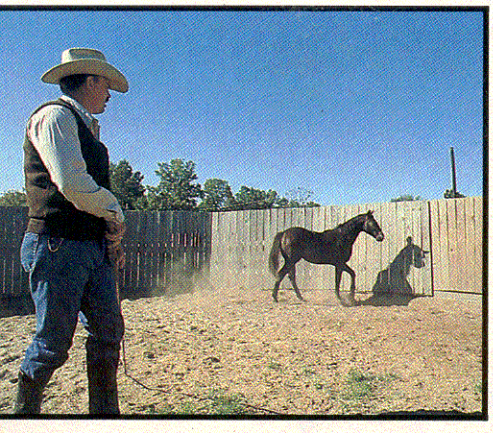
HARNESSING HORSE SENSE



Jim McCall of Ruston has spent 20 years developing a better way to train horses. He has laid aside the bits and bridles, using only body language to break his horses without breaking their spirit.

TEXT BY SALLIE ROSE HOLLIS **PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE ODELL**

Dust dances in the early daylight of a breezy fall morning. It's raised by the footwork of another dance—a choreography on equine terms between Jim McCall and his horse, Jody Call.

From the center of a 45-foot circular enclosure, Jim lunges with knees bent and shoulders tensed toward the horse's hindquarters. The tobacco-chewing colt—he's favored Brown Mule brand since age 6 months—moves forward instinctively to escape this aggressive "threat" from behind. The corral wall forces him to move in a circle.

Still in the center of the ring, Jim follows Jody's movement by turning with a gliding side-step. The man's aggressively flexed leg and lead shoulder still point at the horse's rump. Jody runs, though not from panic, and his gait quickens as Jim intensifies his aggressive position.

Suddenly Jim lunges a step toward Jody Call, and the horse practically slams into the fence in a closely controlled reverse movement. "Ooooh, that was pretty. You done good," Jim says. Tail up, Jody prances at the praise.

This is no ordinary horsing around. All this lunging and stepping is part of a system that James P. McCall, 42, of Ruston has been developing for about 20 years, and the result of that work is a new, nationally recognized method of training horses.

What McCall tries to do is synchronize the wills of horse and human. Using only a whip for sound effects he develops a rapport with the animal, working to manipulate the horse *psychologically*, without force or punishment.

"We're trying to teach people to communicate with horses in a way horses understand," he says. Certain human gestures and hand signals apparently can impart the same commands used in the normal "conversation" of herd hierarchy, which occurs when horses roam free.

Don't compare this interaction between the species to what the famed gorilla, Koko, does with sign language, however. "People are hung up on words," Jim maintains. "With horses, you've got to use body language." He estimates there are more than 1,000 different variations of

body movements through which he communicates with horses.

Lynda McCall, 38, is Jim's wife of eight years and a former student of his horse-training method. "Yeah, I was one of those students who married her professor," she says with a smile, and it is Lynda who has translated most of Jim's actions into verbal explanations—a step that became necessary when Jim began teaching his unique training method to other interested horse owners and horse handlers.

Jim was a teacher at the University of Maryland, in the late '70s, when he first began receiving recognition for the "tackless training" technique. He had started developing it in 1960, at age 17, when he broke his first horse.

The term "tackless," he says, means the training is done without benefit of man-made "hindrances" such as bits, bridles and saddles. "Some Eastern-based publications had heard about the weird things we were doing with horses at the university," Jim recalls, "and they decided to come down and see for themselves if there wasn't some kind of avant-garde article in it. And, when they saw it and believed it could be done, they did some really complimentary articles."

Training a horse, Jim says, begins imperceptibly. "Anytime you're around a horse, you're teaching that horse something about people, whether or not you intentionally have that goal in mind," he says. "What a lot of people don't understand is that if that horse is out there in a pen or pasture and you're just walking through the pasture or working, you've invaded his world.

"He's going to be observing you whether you intend for him to or not. He's going to start to form concepts about what people do and what they're like. And that's when his training starts."

Convincing a previously unhandled horse to accept human company—or "gentling" the horse—is often accomplished through offering the animal an edible lure and then by handling his head.

That step is nothing revolutionary; it's been practiced by horsemen for thousands of years. Jim, however, has added a new twist to the invitation for the animal to come closer.

He drops his eyes and shoulders, creating a hollowing of his body away from the animal. That stance resembles the submissively outstretched neck of another horse. And unless the horse is inordinately shy, it usually will come forward in greeting.

Lunging drills further open the lines of communication that are necessary for breaking without force.

"The horse you're dealing with has got to figure out you're a two-legged horse," Lynda says. Learning the language of lunging takes unbroken colts only 30 to 60 minutes. Not bad horse sense, considering it takes human students six to eight weeks to learn this method of handling their own horses.

But once a human is "speaking equine," Lynda says, "the horse will understand what you want him to do, and he'll do it for you. That's our whole philosophy in a nutshell."

To teach the horse the rudimentary mounting process, Jim first presses against the unrestrained horse, laying arms across the animal's back. The horse is allowed to move away at any time, and when the horse begins to accept this pressure willingly, Jim hangs his arms over the far side, rubbing the sides of the horse's belly with closed palms.

Next, Jim hops gently against the horse, putting increasing amounts of pressure on its back but never really mounting.

After about 15 minutes of such preparatory moves, "bellying" follows, which means lying belly-down with Jim's full weight across the horse's back.

When the horse is accustomed to the weight and begins to accept it without skittishness, Jim slowly lifts his right leg, swings it over without hitting the horse's flank, then sits upright on the horse's back with his legs relaxed.

Throughout this whole encounter, Jim dismounts any time the horse becomes unduly excited. After the initial full-mounting procedure, it usually takes only about two minutes for the animal to relax. And just two weeks after the original breaking process began, man and horse are out walking, trotting, stopping, backing and turning—all without the use of man-made devices. Man and mount are one. Psychology and synchronization have triumphed.

There's a McCall formula for every stage of the horse-breaking process, and Jim has literally hundreds of incisive tips. He wants to write a book about the technique and perhaps produce some videotapes that would demonstrate the methods more graphically. Until then, he satiates the curious through his clinics and seminars and by distributing reprints of an 11-article series written for *Horseman* magazine.

"Anybody can use the philosophy in his own way," he says. "Once they understand the basics, they can put their own accent to it."

Whether Jim's students understand the tackless training system totally or wind up adopting "just a small piece of it," he says, "it's one of those things where I really don't believe a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Horse and rider will benefit from all or any part of our method."

Jim sees training not as a science, but as an art. "A horse is like a piece of clay," he theorizes, "and you can mold it into anything you want."

Lynda compares their work to that of first- and second-grade teachers. "We like to take the young mind when it's the most pliable," she says, "and take all the fear that's associated with breaking and never put it in there. That's the way we like to train horses, and that's the way we like to train people to train horses."

Newcomers naturally wonder what the benefits of such a method are, as opposed to the traditional spine-rattling approach of broncobusting, and Jim patiently explains. "When a horse is trained without force and without a lot of pain," he'll say, "he's more relaxed in the environment he's going to work in. He's more confident; therefore he has less chance of injuring himself.

"One of the other benefits is that if people understand the horses and how they think and what makes a horse act the way he acts, they'll enjoy the animal more. They'll be less apt to blame the animal for faults, and for not doing what they want in training."

Jim also believes that today's renewed human quest for a good mental attitude in athletics has extended itself into the horse industry, particularly in racing. "I think that's an evolved idea whose time has come—that it takes both body and mind to produce a champion," he says. "Over time, people have lost the meaning of that old horseman's statement, 'Break the horse but don't break the spirit.'

"And I think this new technique and philosophy of ours are bringing that statement, in a more contemporary sense, back into the horse-and-trainer relationship. That's our intent, at any rate, and people keep telling us that they're pleased with the results."

These days, Jim practices his technique primarily at the family farm, located off Ruston's Wesley Chapel Road. Named Jimani—pronounced "Jim 'n' I" in honor of him and his wife (both Geminis, astrologically)—the farm eventually will house 10 to 15 brood mares each year and stand two or three stallions. The McCall clan, operating under the "JML" brand, will break and train 20 to 30 yearlings annually, in addition to providing sales preparation, consulting, farm management and blood-stock acquisition services.

"When I went to school," Jim says when asked about his doctoral work at Texas A&M on the breeding of problem mares, "I wanted to be a trainer, but the curriculum choices then were limited to nutrition or reproduction. And I always liked sex better than eating, so I studied genetics." Consequently the horses have a 98-percent conception rate at his closely monitored Jimani ranch.

And although Jim works mainly with thoroughbreds, he's also come up with what he considers the "ultimate quarter horse."

Jim's years of experimentation and his innovative training techniques have made him a well-known personality in the horse industry. He writes prolifically. He conducts at least two clinics or seminars a year, anywhere from Maine (where the U.S. Equestrian Team was training at the time) to Oregon. And his work at Louisiana Tech University has been featured on national television shows such as *The CBS Morning News.*

Having grown up on a farm near El Dorado, Ark., Jim says coming to Louisiana Tech from the University of Maryland in 1980 made him feel as though he'd finally returned home. He came to establish the university's equine science program, which subsequently has won such honors as the "Award for Excellence in Agriculture Technology Instruction" for the southern United States.

Last fall Jim relinquished his administrative duties at Louisiana Tech, returned to regular classroom teaching and began spending more time at the Jimani. And it's obvious that Jim is a contented man. "It's difficult to be around horses and not be contented . . . for me, anyway," he says. "We always had horses while I was growing up," "and I was around them from *before* the word go—even before I could talk! I always wanted to be a trainer, ever since I can remember. I think it's what I was *meant* to be."

Jim has traveled around the country to share his training technique, but his favorite place is the Jimani Ranch in Ruston, where his love of horses is shared by his wife Lynda.

Boyhood photographs show Jim in miniature chaps, cowboy hat and boots, grinning from ear to ear. He even rode to church on horseback.

Through the years, that fascination has remained. There are perpetual boots, long-sleeved plaid shirts and hats that keep the upper portion of his mustachioed face a shade lighter than the rest of him.

"Jim dresses like that no matter where we go," Lynda says with a sigh, but it's quite evident that she's not displeased.

Once, in an airport, his attire intrigued actress Carol Channing. "Are you a real cowboy?" she asked.

"Lady," he replied, "I'm the closest thing you're gonna find to one in Baltimore."

And now, perhaps, he's the closest thing in Ruston, where he continues to preach the harmony of man and horse . . . and where his farm stationery bears a logo of the ultimate, mythical union of horse and human—the centaur. □