show pen, just you and your horse, and say 'judge me.' I think once you realize that you survived the show pen; that you are still alive and people aren't pointing and laughing at you, it gets a lot easier!" Of course, once you've bared yourself in front of a lunch-time crowd, showing your horse is a walk in the park.

John Thompson, Woodville, Ontario, and his Peptoleap were the Eastern Canada North America Regional Affiliate Finals rookie champions last year, and if there's one thing that Thompson learned from his rookie competition year, it was that mistakes not only "can" happen, but they "will." After qualifying for the *Performance Horse Rookie of the Year* competition, Thompson hauled his horse thousands of miles to Oklahoma City for the finals.

"I overspun in my premiere ride," said Thompson. "But I continued on the pattern and had fun doing so as this was the only time I'd be able to show him at this level." Even though he was likely disappointed, Thompson saw no reason to stop enjoying his horse and their ride in Oklahoma City.

Secret #2: Choose Your Support Wisely

Baker speaks highly of her coach, NRHA Professional Burman, and believes that she's been the key to unlocking the success she's had with her horse. "Johnette has all sorts of other clients and horses, and somehow she always finds a way to take as much time as she needs with me. She knows that I need to fix problems with my horse so she doesn't offer to fix them for me." This has translated into increased confidence in the show pen and riding at home for both Baker and her horse. "I really think that Johnette could coach in any sport, she has a very positive and supportive coaching technique and I need that."

As well, she credits her horse, a 12-year-old gelding, Heir To



Words of wisdom from Maria Baker: "Show to the best of your ability, not someone else's."

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Shine, affectionately nicknamed "Harry." "He's saved my bacon many times in the show pen," she says. "Harry is one in a million, rather famous in California, with the biggest heart a horse could have."

To be a successful rookie, you have to have support behind you (your trainer) and below you (your horse). When asked about his biggest piece of advice for rookies, Thompson offers this tidbit: "First, find a trainer or coach and then let them assess your riding ability and help you select the correct horse for you. Too many times people have what they think is the best horse for them because it is the perfect color, or it's pretty, or they want to learn with their horse. Choosing your trainer and getting them to help you choose your horse is very important."

Secret #3: Develop Strengths

There's a story in the golfing community that deconstructs the success of Tiger Woods. According to Woods, his drive is his strength and his putting or "short game" is his weakness. So where do you think he focuses the majority of his practice time? That's right: his drive. When your strength is developed to its potential, your weaknesses will often take care of themselves.

For many reiners, this translates into the edict "show within your ability" or "show the horse you have." Both statements are oft-repeated by successful rookies. For Baker, focusing on her horse's excellent circling ability in the show pen gave her the confidence to tackle more difficult maneuvers. "Harry is such a good circling horse that I always use our circles to build up my confidence before a ride and during each run."

Secret #4: The Long-Term "Over-Night Success" Plan

Behind every successful horse and rider you'll find many long days in the saddle and many wet saddle blankets. No one in the rookie show pen (whether horse or rider) is an overnight success. Margaret Fraser, Calgary, Alberta, was the top rookie rider in the Western Canada Regional Affiliate circuit last year, but has had several horses and years of riding under her belt to get there. "I had my first horse when I was six and off and on since then," explains Fraser. "We never had a lot of money when I was growing up to take a lot of lessons, so learning the hard way took a lot longer. I participated in the local gymkhanas when I was younger and bought my first reining horse to show in 2005, but even then, I didn't show until the South Country Derby Show in 2006."

Fraser's secret was a lot of intense planning and hard work. Her tips to riders who want to be competitive in the NRHA rookie classes are: "Take a lot of lessons and practice a lot to form a good base. Work with a trainer who will coach, watch, and critique your runs. Watching videos of yourself to actually see what you look like is worth a thousand words. When you're learning, maneuvers look a lot different than



Margaret Fraser tells it like it is: "Watch videos of yourself and actually see what you look like."

they feel. Getting into the show pen for experience is worth a lot. Schooling shows allow you to plan your pattern. The larger shows help you gain confidence and get a routine that works to handle the butterflies. A routine helps to eliminate or reduce issues that might arise in the show pen when you need to think of your pattern."

Fraser's plan also included ramping up her training so that she and her horse Cody Jac Pine, known as "Cody," peaked during the fall when they needed to be most competitive. Her plan worked well. In 2007 Fraser and Cody not only won the Western Canada North America Regional Affiliate Finals rookie division, but Cody was also the top-earning NRHA rookie horse in Canada while Fraser received a jacket from Reining Canada for being the top-earning NRHA rookie competitor in Canada.

Because goals for a successful rookie season usually begin at least a year in advance, Fraser recommends rookies visit the NRHA Futurity & Adequan® North American Affiliate Championship Show in Oklahoma City the year before so they can see what it's like and be aware of what to expect.

Secret #5: Remember Why You Ride

2007 was a busy year for Thompson and Peptoleap. His horse was working double duty, being shown by NRHA Professional Harvey Stevens and his wife Molly Stevens in the open and intermediate open. Thompson runs Sliding T Ranch in Nestleton, Ontario, where he rides with the Stevens. To help him stay focused throughout the hills and valleys of a show career, Thompson keeps in mind every reason he loves Reining.

"Reining is a great sport," says Thompson. "The excitement of spinning and sliding, controlling the horse in the maneuvers,

it's all great. But the sportsmanship of fellow reiners cannot be beat. The support, help, and friendships are what Reining is all about. It's great to win, but when you had a good ride and you watch another rider go in the arena and have a great ride and the crowd cheers ... that's awesome."

As well, Thompson appreciates the sharing of information between reiners. "It doesn't matter if you're a rookie or top open rider, when someone sees you having some trouble, they'll give you some ideas."

So what are you waiting for? The real secret isn't about intention or wishes; it's about working toward a goal with a positive attitude. As cartoonist Walt Kelly once said, "It is not good enough for things to be planned. They still have to be done. For the intention to become a reality, energy has to be launched into operation." Go ahead—launch yourself into your rookie goals! ♦



ABOUT THE WRITER

Heather Cook is a writer and former assistant trainer located in Calgary, Alberta. She has been involved with the reining horse industry for 15 years and has volunteered at the regional and national level. Her first non-fiction book *Rookie Reiner: How to Survive and Thrive in the Show Pen* is due out in 2008 from Trafalgar Square Books. You can find her online at www.RookieReiner.com



Why John Thompson reins: "The support, help, and friendships are what Reining is all about."



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