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Ropin'

During calving at Yeager's Y Slash H ranch, I drew the job of doctoring calves. I couldn't quite understand how I was selected, but I wasn't complaining - I never complained about any work that got me a horseback.

I'd been riding Prince all winter. He was a big sorrel Thoroughbred/Quarter Horse cross that Harry had taken in trade on one of his purebreds. Yeagers had a registered Quarter Horse stud, and cutting horses.

When I first started riding Prince he made me nervous. The horse was big and powerful, and cut into his turns a little harder than I trusted him. But I was assured that he had never gone down, so I learned to relax and lean into the corners with him.

Prince had a stance that was reminiscent of a football lineman; his hind legs spraddled. As I got better acquainted with him I learned that he was an excellent cow horse, and I suspected that it was this base-wide stance that gave him such stability. He could cut cattle in the worst of footing without ever losing his balance. Prince was big, strong, intelligent, and athletic. I liked him.

We'd moved all the cows from the upper place to the home place for calving, and I'd taken Prince along to use in the spring work. He'd been my horse all winter, and I continued to use him doctoring calves.

I timed my "house calls" for just after feeding. For about two hours after the hay had been spread out in a long line through the field the cows would all be gathered along the row with their heads down. I could ride slowly up the line, looking over each calf for signs of trouble.

Prince understood the game and walked quietly through the herd. When I'd find a calf to treat, we'd ease him out of the bunch toward the open prairie. The calf would generally be 20 feet away from the feed before he realized that he was alone with a horse on his trail. When the calf made his break, I had a loop ready. Prince needed no guidance but me right up for a throw, and we generally had the calf caught within a few jumps.

My scours boluses and balling gun were in the saddle bags along with a paint-stick. I could give the calf a couple of pills, mark him, and turn him loose without disturbing the rest of the cattle nearby. And so we worked up the line until we had seen all the cattle and doctored anything that was sick.

As with any antibiotic, it is necessary to give a full course of treatment of scours medication. If the treatment ends before the bugs are all dead, the remaining bacteria develop an immunity. And sometimes one medication doesn't work on a particular animal and another type must be given.

So I used different colors of paint in different places on the calf to document my medical history. A red stripe for Terramycin down the face on Monday; across the nose on Tuesday, across the forehead on Wednesday. On Thursday I could use blue paint-stick and start all over again. For Penicillin I might put a circle around an eye, or an X on the nose. And so I could read the course of each calf's treatment.

One day Harry said to me, "You can't keep camping on just one horse. You never know when we'll need more horses, and we have to keep them all hard. I want you to ride Trigger every other day." So the next day I left Prince in the corral and saddled Trigger - a registered Quarter Horse - to make my daily round.

One of the things I learned about genetics in college is the effect of "hybrid vigor". Anytime you cross one purebred animal with one of another line of breeding you get an automatic 10% increase in performance. Practically speaking, the only reason to have pure breeds is to have separate genetic lines from which to cross.

Since my intent was always to have a horse to *ride* rather than a horse to *breed*, there was never any reason for me to have a purebred. And besides, I'd never had much use for paying the premium for a registered horse. As they say, "You can't ride the papers".

But Yeagers had some pretty good horses, bred for cutting. This was the first papered Quarter Horse I had ever ridden. And I wasn't given a choice.

Prince and I had our system down pat. We could get our job done with a minimum of chousing and fuss. But when I nosed out the first calf to catch and doctor with Trigger, it quickly became obvious that I would have to teach this new horse how I worked.

We began as I always had, right after the cattle had been fed. Trigger and I started up the line looking for signs of sickness. So far, so good.

When we came to the first calf that needed attention, I turned him away from the bunch. He had taken a few steps before he understood that a horse and rider were in pursuit. When the calf broke and ran, I nudged my horse and prepared to lay on a loop.

But the calf was pulling away. I kicked the horse harder in an attempt to get close enough for a throw, but the calf had already circled back and gotten lost in the herd.

As Harry had said, we needed to keep all the horses hard. Trigger was out of shape physically, and he hadn't had enough riding to keep his handling in shape either. It would take awhile to tune him up.

As we again tried to work our way up the line of cattle, Trigger was fidgety. The adrenaline rush from the little run had gotten him hyped up. The horse's agitation was sensed by the herd. The cows got nervous and began to pick up their calves and take them away from the feed and toward the safety of the brush.

The next day I was back on Prince. If anything, the rest had done him good. He was quick and eager, and we made up for yesterday's lost time. Prince could feel which calf I had picked out, and in just a few strides I was in position to rope. I was able to take my mind off of guiding the horse and concentrate solely on the aim of my loop.

Prince and I had a lot of fun with the job, and we did it together in a very efficient manner.

But the next day it was Trigger's turn again. He didn't seem to have learned anything from our last go. When I started a calf out of the herd I would have to use my rope to "over and under" him to get within range of the calf. It took a lot more running and a lot more commotion for each calf we had to doctor. I was aggravated, the horse was aggravated, and worst of all, the cows were aggravated. The extra chousing was hard on the calves, and it caused the cows to quit the feed before I'd had a chance to see all the calves.

Swapping horses made the job harder for me. On Trigger, I had to keep a firm hold on the reins and always be aiming the horse. My roping suffered from my divided attention. If I ever kicked Prince, like I did

Trigger, as we moved out after a calf, he would really jump out, sometimes throwing me over the back of the saddle.

Some horses understand the game, others don't. Trigger never did get the picture. More times than one I would leave the herd behind a black calf, circle clear back around before I could catch him, blow through the feeding cattle, and emerge following, a red calf.

No horse is tops at every job, but I never did find out what really suited Trigger. I've since ridden more papered Quarter Horses and my opinion has never changed. Like one old horseman told a tenderfoot who was aghast at riding a horse whose lineage had never been documented, "You can just take those papers and wipe your ass with them, then get on this horse!"