

## The Cowboy and the Saddlebred

**The Cowboy:** Craig Cameron, a native Texan and former rodeo cowboy. But he's earned his living for the past 30-plus years demonstrating how to put the principles of "revolutionary horsemanship," a.k.a. animal behaviorism, into practice on outlaw horses. Cameron was a student of Ray Hunt's, who in turn was a student of the legendary horseman Tom Dorrance. Dorrance, who died in 2003, was so in tune with how horses think and so adept at motivating them to cooperate with him that his clinics (although he never called them that) were attended not only by horse owners, but also by teachers, businessmen, and psychologists.

**The Saddlebred:** Pacific Belle, bred by Desdy Baggott of Altadena, Calif., and owned by me. Prim, as I call her, is 19 years old. I taught her basic dressage and trail ride her. Even though she's not a typical long-legged, swan-necked Saddlebred (she's only 15.2 barefoot), she's the envy of all my neighbors whose horses don't arch

trailer only half a dozen times. The reason she and Craig Cameron found themselves face to face in a big covered arena at the Equine Affaire, a three-day horse exposition at the Pomona Fairplex (home of the California Futurity), is because I don't own a horse trailer, and have trouble loading her into anybody else's.

My husband John—who trained Imperator when he was owned by Ron and Paula Kirsh—informed me that show Saddlebreds are generally very easy loaders because they spend so much of

through this area, we were forced to evacuate—and Prim did not want to set foot in the neighbor's cramped, no-escape-door horse trailer. Luckily John was home, and he was the one who loaded her. Half of Prim's problem was her unfamiliarity with trailers. But the other half is my own claustrophobia.

I had read about Craig Cameron in Robert Miller's fascinating book, *The Revolution in Horsemanship*. Miller, a California veterinarian, is famous in his own right for his work on imprinting foals, and in his book he describes

Cameron as a ranch-raised cowboy who uses many of his mentors' methods: "Make the wrong things difficult and the right things easy." "Be as gentle as possible and as firm as necessary." "Feel what the horse is feeling, and operate from where the horse is."

When a friend told me that Cameron was looking for horses for his "problem loaders" clinic, I volunteered. We live in a fire area, and the next time we evacuate I can't depend on John being home. I was worried about only one thing—after Cameron was finished with Prim, would he ask *me* to load her?

The day got off to an inauspicious start at 6 a.m., when John and I tried to load Prim in our rent-a-trailer, a step-up with a stationary center divider. John had agreed to be my groom for the day—he hasn't shown horses since he retired in 1987. But he had



*After desensitizing Prim, Cameron takes questions from the audience. Although it's not visible in these photos, Cameron always wears a knife in his belt.*



*Prim and Craig Cameron, face to face.*



*Prim half inside the trailer.*

their necks and prance, or wear their ears, or flag their tails.

**The Challenge:** I've owned Prim since she was three, but she's been in a horse

their lives going from show to show. His comment did very little to relieve my mind, because Prim is not a show horse. Two years ago, when a fire swept

sprained his ankle, and couldn't put his weight on that leg to exit through the escape door.

I tried walking Prim inside—at that hour



Joan rewarding Prim after a free-longing session. (Taken from her book, *Backyard Horsekeeping*.)

phobia hadn't kicked in yet. But I walked in by myself. Prim stayed outside, all four feet firmly planted on the ground. Finally John snapped my longe line to the center divider to use as a butt rope, and ten minutes later, after much pulling, pushing, and swearing, Prim scrambled inside.

It was a brutal, four-hour drive through rush-hour LA traffic, and the three of us arrived in Pomona with about 45 minutes to spare.

My first impression of Craig Cameron was that he was too frail to work horses. (In point of fact he still starts colts at his Double Horn Ranch in Texas.) He's 58 and looks as though he's been down the trail a few times—all those years of bull riding have taken their toll. His handsome face is weathered, and he's skinny as a splinter. But he knows horses.

Holding Prim in one hand, he told the audience that problem loaders don't have a problem with trailers. They have problems with anything they are naturally afraid of, since they're prey animals. When horses were wild, *something* was always trying to make a meal out of them. At that point I noticed the blue tarp lying in the ring just in front of the trailer, and next to it, a section of plywood.

Cameron's two cowboy helpers had substituted a rope halter for the one Prim was wearing (Cameron likes them because they conform to a horse's head), and a thick white cotton rope for my nylon leadrope. As he discussed the

mentality of prey animals, he tossed coils of the rope at Prim and generally got in her face—waving his arms, making *whoosh* noises into his microphone, and at one point tossing his jacket over her back and withers. "You have to allow the horse to get scared so he can find out he doesn't have to," Cameron said, and it didn't take Prim long to discover that *whoosh* noises and a harmless white leadrope weren't going to eat her. Once she stopped reacting to Cameron, he stopped trying to spook her.

Then one of his cowboys handed Cameron a six-foot buggy whip with part of a plastic bag on the end. But this time he didn't shake it in Prim's face. He ran it briefly all over her body—she was facing him—and finally reached out and touched her rump with it. Prim reacted the same way she had to the jacket and the rope: she backed up and tried to evade Cameron, all big eyes and vertical neck. "Does this look like a ranch horse to you?" Cameron joked to the audience. But since he persisted in standing still, Prim started circling him—exactly what he wanted. He was longing her, cowboy fashion, using the whip behind her rump to keep her moving. A good-sized crowd had come to watch him—there were probably 300 people in the grandstand. "When you control the hindquarters, you control the horse, whether on the ground or in the saddle," he told them. His techniques are the same ones all genuine horse people agree on, whether they're cowboys,

dressage trainers, or Saddlebred trainers. Everything starts from behind: the stride, the gait, the motivation—everything.

As Cameron talked, he let out more and more rope until Prim's circle took her over the blue tarp. When she trotted over it (on the first try) he moved her down the ring until she trotted over the plywood.

When she went obediently over the plywood for the third time, he stopped to give her a rest—her reward—and explained the theory of desensitization. Meanwhile, Prim was free to do whatever she wanted—look around for me, sniff the ground, look over her shoulder to make sure the gate was still there, or gaze curiously at the audience.

By now, almost 35 minutes had elapsed and Cameron hadn't even gotten Prim close to the trailer. Instead, he had presented her with new, scary stimuli and let her reassure herself that none of it would hurt her.

Then Cameron picked up the whip and asked her to circle again. Gradually he widened the circle until it included the horse trailer, a slant loader big enough that a horse could turn completely around and walk out head first instead of backing out. When Prim declined his invitation to step in, he brought her to a halt and took one step into the trailer. But instead of urging her to get in, he let her investigate it. Then he urged her to circle again, and again let her stop to look at and smell the trailer. One again he took one step inside. Prim watched him but didn't follow. Cameron moved the whip over her rump. She walked halfway in and stopped.

"Now some people would say, here's a horse half outside the trailer," Cameron said. "But I would say, here's a horse who's half *inside* the trailer." Prim had tried—she had given him that much—and he didn't rebuke her or try to restrain her, even when she decided to back out. That's another tenet of animal behaviorism: reward the try.

Cameron walked out of the trailer, circled her, and tried again. Once again Prim walked in with him but stopped halfway. Standing at her shoulder, Cameron moved the whip behind her rump and shook the plastic. She walked the rest of the way in. As the audience cheered, Cameron turned her around and the two of them sauntered out.

After leading her inside another time or two, Cameron led her to the trailer and stopped while Prim walked inside—by herself—turned around, and walked

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by herself—turned around, and walked back out. Cameron asked her to do it again. This time she trotted in, ears up, looking alert and happy, as though this was some interesting new game the two of them were playing.

Then Cameron spoke the words I had been hoping not to hear. "Where's the owner? I want *her* to lead her horse into the trailer."

Trying and failing to load your own horse is bad enough. Trying and failing in front of 300 people is the stuff of nightmares. My heart in my mouth, I climbed into the ring. Cameron handed me the rope, grinned, and walked away.

While he explained that yes, this was a spacious, confidence-inspiring trailer, his pre-loading techniques would work with any horse who refused to load in *any* trailer.

I circled Prim at a walk, wondering if she'd load for me. Cameron ignored us, and the rational part of my mind thought, *If he's not worried, why should I be?* But the irrational part kept right on worrying. I intended to walk into the trailer with her, reasoning she'd be more apt to get in if we went together, but at the very last minute my claustrophobia got the best of me and I stopped. I did have the presence of mind to cluck to Prim to keep her moving. To my amazement she broke into a trot and practically jumped in.

Cameron asked me to load her a few more times, and it was easier than getting my dog in the car. (Chance always assumes I'm taking her to the vet.) Cameron was still fielding questions when his helpers returned Prim to me. While she relaxed in her stall a few minutes, long enough to take a big drink of water, John came back with the rent-a-trailer. Prim hesitated, then walked right in.

Nearly a week later I caught up with Cameron again—by phone, this time. He was giving a clinic at Temecula. He confirmed that in addition to his ranch in Texas, he owns another one in Lincoln, N.M. "I feel at home in that outlaw country," he told me, laughing. (Billy the Kid broke out of jail in Lincoln, and sheriff

Pat Garret hunted him down and killed him not far from there.) Cameron leases a neighboring ranch that's 7,500 acres, and uses it to stage his "challenge trails" clinic, where he takes advantage of the spectacular mountain landscape to train horses and riders. At his ranch in Texas he runs about 160 head of cattle, and uses horses to herd and cut cattle and brand calves. He also bases clinics on those activities. He still considers himself a rancher and a working cowboy. "My family has always been in the ranching business," he told me, even though according to his website, he's on the road giving clinics more than 44 weeks a year.

Cameron has worked with other American Saddlebreds with the same results—a compliant horse who knows that his handler is on his team. "The foundations of good training are the same regardless of breed," he told me. Whenever he has time, he always watches other people's clinics. "I'm always open to new ideas. A good teacher should always be a pupil."

But he also believes that the best teachers are the horses themselves. Or, as Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt taught their students, "The horse is never wrong."

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