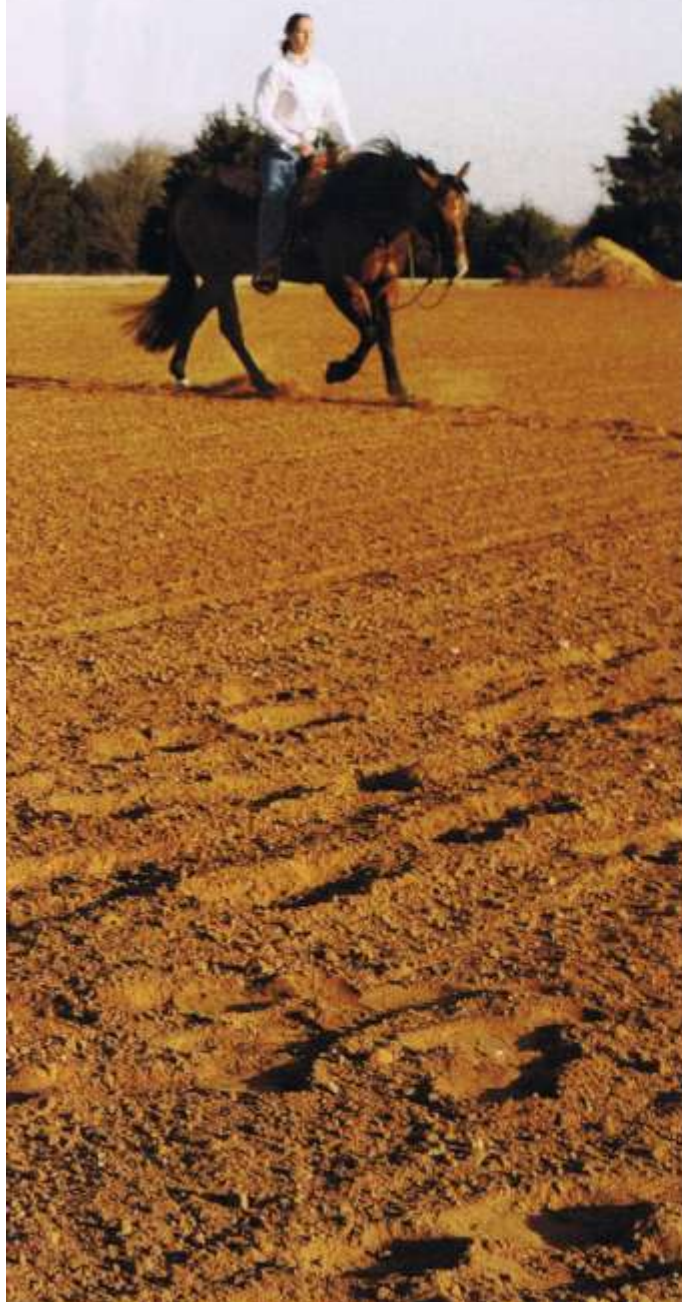


Lessons under the careful eyes
of an experienced non pro
coach are necessary for success
in the reining pen.

A man wearing a light-colored cowboy hat, a light blue long-sleeved shirt, and blue jeans stands in profile, looking towards the right. He is in a large, open dirt arena. In the background, there is a line of dark green trees under a clear sky. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

The Non Pro
INVESTMENT

CASEY HINTON'S PROGRAM FOR DEVELOPING ENTRY-LEVEL RIDERS INTO ELITE NON PRO COMPETITORS.



BY WENDY LIND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN BRASSEAU

NRHA PROFESSIONAL CASEY HINTON HAS BEEN in the performance horse business for over 25 years, and, in that time, he's trained and shown world champions, futurity and derby champions, and made the open finals at the major events. However, he'll tell you that he's just as proud of his non pro program, which has developed numerous students into top-tier reining champions in the NRHA and the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA).

The biggest challenge of Hinton's career? He'll tell you its developing adult riders into winning non pros, hands down.

"I think the hardest part of my job is training successful business people to compete at the upper levels of non pro competition. That's the toughest thing to do in our industry."

He cites a simple reality: By the time many people have the finances to ride at that upper level, they're often over 40. Learning to balance on a horse while executing high-speed maneuvers can be difficult, especially when hectic schedules and family commitments play into the equation. For that reason, Hinton tells his clients to expect three to five years if they want to work their way up the ranks to the elite non pro level. His strategy goes something like this: Balance first, fundamentals next, then experience, experience, experience.

Looks Can Be Deceiving

If you've ever been to the Oklahoma State Fair Park coliseum on NRHA Futurity open finals night, it's easy to see how watching one event can hook future enthusiasts. Loud crowds, big maneuvers, and high octane horsepower inspire many neophytes to look up a professional and get started. But while the pros make it look easy, in reality the sport is harder than it appears.

"In about 30 minutes, you can teach somebody who comes to one of our events the scoring system," Hinton points out. "And it's pretty easy for them to follow along visually. So that can be misleading in terms of understanding the finesse and perfection that our sport requires."

It's been his experience that most of the non pros attracted to reining are intelligent, highly-driven people. Hinton has to remind them that just like they didn't become successful at their business overnight, becoming a successful reining competitor takes time and dedication. Just because a rider can intellectually understand the sport and what needs to be done, their balance and coordination take repetition and time.

"Generally these riders are successful in many areas of their life and expect to do the same when it comes to showing reining horses," he says. "With adults, there always has to be a system or a concept. You tell it to them, and in their mind, they think they can master it. But it's not like teaching a kid. Most of these riders have to re-learn balance."

Hinton helps Nicole Sinkule with the finer points of reining horsemanship.



Balancing Life and Learning the Basics

Hinton went on to explain that in reining, everything is dictated by the rider. Subsequently, a rider's balance plays into every maneuver. Lack of balance can equate into scenarios such as a rider accidentally kicking a horse out of a stop, or coming out of a rollback hanging off to one side of their horse.

"You can easily teach new riders the fundamentals of how to do things in six months. It then takes three to five years to put those fundamentals together with balance and coordination," Hinton says.

For riders just coming out of college with a long stint in the youth ranks, or ropers who want to rein, balance isn't often an issue. In those cases, it's more about the rider learning the technical aspects of the sport, timing, and show-pen strategy.

On the other hand, for moms who're approaching the sport after a long hiatus, or professionals who've been working behind a desk for a decade, developing balance takes longer. Hinton doesn't have any special tips to speed up the process, other than simply spending time in the saddle loping circles, stopping, and spinning. The more, the better. Ironically, how fast a rider develops balance on a horse is often related to balancing family and work restraints.

Rider Levels

Phase 1: In Level 1, Hinton concentrates on teaching riders the fundamentals as they develop better balance in the saddle and begin to show in the entry-level non pro competition, such as rookie, limited non pro, green rider, and novice amateur. He begins to touch on training philosophy. There's a high level of repetition of maneuvers and riders develop muscle memory and timing.

Phase 2: Level 2 non pros begin to hold their own in the show pen while progressing out of entry levels. Hinton says that in this phase riders "start to understand why we do things a certain way, and why the horse reacts a certain way." He encourages riders at this level to start thinking about how to train their horse in certain situations to maintain their horse's performance level.

Phase 3: At this upper level, Hinton says that it has to be a "50/50 combination of him telling the rider what to do, and the rider identifying issues on their own and responding accordingly." Riders at this level can pretty much train and maintain their horses on their own and have the experience to stay ahead of what happens in the show pen. However, Hinton says many Phase 3 non pros still work with a trainer, simply to have a second set of eyes as they work through problems. "They're always asking, 'What does that look like? What will it take to get it to a plus half?'" says Hinton.

"There are a lot of variables that play into it," Hinton points out. "If we're talking about a mom who has to juggle her family, or a doctor who's a workaholic, their time in the saddle is going to be limited."

This, Hinton says, is the single biggest challenge he and his non pros face.

"Most of my clients want to compete at the world-class level, such as at the Cinch/NRHA Non Pro Futurity or the AQHA World Championship Show. At those upper levels, they have to ride against that same handful of non pros who ride all day, and that's all they do," he explains. "It's my job as a trainer to get them to a point where they can compete against those ultra-successful non pros."

He went on to explain that because his non pro clientele are generally very successful, they identify with those top non pros and want to compete at that level. That degree of skill and experience is especially difficult to attain, and Hinton points out that it's easier to "take a person from a 65 and coach them to a 70," than it is to take a person from a 70 up to a 72 or better.

"To train a person and a horse to get to that level, it takes years, and initially they don't realize just what a challenge it is."

Constructive Criticism

In addition to dedication, practice time, and background experience, attitude can play a large role in how fast the non pro progresses. Hinton says it's not that uncommon for riders to think they're further along than they really are.

"You want to keep their confidence up and not discourage them, but you have to be truthful," he says. "As a trainer, you're a combination of teacher, coach, planner, friend, and strategist."

And while it can be disappointing to realize that you're not as accomplished as you thought you were, Hinton tries to be up front and candid with his non pros without offending them.

"They have to understand that I'm giving them criticism to help them succeed, not because I'm trying to be mean," he explains. "After we leave the arena, the lessons are over and we're friends. We're going to dinner and going to have fun."

When his clients get to know him and realize he's looking out for their best interest, they trust his advice. However, at the end of the day, Hinton makes a commitment to say what he needs to say, and it's ultimately up to the non pro as to how they handle it.

"They can either take it constructively or personally," he concludes.

The Horsepower

Once that initial six months or so of fundamentals is under a rider's belt, Hinton works with his clients to identify realistic goals and what it will take to accomplish them. Quality of horse plays a significant factor in how fast a rider will progress through the ranks. To simplify things somewhat, Hinton breaks his program into phases, both in terms of horse and rider levels. (See sidebars). The key is to match up the right horse with the rider's skill level and experience at each phase.

"It usually takes at least three horses, if not more," says Hinton. "The first horse might last one year, the next horse usu-

ally works for the next two years, and then one more horse that will last another year or two."

Hinton says it's his responsibility as a trainer to find those horses and manage them as his non pro works through the ranks.

"I figure that if I'm the coach of this team, part of my job description is to help my clients get out of one horse and into the next one," he says. "I'm always judging where the horse is at, because most non pros have to sell the horse they have to buy the next one. And I have to stand behind what I buy and sell."

He's quick to add that while three horses is a general rule of thumb, some riders will need only two horses to get them to the world-class level, while other riders might need five. It all depends on a rider's dedication, previous experience, and competitive drive.

In terms of price, the trainer has a general ballpark of what each level of horse should cost, but the market is highly variable and being in the right place at the right time is everything.

"If a horse goes to the NRHA Futurity or National Reining Breeders Classic and wins \$40,000, it's not going to be cheap.



Casey Hinton

With over \$300,000 in NRHA earnings, Casey Hinton has had considerable success in the show pen on a variety of horses and was listed as one of NRHA's Top 20 riders in 2007.

In 2004, Casey piloted the stallion Magnum Chic Dream to the AQHA World Championship in senior reining, and, at the 2006 All American Quarter Horse Congress, Hinton rode Smarty Starlight to the intermediate open futurity division championship. He piloted that same horse to third place in the 2006 NRHA Futurity intermediate open as well as to an open finals slot at the NRHA Futurity, 2007 NRHA Derby, and 2008 NRBC. Hinton has also had considerable success in United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) events, garnering the 2007 USEF qualifier championship at the Denver National Western Stock Show on Miss Moth Money and the reserve championship at the 2007 USEF Open Reining Championship in Oklahoma City on Mr Boomerjac. Casey has also become well known for coaching a successful group of youth and non pro riders to many top honors. Among past non pro clients are top riders Kim Dooley, who he helped pair up with Remedies Magic Potion and Dusty Dry Tivio; and Ginger Schmersal (at the time Kingston) who he helped pair up with Side Smoke. Other non pro clients include Matt and Kathleen Armenta, Nicole Sinkule, and Brad Leiblong.

Casey and his wife Kathy own and operate Casey Hinton Quarter Horses in Whitesboro, Texas. They also stand several top stallions to the public at their facility, Cedar Ridge Stallion Station.

Horse Levels

Horse 1: Hinton says that a rider's first reining horse and first reining trainer are the most important. "That first horse has to be the most forgiving and be able to take a joke. We have to use that first horse as a tool for the rider to learn with and then we move on."

Horse 1 will execute the maneuvers if the rider gets close with his cues. It usually is a hand-me-down with a lot of mileage, and may be somewhat used up in the show pen but has enough quality that it can be shown. It also needs to have a good enough attitude to handle practicing things over and over. And over.

"The only way beginning riders get better is through repetition. They need to do things over and over to feel what's right and what isn't," Hinton says, while adding that it can be confusing for a horse to do the same maneuver six times in a row, and get cued for it differently each time. Hinton says the ideal rookie horse is solid and consistent so that the trainer can focus on training the person, not the horse.

"It has to have enough quality in the spin, circle, and the stop to fundamentally teach the rider. The biggest thing is that if the rider loses his balance, or makes mistakes, this horse is lazy enough to take it and not get too hot," says Hinton.

PRICE FOR HORSE 1: \$7,500 TO \$25,000

Horse 2: Horse 2 is an upgrade and likely won't have to take the abuse of repetitions that Horse 1 had to entertain. This horse has more ability and is younger and fresher in the show pen. Hinton notes that riders ready for Horse 2 usually start identifying a clearer agenda in the arena.

"With Horse 2, there's some sort of competitive goal: state title, affiliate title, or it could be qualifying for a world show. Depending on the rider, they might skip this horse, and go to the next horse, depending on how much experience or background they have."

Price for Horse 2: "I think there's an overlap," says Hinton. "Horse 2 can be \$15,000 to \$50,000. I've found horses that were superstars for cheap, and then, for the next person, I couldn't find that caliber of horse without paying a lot more. Luck and strategy are everything. Research plays into it and being ready for the right horse to come along is also important."

Horse 3: Hinton says that it can be a blurry line between Horse 2 and Horse 3.

"Sometimes horse number 2 might be at level 3 before the rider realizes that he can ride at that level," he points out.

Horse 3 usually is called into action when a rider is ready to show in the derbies or futurities, or go to the world show and be a top five finisher, whereas Horse 2 was more about qualifying experience.

"It might take four horses to get to this level, but Horse 3 should be an open caliber horse that can be ridden by a non pro," says Hinton.

"Personally, I don't think there's any difference in the caliber of horse between what I need as an open rider and what a top non pro needs," he explains. "You need a high-caliber horse with an accepting personality. Maybe not a stallion and not complicated. But at this level, you can never be over-mounted in quality."

Hinton added that Horse 3 might mark plus 1s with an open rider, but has the physical and mental ability to plus half all maneuvers with his non pro owner.

Price for Horse 3: Hinton says prices can really vary at this upper level, but he expects to pay between \$35,000 and \$100,000. To find the right horse at this level, says Hinton, may take two months, or it might take six months. "Timing is everything."

But it's going to be more of a sure thing, and for some people, that's the way to go," he notes. "Everyone is different. Some people are fine waiting a couple years for a horse to get broke and seasoned, and then they can show it in the derbies. And we've gotten some really nice horses at the Futurity that didn't mark very well. We take those horses home, work with them a while, and they mature into good non pro horses."

The Ultimate Goal

As his non pros progress through the phases of experience (see "Rider Levels" sidebar), Hinton starts to treat them less like a non pro and more like an assistant trainer. "The idea is that riders at this level can train their way through problems," says Hinton, "and understand how their actions create a horse's reaction. It's not that they become my employees, but they need to have the ability and foresight to ride and think ahead while solving problems that come up."

He says some riders will sail through Phases 1 and 2, and might then enjoy lifelong success in Phase 3. Others might skip Phase 1 and struggle for several years in Phase 2 before they get to enjoy futurity and derby competition in Phase 3.

"The most gratifying phase is number 3," the trainer says. "I've mentioned horses 1, 2, 3 and Phases 1, 2, 3. But there might be overlap where you have multiple horses in each phase. You might have two horses in Phase 1 and two horses in Phase 2. When you get to Phase 3, you hopefully will spend the rest of your life there."

Hinton noted that he's the most involved when riders are in Phase 1.

"When people are in Phase 1, it takes four times more hands-on time, and I can ride three horses in the time they ride their one," he explains. "When they get to Phase 2, I can probably ride one horse while they ride. When they get to Phase 3, I pretty much go about my normal training routine and just help them from time to time. I never take my focus off of them, but at that point they're doing a lot of the training and maintaining on their own, and I become their 'video eyes.' It's a team effort between the rider, me as the trainer, and the horse," says Hinton, while explaining that it's his job to help make a game plan and keep things in perspective. "In today's competition, I don't think they can do without a trainer. We're working toward a common goal in the show pen."

Hinton added that for many non pros, the ultimate goal is turning what's an expensive hobby into a sustaining investment. Several non pros who've been through his program are now enjoying those benefits. But, the trainer warns, they're in the minority.

"Making your hobby cross over to the point where it's breaking even or making money is a difficult thing," says Hinton.

He also pointed out that many of the top non pros who fully train their own horses still ride with a trainer on a regular basis to keep them in line.

"It's team work. It doesn't matter which top non pro you are talking about, they all have trainers to keep them headed the right way." ♦

ABOUT THE WRITER

A licensed architect and NRHA Judge, Wendy Lind lives in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, with her husband Kevin and son Noah. She shows in NRHA events as a non pro competitor, earning multiple NRHA bronzes. She's also been a finalist at the NRHA Derby and won 10 world and reserve world championship titles in American Paint Horse competition.