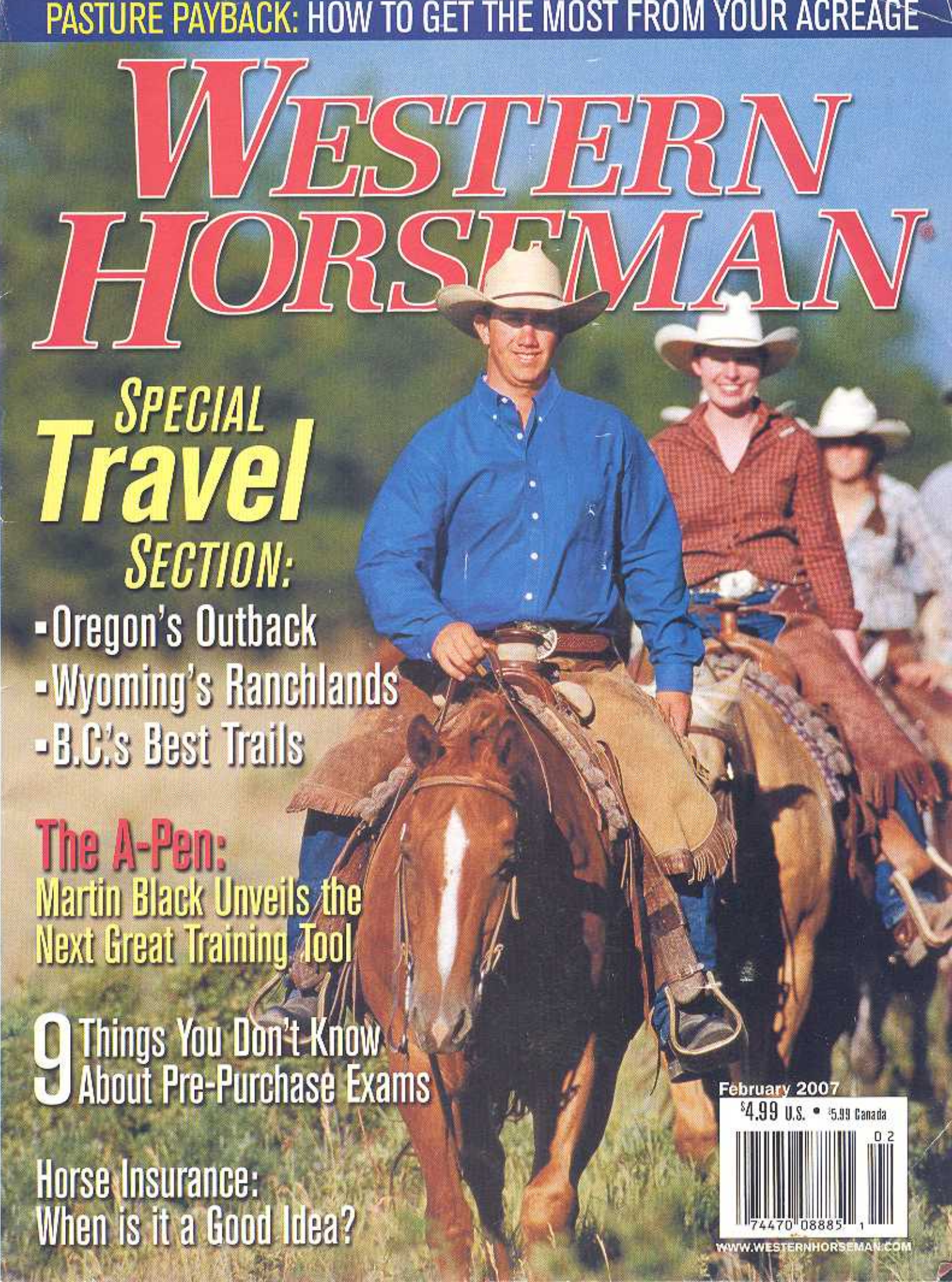


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Training Inside the Triangle

First there was the rectangular corral, then the round pen. Now, the triangular "A-pen" is making inroads with cowboys and cow-horse trainers.

Article by Tom Moates • Photographs by Emily Kitching

Anyone who works with horses likely knows that the shape and arrangement of a corral can itself be a training tool. Corral geometry might seem limited to squares, rectangles, ovals and, of course, the round pen, but there's a newer addition to that list: the triangle.

Championed in North America by horsemanship clinician and fifth-generation Idaho rancher Martin Black, the "A-pen" is becoming an increasingly popular option for starting horses on cattle and improving the herd-handling skills of experienced cow horses.

Origins Down Under

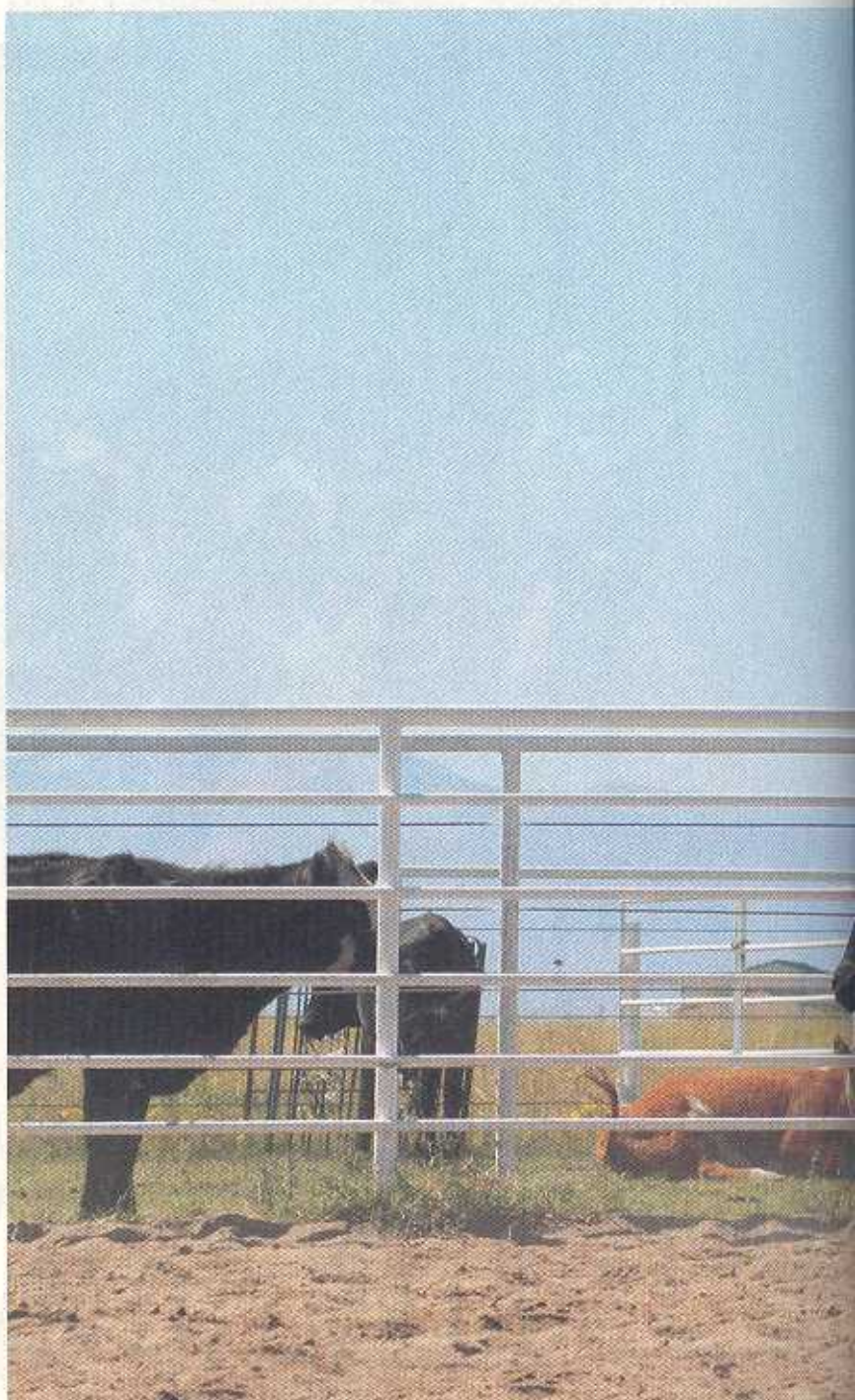
Black's inspiration for the A-pen came during his clinic tours in Australia, where he became familiar with the country's dominant cow-horse sport, camp drafting.

In this event, around eight head of cattle are corralled in a triangular pen. A rider cuts one cow from the herd and pushes it out the gate at the top of the triangle, into an arena, and through a clover-leaf pattern marked by pegs.

"Camp drafting is to Australians what cutting is to Texans," Black says. "They start before dawn and go until after dark."

Black has competed in National Reined Cow Horse Association competitions, and his resume includes a management position on a 1.25 million-acre Nevada ranch that ran 15,000 head of cattle and 400 horses.

In his cow-working clinics, Black emphasizes offense and defense, two skills he says are essential for any working ranch horse. When a horse pushes a



Below: When a rider has more control over the training environment, he can do more to improve a cow horse's confidence. Martin Black trains his horses on cattle inside a triangular A-pen. It's shape allows him to "dial up" the intensity of the cow work. Right: To reward a horse for proper position, Black gives him a chance to stop, rest and soak in the lesson.



cow to move, that's offense. When a horse blocks a cow from returning to the herd, that's defense.

While working in Australia, Black often found himself using the triangular camp-drafting corrals for his clinics, and discovered the shape was uniquely suited to working on a cow horse's defensive skills, and for building a horse's confidence on cattle.

A triangular pen, he explains, allows a rider to "dial up or down" the intensity of cow work. As a horse pushes the cow further up the triangle, into the narrower part of the corral, the cow naturally becomes more aggressive in its attempts to escape the more confined space and return to the herd. For an intense training session, the rider can work closer to the top of the triangle; working nearer the bottom of the triangle provides a more relaxed workout for the horse.

The Set-Up

Inspired by his experiences with triangular corrals in Australia, Black experimented with several shapes and sizes before

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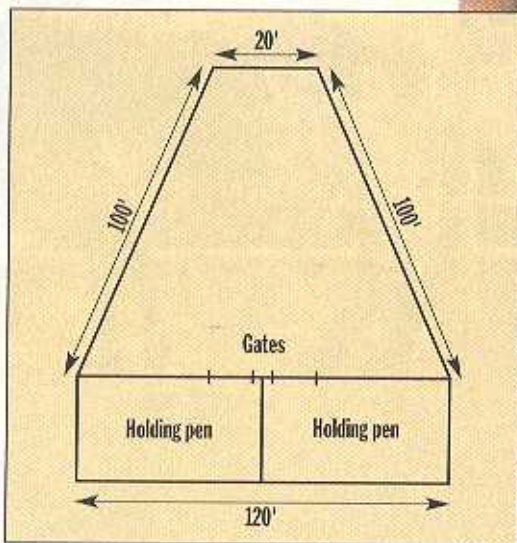
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settling on what he calls the "A-pen," essentially a triangle with the tip cut off.

In Black's A-pen design, the bottom of the triangle is a 120-foot fence. The pen's two sides are formed by 100-foot fences that extend toward the top of the triangle, but stop short of meeting. Instead, the top of the pen is formed with a 20-foot fence, connecting the two sides at the top of the corral.



When he uses an A-pen, Black keeps a herd of cattle in a holding pen located at the bottom of the triangle and running the length of the 120-foot base. That holding pen, he suggests, is best arranged as an alley split by a center partition, with gates allowing access to the A-pen from either side of the partition. With that configuration, fresh cattle can be kept on one side of the holding pen, and spent cattle can be sent to the other from inside the A-pen.

Other benefits of this arrangement include that there is little need for turn-back riders in an A-pen, a cow that slips past a horse can't return to the herd, and there's no extra chaos created by a loose herd. All this allows for greater control of the training environment.

Cow-Work Advantages

"An important point the A-pen teaches a horse is where to find the 'balance point' on a cow," Black explains. "The balance

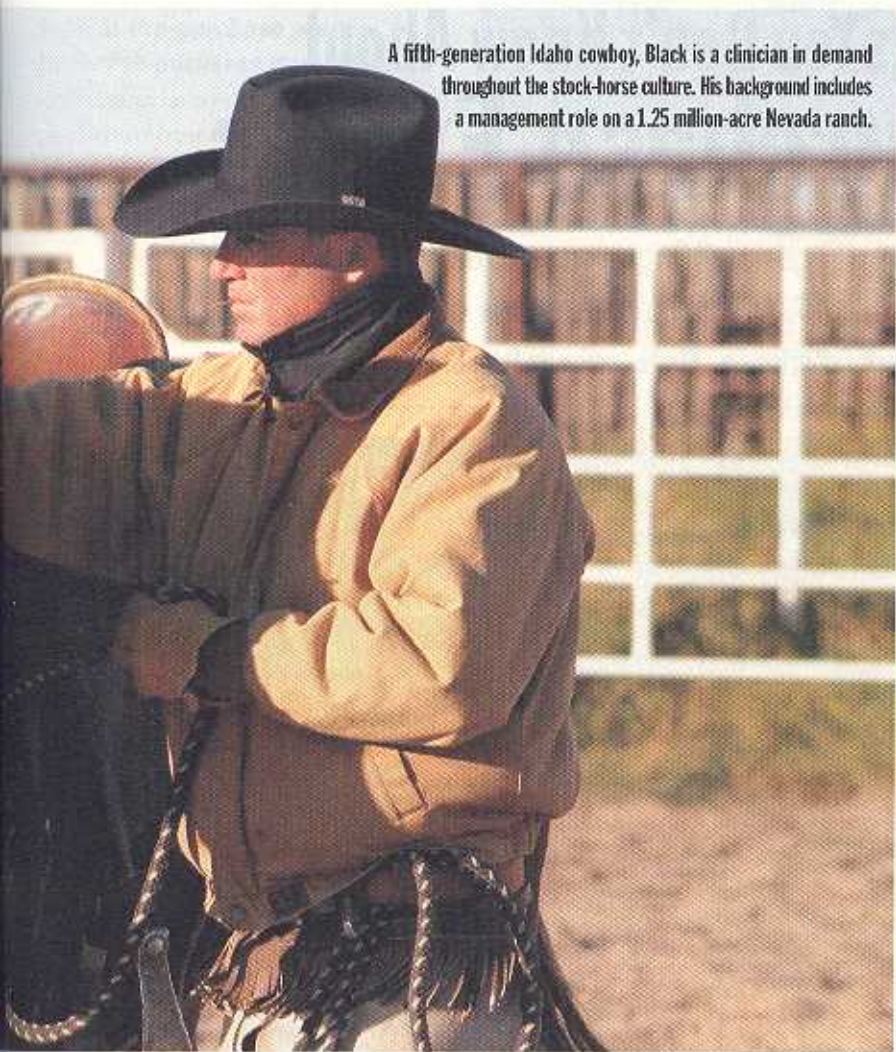


point is what triggers the cow to move left or right. If we push toward a cow's tail, it'll move one direction. Push toward its nose, and it'll stop and turn the other direction. That balance point isn't consistent, and can change at any given moment.

"You'll see me letting a horse wander out into the A-pen," he adds, "but what I'm doing is offering him the chance to make a defensive move against the cow. If we wander clear up to the point of the A-pen, that's going to cause the cow to push back on us, and run all the way to the back fence. I'll have to hustle the horse back, making more work for him.

"This makes a horse more cautious about [paying attention when approaching a cow] because he doesn't want to have to work at hustling to get to the back of the pen."

Once that foundation is set, Black concentrates on further refinement,



A fifth-generation Idaho cowboy, Black is a clinician in demand throughout the stock-horse culture. His background includes a management role on a 1.25 million-acre Nevada ranch.

teaching a horse that if a cow isn't pushing back, it's acceptable to step toward it, to be on the offense.

"Horses pick this up really fast," he says.

When a horse is in a good position, Black lets him stand for several minutes as a reward. These opportunities to relax allow the horse to soak in the lesson and to feel comfortable being between the single cow and the remainder of the herd.

From that position, Black often cues the horse to take small steps toward the cow. This puts the horse on the offense and triggers equally small steps from the cow. Ideally, the horse has plenty of opportunities to stop and relax during this give-and-take.

When the cow goes on the offense herself, moving toward the horse, Black expects his horse to switch to defense, to stop and turn. If the cow gets by, he

scrambles the horse to the back of the A-pen, gets between the cow and the fence, and begins pushing the cow toward the top of the triangle.

Black now gives clinics on A-pen methods, teaching students who are working on their horses' abilities in cutting, rating and working cattle. Most students, he says, quickly learn to appreciate the chance the A-pen gives them to work solo.

"The A-pen," he says, "ties in with having grown up on a ranch short-handed, trying to do the work of several men."

Tom Moates is a writer based in Virginia. To learn more about A-pen training, and about Martin Black's forthcoming DVD, Introduction to the A-Pen, visit martinblack.net or call (208) 337-8438. Send comments on this article to edit@westernhorseman.com.

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