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Roping 101

I do like to rope. Unlike most western riders, my lariat is not hanging on my saddle as a decoration – it gets used. (See “Bull-Roping” from the book [Ain’t This Romantic.](#))

I am not *passionate* about roping, however. And that may explain why I’m not really noted for my prowess with a rope. There are many guys (and some gals) who live to rope. They work hard at good jobs in order to afford the dually pickups and slant-load trailers to drive to roping practice several nights a week and travel to competitive ropings miles away.

I haven’t earned any trophy saddles, but I can hold my own – just a little above average I would say. And if there is a critter that needs to be roped, I’ll rope it. Maybe we should start with explaining why a critter needs to be roped. (We’ll exclude, here, rodeos and contests where critters are roped for the sake of roping - we’ll talk about the times on a ranch where were roping for the sake of accomplishing some task.)

On the ranch, there is a period of time in the spring when there can be a lot of calf roping to do. (See “Ropin” from the book [Ain’t This Romantic.](#))

First off is the ear-tagging. If it is done in the first day or two, a guy can just grab them from afoot. But some get missed for a couple of days, and must be caught from a horseback. Another reason for roping is that young calves are dumb and haven’t experienced such things as bridges, ditches, and creeks. It is often much quicker and easier to just drop a loop on a calf and pull him the short distance to where you want him. And of course there is the doctoring. Scours are often seen among young calves, as well as pneumonia and naval or joint ill.

Calves are small and easy to control, and it’s a good time to teach your horse to “rate” an animal, and to hold them on the end of a rope. It’s no problem for one person to throw the calves and pull the rope off when he’s finished. It’s the bigger stock that is the challenge.

But for sheer volume, heeling may be the most-used skill. Although the practice is dying out, there are still ranches where hundreds, even thousands of calves are heeled to a branding fire. (See “Branding” from the book [Ain’t This Romantic.](#))

Of course it's easy to understand why a person would head and heel a critter out on the range to doctor them. It may be miles to the corral, and it's hard for a sick, injured, or lame animal to make that trip afoot. But sometimes an animal refuses to comply with a simple request to go through that gate, and a cowboy simply has no choice. It's a matter of honor. (See "On the Fight!" from the book Ain't This Romantic.)

So, there are many legitimate reasons to use that rope – and a good cowboy takes advantage of them all. But he also uses some discretion. As I pointed out in "Bull-roping", you can't make a full-grown cow go where you want her to go. All you can do is make it so miserable for her to go elsewhere that she *chooses* to go where you want. Be careful to pick your battles! (See "Flight 932" from the book Ain't This Romantic.)

Now let's talk about ropes.

The old Spanish vaqueros used rawhide lariats. I am told that those rawhide lariats wouldn't take the pull of a cow hitting the end of the rope, and thus "dally" roping was invented. The term dally comes from the Spanish "darle vuelta" – "give the turn". The vaqueros had open wood saddles with broad horns where they could take several wraps and "play" their long rawhide ropes.

When I began roping in the early 1970s, Plymouth Silk Yacht Manila was the standard, with nylon just coming on the scene. Manila is a natural fiber that easily absorbs or transpires moisture. It is stronger, but it's character changes rapidly with the weather – stiff when wet, limp when cold. Competitive ropers using manila kept their ropes in burlap rope sacks that they could shelter from the weather, and maybe add moisture when necessary.

Nylon has become the standard. It is, of course, extremely strong, and it is relatively unaffected by weather. It is sold in standard lengths from 30' to 65', and standard diameters of 5/16" and 3/8" (scant or full). And after you pick the size of your rope, then you have to decide on the "lay" – from extra soft, through soft, medium, hard, and extra hard.

Most lariats have three bundles of fibers that are twisted against themselves to hold them tightly together. How tightly they are twisted against themselves determines the lay of the rope.

Poly ropes are another choice. I prefer poly for roping calves as it has a little softer body that lays in better around the smaller extremities of a calf and collapses quicker, to prevent the calf from running through the loop before you can pull your slack. Alternately, I'll use a 5/16" soft lay nylon for calves. Competitive ropers go through a lot of ropes to find the

one that feels right to them. A store that sells new ropes for \$30 and more will often have a pile of trade-ins that they will sell for \$10-12. I'll often go through that pile to find one I like.

Now that you have a rope, it's time to start practicing. At the store where you bought the rope you can also purchase a dummy calf head, or a horned steer head. It takes lots of practice to get the feel for the size of loop you want to throw, how to lay it on the head and jerk your slack, and most of all, how to coil it up without a kink and build a new loop. In the meantime, you need a saddle.

Saddles are built for all different uses. A roping saddle has a horn that is strong enough to tie off to, and rigging designed to take the pull of 1200 pounds of angry critter. Cutting saddles have horns for holding onto when the horse turns sharply. Pleasure saddles have horns to help you pull yourself up. English saddles have no horns at all. Be sure you have a roping saddle.

Most modern ropers use a full double rig saddle. It has a wide front cinch set well ahead under the horn, and a wide leather flank cinch. (Be sure that the two are hobbled together so the back cinch doesn't swing back and hit the horse literally in the flanks, or you'll be riding a bucking horse just like in the rodeo bronc riders.

Now add the horse.

To keep you out of trouble, a rope horse has to handle well. He must be able to pivot quickly on either his fore or hind legs to follow the movements of whatever is on the end. (See "End of My Rope" from the book [Ain't This Romantic](#). And remember the palomino in "Branding".)

He must also learn to "rate" the animal you have set out to rope. A good rope horse will follow the animal you are after, with no guidance from his rider. (See "Cow Pony" from the book [Ain't This Romantic](#).) When a horse sets you up on a calf and keeps you there it's not much different than roping a bucket on the ground in front of you. Until you catch him.

In Montana, most everyone is a dally roper. I've heard that in other parts of the country they sneer at us. Those folks tie hard and fast to their horn – "If I catch 'em I keep 'em", they say. And that *would* give a fellow extra incentive to hang on to his rope, just as rocks all around below you give extra incentive to stay aboard a bucking horse. It's your choice. A safer alternative is to take a dally, passing the tail of the rope over the top and laying it under your thigh. That way if you part company with your horse you free the dally so at least *he* isn't hurt in the wreck.

And we dally ropers have different camps also: I like rubber hornwrap that grips my rope – “Ranch Roping” rules prohibit rubber.

The best way to learn how to rope is to just got do it. So, pick up a rope, jump on your horse, and look for an opportunity to get some practice!