

Pulling Leather

Pull leather / pul lether/ v a disparaging term used to indicate that an off-balance rider has been forced to grab his saddle with his free hand in order to prevent falling off his horse

Sitting a well-broke cowhorse when he is working is always a joy. But it can sometimes be a real challenge stick with him, and no cowboy wants to be accused of having to pull leather to stay aboard. One day, however, I had to grab my horn – not once, but twice – in order to maintain my seat atop my horse. First, a little background:

Working cattle on the open range has little resemblance to the competitive cutting competitions which take place in an arena. In these events a yearling steer or heifer is cut out from a group and the horse given free rein to swoop and dive, dramatically demonstrating his skill at holding the animal away from the herd. The arena is small and open, the footing is clean and level, and the critter is allowed to return to the herd after being played by the horse for a short time.

Out on the ranch, the cow is being cut away to be moved to a different location. There are rocks, holes, and brush to contend with, and there is always more than just the one animal to be managed. Guiding the horse through the process can be poetry.

But note that I used the word *guide*, rather than *direct*. It is the cowboy's job to let his horse know *which* cow he wants and *where* he wants it – also to open and close the gates. *Especially* in rough country, you want to let the horse exercise his own judgment as to his footing. Some sage advice in this regard was given to one young cowboy early in the last century:

"Nine-tenths of being a good horseman is learnin' a horse what you want of him. Half the other tenth is in leavin' him free to do what you learnt him", said Watt Bendt.

"Ain't nothing to (cutting) if you take your time, watch you don't throw your horse off balance, and leave him have his head."

Ralph Moody recounts in his book Home Ranch, that advice from his foreman on a ranch in Colorado in about 1910.

"Just leave yourself foller along easy - the way your best girl does when she's dancin' with you."

"'Tain't the girl that counts, and 'tain't the dancin'. It's more like keeping time with the fiddler. Lose track of it and you're a goner; stay with it and you can't go wrong - leastwise less'n you go to watchin' your own feet.'

And so it is, even in the new millennium. I had taught my Kentucky Colt what I wanted of him, and I gave him his head to do it.

Although bred in Kentucky, Thunder was born and raised in the rough country of the West Boulder. He was big and powerful, and he had taken a feather-light rein. It required only a barely-perceptible cue from the rider to bend him in any direction. He was an eager horse, and his long Thoroughbred legs carried us all across the ranch at a ground-eating pace.

We traveled for miles at a time on a slack rein, with me offering only vague suggestions as to the direction. I let him pick his exact path through the sage, amusing myself by guessing which way *I* thought was easier. *He* was the one who had to do the work, and *he* was entitled to choose where he put his own feet.

It was with the same barely-perceptible movement that I would indicate to him a job at hand. He could infer his assigned task from my balance and from the position of his quarry. And when he was pointed toward an errant cow, he showed his rider no mercy as he pursued her over, under, around, and through whatever terrain unfolded before them.

On this particular day, Thunder and I went out after a misfit handful of odd cattle that had been grazing on the Elges Creek bench. It was a small field – only some 160 acres – and only ten head of cattle. The ride was made interesting by two things: among these ten head were three different classes of livestock, and the terrain coming off the bench was steep, with large patches of knee-high sage.

There were 3 cow/calf pairs in this bunch, 3 dry cows, and a bull. Each of these three classes of cattle handles differently: they travel at a different pace, they require different amounts of pressure to move, and they are drawn towards different features of the terrain. Holding that little bunch together required some lively riding.

The three pairs were willing to move right along, following the trail down off the bench and out the gate. The bull was willing to follow the cows, but it took repeated urging to keep him moving. The three dry cows, however, wanted nothing to do with any of it. They were all old, two of them were lame, and the third one was just plain mean – she continually turned to charge my horse whenever we approached too closely.

The pairs led out as I started the bunch down the mountain, and I occasionally had to ride up to the point to bend them in the appropriate direction. Then I headed quickly back to the drag to get the bull moving again. In the meantime one of the dry cows would trot off on a tangent away from the other cattle and toward the shelter of the trees and thornbrush.

A lesser horse would have been tired by the climb up to the bench and the continual darting back and forth and up and back to hold those cattle together and moving in the right direction – but not the Kentucky Colt. We were uphill and downhill and around the brush and over it. We brought one cow back to the herd from her attempted escape to the left, only to have a different cow blast out to the right.

The trees and thornbrush were heavier as we started down a steeper pitch from the grass and sage-covered bench. One old cow decided to make her

break downhill while we were holding things together on the uphill side. Thunder was watching her, and waiting until I turned our attention back to her.

I don't know if I nudged him, or reined him, or merely leaned slightly toward her, but she already had a good lead on us and was headed for heavy brush, and the colt knew we had to beat her. As usual, I gave him his head to get there in whatever way he felt was best. It was when he went airborne over a big patch of sage that I *first* grabbed leather – I had made the mistake of looking at the route of my *horse's* feet, rather than staying focused on the movement of the cow.



Thunder circled wide around her to come in between the cow and the thornbrush. Then he cut hard toward her and chased her back to the others. But these three dry cows were determined to scatter. In the time it took to get the bull caught up with the pairs, those 3 dries were off again in three *different* directions.

The closer we came to the gate, the steeper and brushier the terrain. And those 3 cows knew that in this field was their last chance at escape.

As the 3 pairs walked placidly toward the gate, one of the dries bailed straight downhill toward the creek and we had to bail straight down on her flank. The colt paused at the top of a cut bank just long enough to look back and ask if I indeed wanted to drop directly down from there. I replied with a squeeze of my legs, and over we went.

I leaned far back in the saddle as his front feet lit on the road six feet below us – our profile would have looked exactly like a saddlebronc with his hind legs kicked high in the air behind him.

The cow hesitated only a second before she dove off the road and continued toward the creek, and we dove off beside her. We jumped the creek to stay on her flank, airborne for another eight feet.

The rest of the cattle balled up together near the fence as we turned the old rip back toward them; then they began looking for another escape route. The colt read their intentions and bolted back up the steep bank to cut off their escape, and again I grabbed the horn to keep from being thrown over the cattle and left lying in the brush.

I have no doubt that the colt would have finished the job without me, and maybe would have returned for me when the job was finished. But I preferred to stay with him on that adventure.

Back up on the road the colt stood heaving and dripping sweat as the cattle glared at us and decided on their next move. Finally they turned and filed through the gate and down onto the flats. Then we had to go back up the hill for the bull.

He wasn't in a hurry like the dry cows, but he chose a path through heavy brush, hoping that we would overlook him. The bull bellowed his defiance a few times as he crashed through the brush, but he was soon through the gate behind the cows.

Once the cattle were all through the gate, the excitement of the ride was over. We did have to lope around them to the left and turn them back; then out

to the right to turn them away from the lawn - but this was all on relatively flat ground with only foot-high hay to contend with. I could have accomplished *that* part of the ride on a four-wheeler.

The colt and I were still grinning at each other as I leaned from the saddle to latch the corral gate behind the cattle. We had just spent the better part of an hour whirling and spinning together to the music of the West, each of us enjoying the cowboy dance. I'd pulled leather a couple of times, but had never thrown my horse off balance. We'd come in with all of the cattle, and with both of us upright, uninjured, ... and together. It just doesn't get much better than that!