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GameDay Finale

A winning cow work requires planning, timing and strategy. Here's how to prepare both mentally and physically.

Article and photos by Annie Lambert

The cow work—a sometimes scary, usually exhilarating and always crowd pleasing conclusion to any cow horse contest—is the last chance to earn a win or save face.

But, despite appearances, planning a run down the fence doesn't take place as you ride into the show pen. Designing a run should be a pre-game, as well as game day, tactic, says cow horse trainer Jake Gorrell of Hanford, California.

Whether you are at a weekend show and go down the fence directly following your reining run, or at a major aged event with the fence work run as a separate entity, how you prepare for that run may be the difference between going home with money or leaving with only thoughts of "should'a, would'a, could'a."

"What do you do to prepare for a final fence work?" asks Gorrell. "Lots of things go through your mind the day before, as you are warming up, while walking into the arena, through changing your game plan in the middle of the run.

"The herd work, reining and cow work are

all equal parts of a cow horse score," Gorrell adds. "But, in my mind, the cow work is probably the most important aspect of a reined cow horse. It is our tradition and what sets us apart from other disciplines."

A cow horse must work instinctively and independently while remaining responsive to subtle cues from the rider, often while running full-out next to a cow. Seem easy? Probably not.

Pre-Game Tactics

Tomorrow is game day, and you have your final cow work. What do you do for your horse? Soundness and nutrition are the first issues that pop into Gorrell's mind.

Sometimes, horses have been through a long show with many tough runs and can be body sore. Others might have unsoundness issues that are not serious enough to keep them on the bench, but are problems that need to be addressed.

"I always think about the next day," says Gorrell. "If a horse isn't 100 percent sound, you might need to give them some [butazolidin] or Banamine to try and make them more comfortable.

"And I usually feed my horses quite a bit the night before I show, and don't give them as much the morning of the contest. That way, they aren't working on a full stomach; they aren't weighted down or lethargic."

The Warm-Up

Gorrell says that there is a fine line between warming up and wearing out a horse. If he is getting ready for a cow work, he doesn't want to get a horse tired or over-stimulated. He tries to keep his horses relaxed and thinks about their musculo-skeletal systems being warmed up, but not fatigued, to avoid injury.

"I want my horses listening to my cues," Gorrell explains. "I lope them around, not worrying too much about pace, and concentrate on steering. I want their bodies soft in my hands and to have them listening to my legs. I want their minds quiet, concentrating and relaxed, focused on their jobs.

"It is pretty much the same for the reined work, and often your fence work will follow the reined work without leaving the arena. I've never been a big advocate of loping forever



Gorrell moves in boldly and takes command of a cow in the boxing, figuring how the bovine will handle—and earning its respect—before going down the fence.

before I go show; I just don't like it and think fatigued horses are more subject to injury. I like to have their minds fresh, but quiet and confident. Confidence is huge."

Gorrell acknowledges there are horses that require more loping, but says that doesn't mean he has to like it. Having a horse "paying attention with the least amount of exertion" is a priority, the trainer says.

A pre-cow work warm-up for Gorrell's horses consists of softly rolling them off the fence a few times, making sure they are supple, getting off his legs and responding to his hands. When loping a straight line, the trainer expects to be able to move their shoulders and feet whichever direction he chooses, without resistance.

"It is very important to have control of the shoulders and feet during a fence run," Gorrell says. "If something happens, you need to be able to place your horse anywhere you want to."

"As you are running down the fence, if that cow bears off the fence you've got to be able to respond. And that isn't just to have a nice run, but also to avoid an accident, to stay safe."

Strategy and Technique

Know Your Horse, Cattle and Arena

Before Gorrell enters the arena, he has his horse prepared, has sized up the arena dimensions and has a pretty good idea of how the cattle are working.

"You need to know how much air the cattle have in them, how strong they are and estimate how long they are going to last," Gorrell explains. "How much feel do the cattle have? Are some sizes and colors showing less or more feel or speed? You need to study those cattle."

"Know your arena," Gorrell continues. "Does it have a rounded, oval corner, or is it square? Where are the cattle holding pens in respect to the arena? If the cattle are behind the boxing area, they might be reluctant to head down the wall. On the other hand, if they are held at the opposite end, they may be hard to catch going to that first turn. Cattle will always gravitate back to where they came from."

Coming into the pen armed with the right information helps a rider determine how long

Open-Field Turns

When a cow refuses to go to the wall, and the horse and rider are in good position, it may be possible to take advantage of the situation and make an "open field turn," a turn made without incorporating the fence.

"If your horse turns the cow without the aid of the wall while in good position, you can score huge credits," says Gorrell. "If your horse sets his hocks into the ground, makes the cow change directions and fires back on the cow, it can be worth way more than turning on the fence. It carries a high degree of difficulty so the score should be big."

But Gorrell warns riders that while they can take advantage of a degree of difficulty, they cannot create a degree of difficulty by being reckless. And, the trainer reminds, degree of difficulty credit will be given only to riders who handle the tougher situation.

to box their cow, how to ride out of the corner and how to judge the number of fence turns before a bovine can be circled under control. However, Gorrell suggests, riders should be reading how their individual cow is really working throughout the run, rather than how they expected the cow to run.

Boxing

Every move Gorrell makes while boxing helps him determine how the cow will act during the balance of the run, both on the wall and while circling.

When Gorrell rides into the show pen, it is with authority, trotting toward the cattle gate and asking for his cow early.

"I don't like my horses to have to sit in that arena with their head down a long time," Gorrell explains. "I don't want to let my horse look around and see the crowd and lose concentration. About the time I stop, the cow should be coming in."

The trainer recommends using tempered aggression when initially approaching the cow. Being too aggressive, he says, could cause you to lose the cow, while coming at the cow too directly and/or too fast could blow that bovine right past your horse. Being too tentative, however, puts the cow in the driver's seat.

Either way, insists Gorrell, you need to be in control.

If the cow moves toward him, Gorrell keeps his horse faced to the cow, trying not to give ground. He never wants his horse to get too over-rotated; the front feet should always be closer to the cow than the hind feet. This angle, the trainer points out, benefits the horse when a cow challenges.

"I'm training that cow when I box him," says Gorrell. "I trot up and go right to the head of the cow almost every time. I want that cow paying attention to what I'm doing. When he comes to me, I'm trying to push him back to that fence, always working his face."

Gorrell wants to drive the cow as far as he can across the end of the pen, turning it just short of the point that would enable the fence to assist with the turn.

"If you drive the cow across from corner to corner, you never turned him; you and the fence have turned him," he says. "But, I want to make the turn [without using the fence] because I'm training the cow so I can turn him before hitting the penalty marker on the wall. I'll drive him and turn him away, repeatedly, across that arena."

Turning the cow away from his horse ulti-



The corner transition means staying with your cow without overrunning, and shutting it off before the halfway penalty marker.



Cow horses must rate a cow down the fence instinctively while remaining relaxed and responsive to the rider's cues.

mately sets the cow up to turn into the wall when turning on the fence. Training the cow to turn away when boxing often keeps him from turning toward your horse on the wall, which would allow it to escape your control off the wall.

"If you can turn a cow into the fence, you are much more likely to get back into position [and headed down the wall for your next turn] without having to maneuver in the center of the arena and loop the cow back to the fence," says Gorrell. "If you have a decent cow and

it runs down there and gets off the fence for any reason, you have lost control somewhere. Control is the name of the game."

If you have a horse that gets real cowy in the box, it is fine to let him show off a little bit, according to Gorrell. But he reminds competitors that such a display is not a requirement, while controlling the cow is. Those cutting maneuvers probably won't improve your fence work anyway.

"You aren't teaching the cow much and you are wearing your horse out," Gorrell



Being too close to the cow and fence may cause a horse to "hang up" in the turn, allowing the cow to escape behind the horse and off the wall.

says. "Your horse is making bigger and harder moves than the cow and getting more worn out than the cow, too. Driving the cow across the pen and turning it away will give you a better idea of how the cow feels."

Gorrell also notices a lot of non-pros and amateurs spending too much time boxing, which creates an overtired, numb cow. A numb cow can be more dangerous to work than a speedy one.

"If you stay down there [boxing] for too long, you might get a check," Gorrell adds,

"but we all want to win first, not second.

"That doesn't mean—and I want to emphasize this—it doesn't mean you can get reckless! The whole name of this game is controlling the cattle."

Gorrell stays fairly close to his cow while boxing, if he is able. A wild cow negates that action, but being close on a good cow gives it the sense that the horse and rider team is a major factor in its life.

"Being close in the box sets me up for a nice, controlled departure out of that corner," Gor-

rell points out. "Getting through that corner is very important to your run down the fence."

Departure and First Turn

"Keep it simple; just get around the corner," Gorrell says of the transition from boxing to running down the wall.

Sometimes, cows will stop and turn back on a rider in the corner, and it is a difficult point at which to read cattle. A lot of ugly things seem to happen during that transition.

"I work angles on the cow," says Gorrell. "I'll stay back just enough so I have a little [inside] angle on the cow, and from there I can slide up to its hip. Smaller cattle I might give a little more space because they are generally quicker, not so much faster, but they can scatter. I don't want to get myself in a position where the cow will be able to cut back on me.

"I'm more apt to go to the hip on larger cattle. They are usually fast, but maybe not as agile. You need to watch and see how the cattle leave the corner and figure the best way to react."

Once through the corner, the rundown becomes all important. According to Gorrell, riders sometimes don't concentrate as much as they should when galloping down the arena wall in hot pursuit of a cow. Most riders feel the rush of adrenaline and start thinking, "Oh my gosh, here comes the big turn!"

What should be going through the rider's mind is keeping off the cow's hip enough to keep it running past the center marker, while remaining close enough to get it turned before the corner penalty markers.

Rate is another crucial aspect of running down the fence, according to Gorrell.

"Your horse should be comfortable staying right next to that cow," he says. "Horses need to rate willingly at the same speed of the cow and remain in position to turn the cow when asked.

"I want to get up on that cow's hip as quickly as possible and have my horse rate with the cow. When I feel it is time to turn, I'll ease by or kind of sneak past the cow. I don't want to blow by him at an accelerating speed. If the cow is running 30 miles an hour, I only want to be going 31 or 32 miles an hour. Easing in makes an easier, tighter turn for my horse and allows him to get back into position quicker for the next turn."

And Gorrell makes a conscientious effort to manipulate his position for an even better turn.

"As I get close to where I want to turn, I drift the horse sideways, away from the cow,

draw my horse's ribcage out and away from the cow by just three to six inches," he explains. "If you use your cow-side leg, it puts a slight, natural arc in your horse.

"When you get close to that cow, he knows you're there and it will draw him like a magnet. If you touch the cow he'll lean on you, so I don't want that. Past the center marker, I'll draw out and pray that cow follows me. It gives the cow more room on the fence; just a 12- or 18-inch window increases your chances of turning it *into* the fence by probably 75 percent."

When you are too close, the horse has the cow smashed into the fence, Gorrell says. When this happens, the cow lifts up and the horse usually slides by and hangs up on the fence. He has no room to turn, and neither does the cow.

A properly delivered first turn is more apt to lead to a great second turn. And, the controlled turn always helps to avoid the dreaded loop.

"I hate the loop!" says Gorrell. "In the old days, if you had to circle your cow back around through the arena [and realign it on the fence], make a loop, you were not going to win. Smoky Pritchett, Don Murphy—all those guys say the loop is for somebody who is not on a good-enough horse or is not a good-enough hand to get a good horse to handle the cow."

Gorrell laughs as he confesses that he probably ends up making a loop way more than he would like, but says he tries to avoid it at all costs.

"If you try to avoid it and there is nothing you can do, as when the cow is bad, but your horse makes a great turn, then those are situations where, as a judge, I wouldn't penalize somebody for making a loop," Gorrell explains. "If any person doesn't make a big effort to get back into position and avoid the loop, they should not be given much credit.

"Taking a loop, instead of hustling to avoid it, gives a rider time to regroup and set up a nice rundown to the next turn. They are lowering the degree of difficulty and should be penalized for it."

Gorrell is quick to point out that there are times when a person needs only a "passing" score to make the finals. At that point, he believes, it is okay to mentally protect yourself, and your score, with a loop. You can't safety up, he reminds, but you can play it smart—and playing smart is part of winning the game.

Being familiar with your horse will help you realize how much room you need to give him to make a great turn, according to Gorrell.



When a horse turns with the cow and fires out of the turn, he can keep the cow on the wall and avoid a loss of working advantage penalty.



Move your horse up and out to hustle to the head when circling a cow. Chasing from behind can easily lead to horse and rider biting the dust.

Moving slightly off the cow works well for a less-flexible horse, also, because it creates a "pocket" of room for him to maneuver in.

Second and Subsequent Turns

How many turns to make is a big question mark for many riders and an uneducated guess for others. Where to make subsequent turns down the fence usually proves to be another brain teaser. Gorrell says that a smart strategy,

coupled with experience, will help in the decision-making process.

"Knowing my horse, how the cattle work and the type of arena, gives me an idea of what I'll need to do before I enter the show pen," Gorrell says. "I tentatively plan on making three turns before I go to the center to circle. As the run progresses, my strategy can easily be altered by taking a turn out or adding a turn.

"Some guys go in thinking 'two turns and go to the middle,' which can wind up putting the run into jeopardy. You need to remain flexible."

Gorrell notes that over-thinking the situation during a fence work can slow your reaction time.

"I try to isolate my thoughts to a few that I know are going to make the biggest advantage to the run," he explains. "By far the most important is my position on the cow; know how the cow is rating and know where you are with respect to that cow."

This can be harder than it seems, according to Gorrell, who says he sometimes con-

centrates on the cow at the expense of losing position within the arena.

"You need to be conscious of where that center marker is, and I like to turn as far down the wall as I can without hitting the corner penalty marker," he says. "The risk factor goes up, but with every risk comes a benefit. That benefit is having your first turn show the judges a lot of rate and control. The longer run also helps your odds for a better second turn."

That first turn is the most important turn in the run and is also a decision-making point, Gorrell says. If you have a strong cow, you should probably plan on making two more turns. That means your second turn will be

made closer to the opposite end of the arena, which sets up a third turn near the center mark and puts you near the center of the pen to circle the cow.

"It's like having a good football team," says Gorrell, "you have a lot of options." "After that first turn, you go down farther to make a second turn. Those mental decisions change with every turn. If, at the first turn, you decide two turns is enough, you'll make a second turn closer to the middle of the pen to set up your circles.

"Ride and think like an athlete. If you sit dead on your butt or flatfooted in your stirrups, you're just like a flatfooted basketball

About Jake Gorrell



Jake Gorrell of Hanford, California, says he is always learning, always on the lookout for new insight and ideas that will advance his training program.

An Idaho native, Gorrell, age 35, was raised in a rodeo family and surrounded by good horsemen. He began showing horses early and even competed in junior stock horse classes throughout Idaho. He says he learned a lot

from his father, Jerry, who was also a horse trainer.

"My dad was a horse trainer and both my parents come from rodeo families," says Gorrell. "Dad has trained a lot of horses and is a past winner of the Idaho [Reined Cow Horse] Futurity. He taught me a lot about training."

During his high school rodeo days, Jake was a District All-Around Champion and the reserve all-around at the state level. He also won the district cutting championship four consecutive years and was the state cutting champion, but never competed at the nationals.

With a nudge from his father, after graduating from high school Gorrell entered the world of business. He earned a degree in business administration with an emphasis on marketing and management. After graduation from the highly accredited College of Idaho, he found a job and was on target toward making his fortune as a business executive.

But there was a problem. He missed the country, he missed his family and he missed the horses.

It was actually Jim Roeser, father of trainers Dan and Jon Roeser, who told Jake he had the talent to train a horse if he was willing to put in the time and effort to compete with the best.

The Roeser clan was like a second family to Jake, and his respect for Jim re-directed his career path toward the performance horse industry.

In 1996, Gorrell moved to California and spent the next three years working for and learning from Jon Roeser.

Gorrell has been a consistent finalist at major cow horse events since venturing out on his own in 1999. Equi-Stat shows his lifetime earnings in excess of \$461,312, with numerous champion and reserve championship titles to his credit, including the 2001 Limited Open Championships at both the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity and Idaho Reined Cow Horse Futurity. In 2002, he won the NRCHA Open Bridle World Championship, and claimed the Cow Palace Grand National Open Bridle Reserve Championship the following year.

At the 2006 AQHA World Show, Gorrell won the Junior Working Cow Horse Championship. He also won the Valley Cow Horse Association Futurity Open Championship in 2004 and was NRCHA Derby Open and Intermediate Champion in 2005.

Jake credits his wife, Sonia, whom he married in 2000, his family, friends, and mentors such as Don Murphy, for his success, noting that their support is the key to his operation.

Just Do Your Job

"When I show a horse, I'm not concerned with fancy moves, making huge slides and fast, wicked turns," says Gorrell. "I've been there and done that. Anytime you think about setting up a run by saying, 'I'm going to nail that son-of-a-gun,' or 'I'm going to make a huge turn,' it never works."

Gorrell's advice is to just do your job without any pre-run pledges of greatness. The cow work requirements call for boxing the cow at the end of the arena, making at least two good turns on the fence, and circling the cow both directions in the middle of the arena, in that order.

"I have a mental picture of my run," Gorrell explains. "I have a game plan. That basic game plan is what my decisions are based on, and a lot of it comes from experience."

"Sports psychiatrists give you trigger words; one word means a whole paragraph of things you actually do. When I say 'box,' it doesn't matter if it is a fast or slow cow. It is the same game plan. I'm going to drive the cow across the pen and turn him away from me. If the cow tries to blow by me or won't move, I have to react, but it will be with minimal thought process, so my reaction is quick and positive."

player; you're going to get beat. Think like an athlete and your body reacts faster physically, you ride better."

Circle Up

And circling up is not a good time to be asleep at the wheel, either. Being improperly positioned or out of control while trying to circle your cow can set you up for an accident. Control, once again, is a major component of your final maneuver.

After making his last turn, Gorrell sweeps his cow off the fence and drives it as near to the center of the arena as possible. Starting and finishing your circles in the middle of the arena earns credit. Being "center stage" puts you in the spotlight in front of the judges, and, says Gorrell, "That is showmanship."

"Say you make a right-hand turn and sweep the cow off the fence, which puts you on his left side [as you ride between the cow and the fence]," Gorrell explains. "As he breaks to the center, he starts drifting toward the gate he came in, which is to the right of the cow. A lot of times, I'll switch sides so that cow will drift into me. Hopefully, the cow will hug my horse's shoulder with the front of his shoulder, allowing me to physically push it around. He'll

be under my control."

When switching sides to circle a second direction, Gorrell again tries to make the switch while the cow is traveling in a direction the cow doesn't want to go, which helps maintain control.

"When I change direction, I always think about which direction the cow is spurting toward," Gorrell says. "If you go in the opposite direction, he'll be going his slowest speed. I like to turn one until he is tipped almost straight away from what he is drawn toward, usually the gate, then switch directions and he about falls into you."

Being out of control while trying to circle can get you and your horse hurt. There is, according to Gorrell, about a two-foot circle from the flanks and around the rump of a cow that is considered a danger zone. If your horse's front feet encroach inside that zone, you need to back off to prevent an accident like clipping the cow's heels and falling.

This rule of thumb applies to your position on the cow throughout the run.

"The worst is when people get behind a cow and are trying to get up beside it," says Gorrell. "The best thing to do is pull up, pull out, and then ride to the cow's neck. Do not come

to a cow from straight behind; you don't know where he is going."

Don't Run Wild

Gorrell believes in the saying, "No guts, no glory," but the trainer does not suggest that anyone run wild without a plan, putting their life in jeopardy.

"I don't want to be running down the fence having to think, 'Boy, I need to get my horse's head down,' or 'I need to get his shoulder up,' and worry about big stops and big turns," Gorrell says. "If you're thinking about all that, it is too much."

"Don't let your brain freeze up. That is part of being an athlete, thinking and using your hands and your feet. If you freeze mentally, your body freezes. The mind and the body are connected that way. If you just lock your hands, your mind locks, too."

"Anytime I'm showing and worrying about how my horse looks in the fence work, it breaks my concentration," Gorrell admits. "If I have to worry about that, it means my job hasn't been done at home. When I walk in the pen, my only obligation to myself is controlling the cow through, and safely completing the required elements of, a cow work." ♪



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