



# VaQuero

# STYLE

*Richard Caldwell spreads the word on horsemanship the old-fashioned way.*

**By Tom Moates**

**Photos by Emily Kitching**

WEARING A BLACK HAT, WHITE LONG-SLEEVE SHIRT, GRAY VEST, FRINGED LEATHER ARMITAS AND artistically ornate silver spurs, Richard Caldwell's style stands out in the midst of typical western-clad cowboy competitors these days. The gear on his horse creates a similar impression: long hand-plaited rawhide riata, hand-made horsehair mecate reins on an old-school hackamore, or perhaps finely braided reins and romal with rein chains on an elaborate spade bit.

Fashion, however, is not the concern of this horseman. Rather, it is the underlying meaning of horsemanship and the belief system linked to these useful items that motivate him.





Richard Caldwell trains his American Quarter Horses in the vaquero style, taking the horse from the hackamore to the two-rein before going in the bridle.

## Learning the Way

RICHARD IS A VAQUERO-STYLE HORSEMAN FROM ALTURAS, CALIFORNIA, who has spent many decades of his life working cattle and training horses in the old vaquero way. The vaquero “buckaroos” took several years to develop a horse from the hackamore to two reins before becoming fully “in the bridle.” A seasoned hand, Richard possesses strong convictions about horsemanship, and he is a stick-to-his-guns kind of fellow, even using his familiar traditional vaquero gear and tack when competing in mainstream competitions. Richard’s approach is somewhat maverick by today’s standards, but founded in old customs and a strong belief of what he thinks is best for horses.

These days, Richard trains American Quarter Horses in the vaquero style, works cattle, teaches horsemanship clinics and occasionally competes, using the knowledge he came by during more than 30 years of ranch work.

“I left home when I was 15. I started then,” Richard said. “I learned from a lot of great horsemen out in the brush, not in the arena.”

Buckarooing is a tradition reaching back to his grandfather in his own family and, historically, to cattlemen of a great many generations in far western North America. The true vaquero with proven abilities and experience in the vast expanses of desolate country has few spectators to observe his handiwork. Still, the reputation of a true vaquero among horse folk lingers even today as that of a cowboy possessing highly refined horsemanship and cattle-working skills.

Richard buckarooed for many ranches through the years, primarily in Idaho, Utah, Nevada, and Oregon, while he also plied his trade as a certified farrier.

## Modern Contests

RICHARD IS NOT ALONE IN HIS INTEREST AND LOVE FOR THE vaquero ways in the modern era. More horse owners are seeking

the old ways to improve their horsemanship through clinics, books and videos. Vaquero horsemanship enjoys a solid place in the growing and robust movement in the horse world today for implementing more gentle and humane ways to improve relations between horse and human.

A lot of the vaquero revival is due to competitions that cater specifically to the style. The Californios Ranch Roping and Stock Horse Contest, held each year for the last nine years in Red Bluff, California, is one such event for modern vaqueros.

The competition requires participants to use authentic vaquero gear, and all events – even timed ones – are scored by judges. In roping contests, for instance, contestants are judged on the size of the loop, handling of the slack and control of the dally.

“I want to get out the true meaning of vaquero horsemanship,” Richard said. “I’m only one person, but I feel like I need to do what I have to do. I am judged with the equipment I use. The rules and judges (at mainstream events) can go against what traditional vaquero horsemanship is.”

Richard explained that when running against the clock in competitive roping, a hard stop is looked upon in a positive light, but vaquero riders seek a soft stop that is less stressful on the horse and the steer.

The difference is of critical importance to ranchers protecting their livelihood. Other differences are more subtle.

“No true vaquero would ever lead a horse with the bridle reins,” Richard said, because it can undo the hours of work tuning a horse to extremely sensitive cues on a spade bit.

“There are a lot of horses ridden in a bridle, but there aren’t that many bridle horses anymore. I see spade bits with no rein chains; no vaquero would lose the chains. Some people try to use it as a pressure bit, but it is a signal bit.

“I don’t want people to misunderstand me,” he added. “I’m not against the show-horse world. I’m against gimmicks and



Many modern contests test riders on their vaquero style.

gear instead of horsemanship. I want to help people who are interested in horsemanship. People are always in a hurry, and it takes time to get better with horsemanship.”

## The Horses

THE VAQUERO, ACCORDING TO RICHARD, OFTEN PREFERS AN AMERICAN Quarter Horse for temperament, athletic ability, stamina and good feet. A horse around 15 to 15.2 hands can best accomplish the ranch work he does from covering a lot of ground to roping and pulling bulls.

“I ride Quarter Horses because they fit what I do,” he said.

Quarter Horses also have the temperament or disposition and trainability required of horses in the vaquero style of training.

“I really believe that you transmit your state of mind to your horse,” Richard said. “In other words, if you are fast and in a hurry, then your horse feeds off of this, and he will also become fast and in a hurry. If you are impatient, your horse becomes impatient. If you are calm and relaxed, your horse will become calm and relaxed. That is not to say that you can change the personality of a horse, but you can influence it by your own state of mind. If you ride with a lot of pride, your horse will sense this and respond likewise to a certain degree. If you are not a disciplined rider, then your horse will not be a disciplined horse. The same goes with consistency; to get a consistent response from your horse, you must be consistent in your riding.”

There is some overlap between the contemporary show world and that of the vaquero, though. In 2007, Richard was a National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity non-pro finalist.

“I don’t compete against others when I go in there,” he

said. “I compete against myself. When I think of vaquero horsemanship, I think of pride.

“There are some great hands out there that just choose not to come to town,” Richard said. “There are also places that don’t have the skills any more. Those old guys are gone. There is a big difference from a buckaroo and a cowboy, not that one is better than the other. I’ve learned from a lot of people, and I want to give back. The main reason I decided to do clinics is because I got tired of seeing people doing something false. So rather than whine about it, I decided to do something about it and educate people.”

*Tom Moates is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to [aqhajrnl@aqha.org](mailto:aqhajrnl@aqha.org).*



Richard Caldwell grew up as a buckaroo, and he continued that life as an adult. He and his wife, Nancy, had three daughters, Ameer, Charee and Billee Jo, who traveled with him.

“I don’t have any regrets taking the kids from cow camp to cow camp,” Richard said. “At the time, it seems hard, and you just do it – changing diapers at the cow camp, washing them in a bucket. My kids sacrificed a lot for me. They went to school in one-room schoolhouses that the ranches had. But those memories are worth more than material things.”

When Richard worked for a cattle ranch in the Alturas region of California, he liked it so much that he settled there when back and knee surgeries slowed his pace. Richard now has seven grandchildren.



Richard teaches clinics to share his knowledge with others and keep the tradition alive.