

# FROM OUR ARCHIVES

*This story was written by Joan Fry and appeared in our October, 1990 issue. Since the original story on Pat Parrelli was published, he has become a well-known figure in the horse world.*

## Faces: Pat Parelli



Pat Parelli claims he can take an unbroke colt—**any** unbroke colt, any breed, any temperament—and by the end of an hour he will not only be riding that colt, but the colt will halt on command, do all three gaits, including flying lead-changes, and walk into a horse trailer by himself—**all without a bridle**.

Sounds incredible? I thought so too. That's why I visited Cal Poly Pomona a few months ago to watch Parelli in action. Sponsored by the Arabian Horse Association of California, his demonstration was part of a series of horsemanship clinics offered over the summer.

Parelli, a 36-year-old ex-rodeo rider who has been following the lecture circuit for the past ten years, calls what he does "Horsemanship Psychology Demonstrations." He's a horse behaviorist, and he's learned from some of the best in the business—old-time horse tamers, cowboys, and at least one college professor.

A good-looking man wearing a white neckerchief, cowboy boots, and a gambler's mustache, Parelli asked Cal Poly to provide him with only two things: two unbroke colts, and a trailer. He never got around to either the second horse or the trailer (these are Arabians we're talking about). But what he **did** do was amazing.

What, exactly, **does** Pat Parelli do?

He started by taking the halter and lead shank off the first colt and replacing

them with a braided, hand-tied halter of his own design connected to a soft, heavy, 60'-long rope. Then he turned his back on the colt and started talking to the audience. Although Parelli prefers the term "communicator," he really is an entertainer—a talker who's fast on his feet, quick with a quip, and as good as a stand-up comic at winning a crowd.

But Parelli never forgot about that colt on the other end of his rope. After watching Parelli for a few minutes, the colt lost his fear of this strange man in this strange setting, and—ignoring Parelli—put his head down to sniff the ground.

Parelli immediately faced the colt and gave several short, sharp yanks on the rope. The colt backed up a few steps and stopped, his attention riveted on Parelli. Parelli stopped jerking. Then he turned around and started talking to the crowd. After several minutes, the colt got bored again. The same thing happened.

Parelli's goal, which any student of whip breaking probably figured out long before I did, was to have that colt pay attention to him any time **he** faced the colt. (In whip breaking—and Parelli sometimes works horses in a bullring using a lounge whip—the trainer taps the horse on the hind end. As soon as the horse faces him, he quits).

Then Parelli taught the colt a reverse lesson. As he stood facing the colt, still talking to the audience (a mike was clipped to his shirt collar), the colt finally got curious and came over to him. Parelli petted him, rubbing his face, scratching his ears, stroking his neck. He stressed that a horseman needs to develop this "hands on" association with his horse in order to touch him all over, even in the ticklish places, without the horse objecting or fighting.

Suddenly something spooked the colt, and he swung into Parelli. While Parelli calmly explained to the audience that he, Pat Parelli, had "his own space" exactly the same way horses have theirs, he slapped the colt on the neck behind the ears. The colt jumped back. Each time the colt crowded him, Parelli would slap him—on the side, on the rump, on the neck—loud, open-handed slaps. Soon the colt got the idea that it was a bad idea to walk over this man.

Then Parelli turned the horse loose. (I've seen a tape of Parelli working a colt

in a bullring. This was Cal Poly's full size show ring). What he was demonstrating here was that you don't really **lead** a horse, even on a lead rope; you **drive** a horse. As the colt warily circled him, Parelli followed him on foot, still talking to the audience. Whenever the colt slowed down or attempted to stop, Parelli grabbed a handful of loose rope and threw a few loops against the colt's hindquarters. He was establishing 1) a distance between himself and the colt, and 2) an idea: that as long as he was walking behind the colt, **driving** the colt from behind, the colt would move forward. When Parelli stopped, the colt stopped too.

Next Parelli stood facing the colt with his hands on its withers and jumped up and down, gradually putting more and more of his weight on the colt's back. Since horses, like people, are "sided" (most horses will turn more readily to one direction than the other, and are more comfortable taking the canter lead), Parelli was able to half-mount the colt from the left, but not from the right. When he tried to "jump" the colt from the right, the colt backed a few steps, whirled, and tried to run over him. Parelli immediately slapped him and attempted to "jump" him again.

The colt was getting more and more worked up, and Parelli was alternately slapping him and jerking on his halter when a Cal Poly official reminded him that he'd asked for a break halfway through the two-hour session, and that hour was up.

After the break—during which time Parelli did not approach the colt or even look at him—he was able to "jump" him from both sides. The colt was so relaxed and accepting that Parelli mounted him, squatting, and then slowly stood on the colt's back. The colt never moved.

After dismounting, Parelli "drove" the colt up to a Western saddle he had placed in the middle of the ring. Standing at the colt's shoulder and facing his rump, Parelli swung the saddle blanket on and off the colt's back until the colt stopped flinching. Then Parelli quickly saddled him, cinched him up, replaced the long lead rope with a shorter one, and mounted him.

Telling the astounded crowd that when he wanted the colt to move on he "smiled with all his cheeks," Parelli

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demonstrated—by flapping his arms, moving his legs (without actually kicking the colt), rocking back and forth, and smiling—how a forward-urging attitude can actually get a horse to walk off. When Parelli wanted the colt to stop, he simply closed down—slumped in the saddle, stopped moving his legs, his arms, his body. The colt stopped. Five minutes later, without the colt ever having bucked, Parelli cantered him around the ring on the correct lead. Then he rode a figure-eight to the center of the ring, and—using his arms and body-weight—got the colt to switch leads through the figure-eight.

Then he rode the colt over to the audience of several hundred cheering people and asked for questions.

It was quite a performance—and it made a believer out of me. But animal behaviorism is still a controversial science, and Parelli's detractors claim that his cowboy techniques and crowd-pleasing antics won't work with every type of horse.

Is Pat Parelli a true horse psychologist, or simply a bronc rider who learned the principles of whip breaking and took his show on the road?

One of Cal Poly's officials leans towards the second point of view. An Arabian owner himself, this man pointed out that the reason Parelli never got around to the second colt was because he got into a fight with the first one; he's more used to broncs than hot-blooded horses "that will fight to the death" rather than submit. This man agreed that Parelli has "the touch and the balance and timing" of a natural-born horseman, but doubts that any man "who really loves horses" would climb on the back of a two-year-old colt wearing high-heeled boots, or ask that colt—when it was tired, dripping wet with sweat, and still unsure of its balance with a man on its back—to execute a flying change of lead.

On the flip side, Parelli has never met a horse he couldn't out-smart—a list that

includes rank rodeo broncs and "the hardest case" he ever had, a 20-year-old rent string veteran who knew every trick in the book, including how to trot home backwards. Horse owners from coast to coast—from Saddlebred trainers to dressage trainers—swear by Parelli. (He gives over 40 demonstrations a year throughout the U.S. and Australia). *Equus* magazine did a cover story on him for their February, 1989 issue; he's also been written up in *Horse & Rider* and *Western Horseman*. Parelli has appeared at colleges and universities throughout the country, where he has drawn an enthusiastic response. He recently received a Special Recognition Award from the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. (NARHA), for donating a portion of his demonstration proceeds to NARHA. This year, Parelli set himself the goal of raising \$20,000 for handicapped riding programs.

"What's your basic satisfaction with what you do?" I asked him.

"Seeing regular people get extraordi-

nary results from ordinary equipment," Parelli replied promptly. He pointed out that he does clinics as well as demonstrations, and likes to deal with practical problems that ordinary people face. "Last week at Baker, Ore., I was talking to a girl who had come to a clinic in Yakima, Wash. She came because some friends of hers in Red Lodge, Mont., had gone and learned from observation the trailer loading [technique] that I presented there. Then they went out and trailer-loaded their horse, and taught—I'd told them that night to go and share it with two people who were worthy of it—they not only taught the horse but taught the girl who owned the horse how to trailer-load it. She in turn taught **this** girl. This is now fourth-generation information, and this girl, the day before my clinic, had successfully loaded a ten-year-old mare that nobody in the community could get in the horse trailer."

Parelli paused, as if thinking about it, then nodded. "**That** is where I get my satisfaction."

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