



BETWEEN

In this first of a three-part series on keeping your rope horse conditioned, Leonard Berryhill talks about the importance of box work.

By Leonard Berryhill with Tonya Ratliff-Garrison

Photos by Tonya Ratliff-Garrison

When your horse is at home between roping events, the box is something you should work him on every day.

You know what to do with your rope horse when you're getting ready to show. However, just what do you do with him when he's at home between ropings?

For AQHA Professional Horseman and judge Leonard Berryhill, there's plenty you can work on to keep your horse conditioned and ready for his next event.

In this first of a three-part series, Leonard explains how working in the box, even for the seasoned horse, is one of the most important exercises you can do at home. Next month, Leonard will talk about how to keep your team roping horse ready to show, and in December, he will address the tie-down horse.

WHEN YOU GET YOUR HORSE HOME AFTER A SHOW, YOUR MAIN focus is keeping him in shape.

A show horse is like any athlete. We've been exercising, riding and roping on him for several months, and by now, he's in excellent shape. You're not going to be able to let that horse have three or four days off and then drag him back to the arena. To keep that athleticism, he must be on a consistent program and work schedule, even at home. It's much healthier for a horse's body and mind if he is on a work schedule.

When I work my horses, it's riding them more than roping on them. There was a time when we would just pull a horse out of a stall or pen and start back in the box and go to roping. That's not the way I do it any more.

I ride my horses a lot more. I ride mine out in the country. Ride them in the pastures. Bring them to the arena to work

on turnarounds. Work on their stops. Work off their hocks. Run them up against a lot slower cattle to work on their timing and smoothness.

But every day, without fail, the thing I do with all of my rope horses is work in the box, no matter whether we're at home or at a show. And your No. 1 goal with everything you do in the box is to teach that horse to be responsive but quiet.

That's one of the biggest things. Because the box is a score in our scoring system, you want the horse to be the best he can be. I think it's important. I sometimes think judges don't give enough for a good horse in the box, but they sure will take a lot away if the horse is bad in the box.

That's why I spend most of my time at home working with my horses in the box – on scoring, keeping quiet, departing properly – just about anything so that horse is always comfortable and confident in the box.

A horse that acts up in the box will cost you some big penalties. He needs to be corrected, and that's where we do all our work at home in the box and at the shows to keep horses quiet and able to see the situation so they don't get scared.

Here are some of the exercises and techniques I use in the box for my horses:

Sit in the Box

I DO A LOT OF SITTING IN THE BOX.

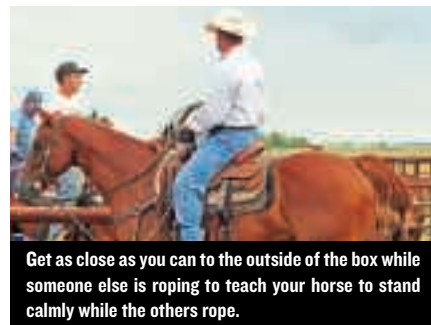
If there's nothing going on and I'm sitting around visiting or whatever, I'm sitting in the box doing it. I want that to be



If you're relaxing, then relax in the box on your horse.



Teach your horse to relax while playing with your rope in the box.



Get as close as you can to the outside of the box while someone else is roping to teach your horse to stand calmly while the others rope.

ROPINGS

the horse's safe zone, where he can relax, not be worried and not be stressed. If I'm relaxing, I'm relaxing in the box.

At home, I also always uncinch and untack my horse in the box. I want to make that box as comfortable a spot for the horse as I possibly can.

While sitting in the box, I rattle the chutes, make a lot of noise and carry on. I open and close the chute gates. And I don't just stick to one side. I want most of my horses to go both ways, so I go to both sides to teach them to be quiet and relaxed.

If you have someone roping in the arena, go over next to the box outside and sit as close as you can beside it while the other ropers are doing their thing.

Move Around in the Box

I LIKE TO HAVE MY HORSE WALK CALMLY IN AND OUT OF THE BOX. I'll walk him in, walk him out and then back him into the box. I try to get the horse to not only be nice and relaxed in just about all situations but to also be free in the box.

My training background is in western pleasure and western riding. I blend those disciplines into some of the things I do in roping.

I like my rope horses to move off my leg and be able to sidepass, particularly in the box. Anytime you've got a rope horse that can do that, you're ahead of the game.

In the box, I'll work a lot on leg yields and get the horse

to move to the corners, off the corners and from side-to-side in the corner. I want to be able to put him wherever I want him to go.

To be able to place a horse in the box anywhere you want him under the pressure of being ready to rope is really hard and difficult to achieve. But when you get one that's there, your horse is going to be one of the ultimate scoring horses there is.



Walk your horse calmly out of the box and then ask him to back up into the box.

Simulate Situations

MANY SEASONED ROPE HORSES WILL ANTICIPATE IN THE BOX.

At home, I'll pretend with the horse in the box that we are going to make a run. I want to try to reproduce the feeling the horse is going to make a run, but at the same time I will

make him do what I want him to do.

I do a lot of things like walk the horse into the box and never call for a cow until the horse walks calmly out of the box. When he is able to walk out of the box, the next time I put him in the corner, we'll run a steer.

However, if I call for the cow and the horse wants to be nervous, jumpy or turn around, I won't run the steer until the horse can stand still in the corner and walk out of the box with a cow in the chute.

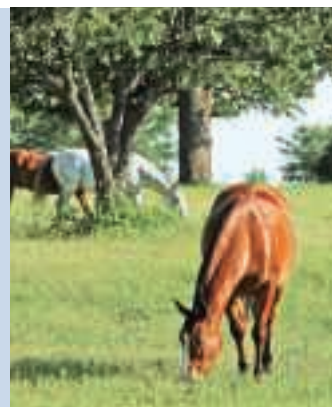
You don't want to run steer after steer after steer out of the box. Instead, maybe only score three, or run one and go back and make the horse walk in and out of the box for 15 to 20 minutes.

I spend hours upon hours working horses in the box because it's the most important part of roping. That's the beginning of the run right there, and how you leave the box can make or break a run, be it in tie-down or team roping. 🐾

Tonya Ratliff-Garrison is field editor for The American Quarter Horse Journal. She can be reached at tonyag@aqha.org.

Some Respite

When I come home from a show, I give the horse a day off to be turned out where he can stretch his legs, be a horse and do whatever he wants. If it's a horse that has been hauled to a lot of shows and that horse is working solid and doing well, I give him a little more time off between shows than I would a horse that still needs some work to correct mistakes or needs improvement. That horse will probably only get one day off and then it's right back to work.



Take a horse that is anticipating into the box like you're going to make a run and let him sit in the box without a cow in the chute. Then calmly walk out of the box.



Put your horse up against the chute, play with the chute, rattle it, make a lot of noise, so the horse gets comfortable with it.