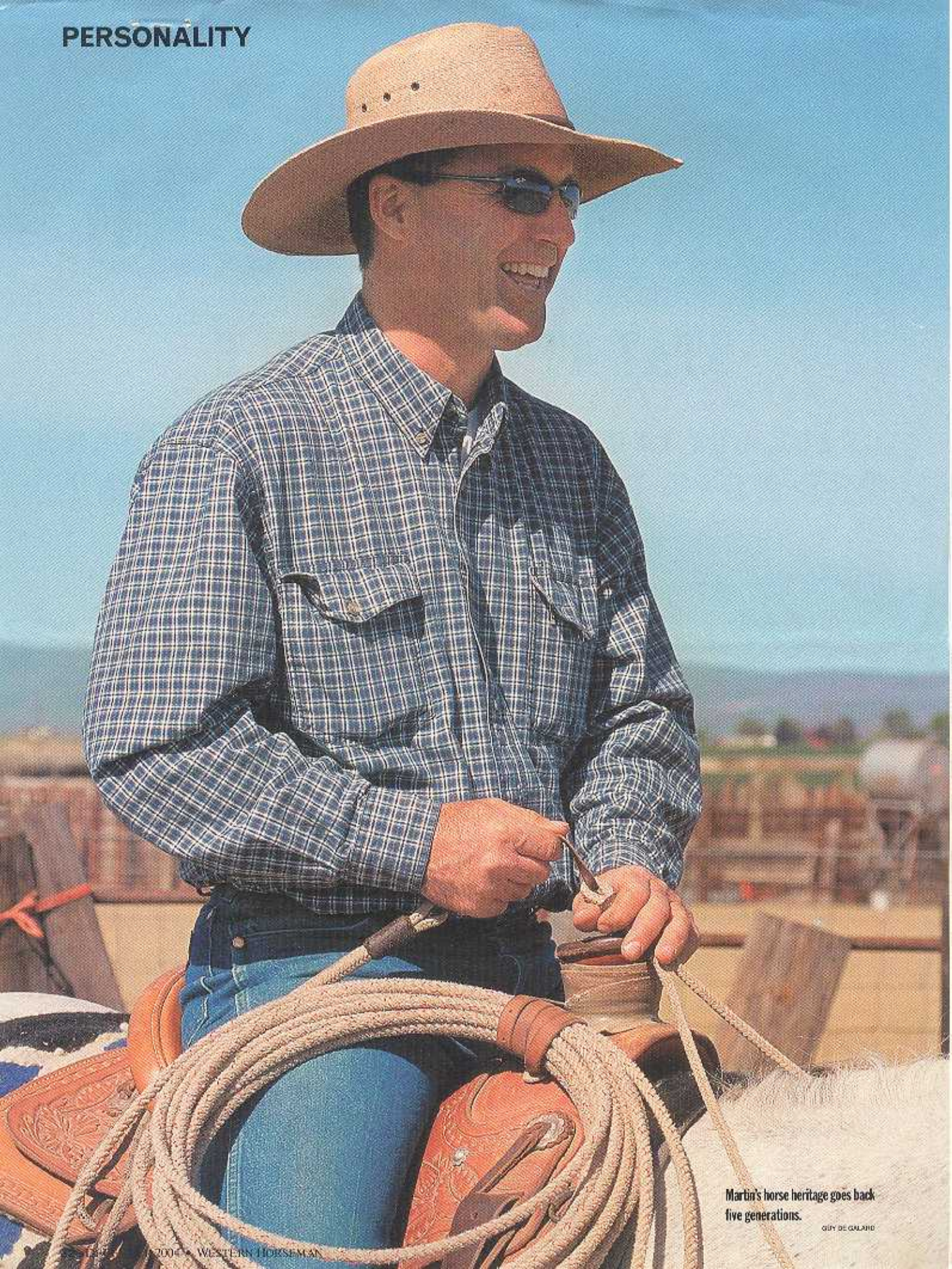


PERSONALITY



Martin's horse heritage goes back
five generations.

GUY DE GALARD

The Horsemanship of MARTIN BLACK

In the setting sun, Idaho horseman Martin Black lopes circles in a Colorado arena. His horse's breathing is barely audible in the strong wind that sweeps across the front range of the Rockies. A steer enters the arena, and Martin skillfully works the animal back and forth along the fence, then in circles in both directions.

The horse, Play Lika Hickory, reserve-champion ranch horse at the 2003 World Championship Ranch Rodeo and national finals ranch-horse champion at the 2004 Western Heritage Classic, is perfectly balanced and knows his job.

Martin has built a reputation for starting and preparing horses for such diverse events as racing, cutting, reining, jumping, roping and reined cow horse. His travels have taken him all over the United States, as well as to Australia and Europe. His training methods build the horse's confidence by teaching him discipline through self-induced pressure that's easy for the horse to understand and minimizes confusion and fear.

The Black family has raised and trained horses for five generations. It runs in Martin's blood. His great-grandfather, Joe Black, was born in a wagon in 1875. One of the early

The Idaho trainer makes
working with young horses
his life's work.

Article by Guy de Galard

settlers in Idaho's Bruneau Valley, Joe became a prominent horse breeder in the late 1800s and early 1900s, raising and training thousands of Thoroughbreds that he sold to ranches across the West, as well as to the U.S. Cavalry and European governments for military use.

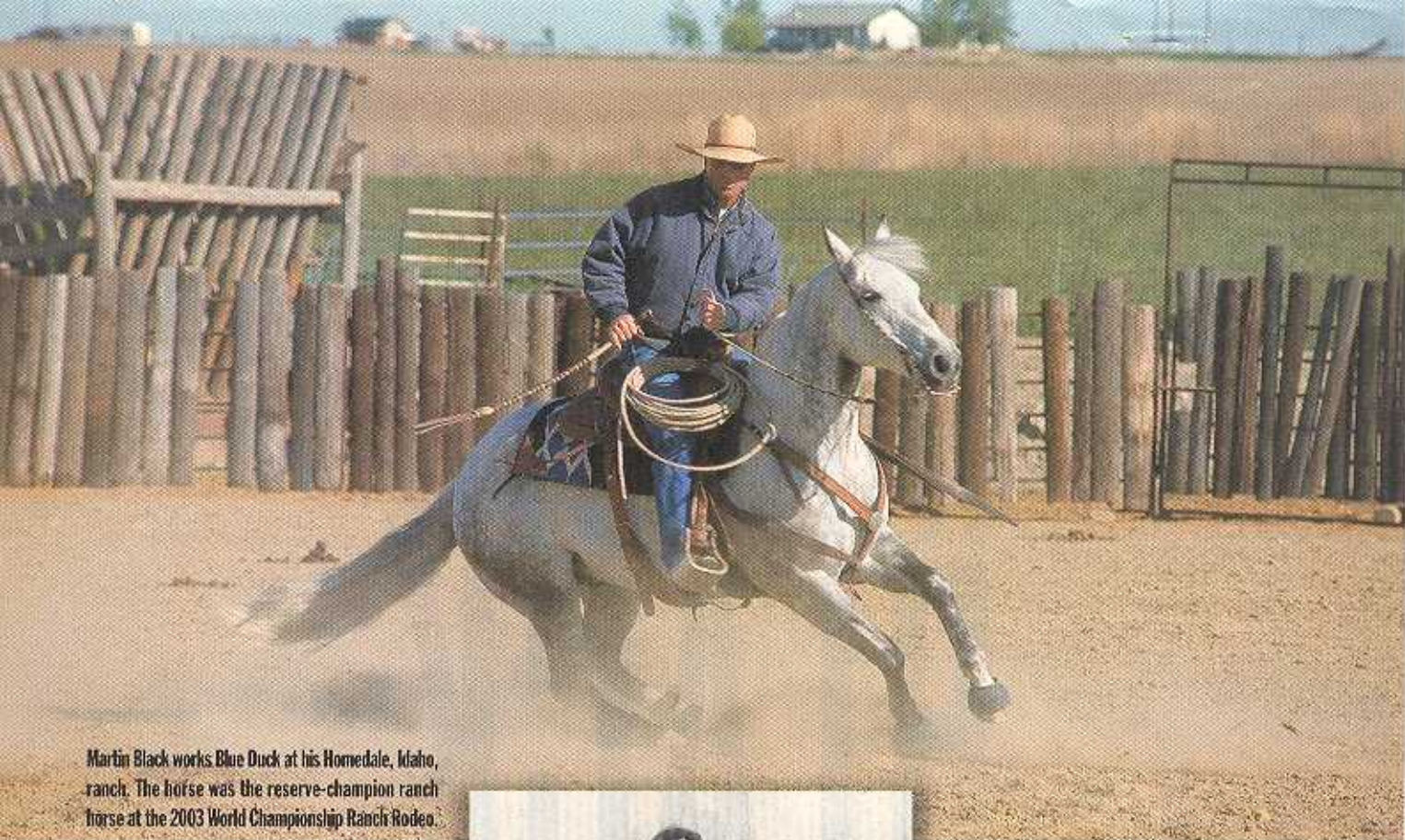
Throughout his life, Joe carried on the traditions of the early California vaquero and usually roped with a rawhide reata. Martin grew up in this environment, inheriting an appreciation for the Spanish California style of horsemanship, and its emphasis on versatility.

By age 10, Martin had learned a great deal from his grandfather, Albert, and his uncle, Paul, and was 12 when he started his first colt. By 14, he'd started a number of colts and had developed an appreciation for training young horses.

Martin also learned a great deal at an early age from Melvin Jones — a student of Martin's uncle, Paul — who went on to become a great reined-cow-horse competitor.

"When I was about 8," recalls Martin, "I started watching Melvin at the Elko County Fair. At that time, he pretty much dominated the entire event, and he was like an idol to me. I'd get there early in the morning to watch the first contestant, and stay late to watch the last."

—G*



Martin Black works Blue Duck at his Homedale, Idaho, ranch. The horse was the reserve-champion ranch horse at the 2003 World Championship Ranch Rodeo.

GUY DE GILBERT

Today, Martin still remains more interested in starting horses than in “finishing” them.

“After I realize where a horse’s potential is, even at an early stage, I like to start on fresh colts,” he explains. “The more horses I can work, the more I can learn. There’s so much more to learn from a fresh mind. There’s only one chance to make a first impression, and it’s so important for it to be a good one in every phase of training. And, the younger the horse, the shorter his attention span and the narrower the window of opportunity for him to learn.”

When Martin was 14, he met Ray Hunt for the first time. Ray’s methods and philosophies uncovered a new layer of horsemanship for Martin, one that would deeply influence the way he worked with every horse he encountered. Even as a teenager, Martin knew that Ray’s approach made sense.

“I could appreciate what Ray had to offer,” Martin says. “I had enough miles and had gotten in enough trouble starting and buckarooing on older ranch colts. I was ready to listen.”

On His Own

At 17, Martin left home to work with Ray in California. He also spent time riding with horsemen such as Gene Lewis,



Joe Black, Martin’s great-grandfather, was a prominent horse breeder in Bruneau, Idaho, in the early 1900s.

JOE BLACK/ARTIST

another Californian, and Melvin Jones, Tom Marvel and Bill Van Norman in Nevada. In 1984, at age 24, Martin took a management position on the Wine Cup ranch, a 1.25 million-acre outfit that ran 400 horses and 15,000 head of cattle in north-east Nevada.

That same year, Martin won the Jordan Valley Big Loop contest in Jordan Valley, Ore. He still competes in the annual event.

“While at the Wine Cup,” Martin recalls, “Tom Dorrance would come to visit during the summers and spend time working with the buckaroos and their horses. Each year, we’d start around 40 head of colts and get our show horses ready for the stock-horse show in Elko. That was a terrific opportunity to work with Tom and a lot of horses at various levels.”

Martin’s goal, though, was to start his own business. After many long hours in the saddle, tending to cattle, he realized he could develop a better future and still do what he loved best — working with horses — by offering his services and experience to recreational horse owners.

In 1993, he struck out on his own. He was soon starting colts for clients such as reined-cow-horse and cutting-horse trainer Don Buttrey, cutting-horse trainer Doug Jordan, and Kentucky racehorse breeders. Martin’s started 5,000 horses



Each year, Martin competes in the Jordan Valley Big Loop Rodeo in Jordan Valley, Ore. He won the contest in 1984.

GUY DE GALARD

in the last 10 years, including 800 racing prospects.

Martin has built his reputation on the diversity of the horses he works with, but he uses the same principles with all the colts he starts.

"I don't work a cutting horse any differently than I work a racehorse," he explains. "During the first 2 weeks, it's all the same. I don't find any difference in their dispositions as breeds. It's the previous handling that makes the difference more than the breeding. The spirited image that Thoroughbreds portray is because most of them haven't been handled in a way that gives them a good foundation and mind. When Quarter Horses are handled, fed and confined the same way as Thoroughbred racehorses, they act the same."

Martin's basic philosophy is to build the horse's confidence in everything he does, through self-imposed pressure.

"The horse needs to perceive that he's applying pressure to himself, without being attacked," Martin says. "I set up a situation in a way that the horse creates pressure; then the horse's decision is directed the way I want it to go. When releasing the pressure, timing is very important."

"How we apply relief or pressure determines the horse's attitude and response. This builds his self-confidence. The more confidence he has, the longer he'll last in the training program."

Martin stresses that the horse's confidence level should gauge a rider's expectations, not the horse's performance level.

"If the horse is performing out of fear or confusion, it

won't be positive," he says, adding that there's plenty of value in "waiting for the horse, and finding out what the horse has to offer," a valuable lesson Martin learned from legendary horseman Tom Dorrance.

Being a good horseman also means being able to read the horse's mindset and body language. When working with a colt, Martin tries to determine if the horse is seeking relief or giving to pressure.

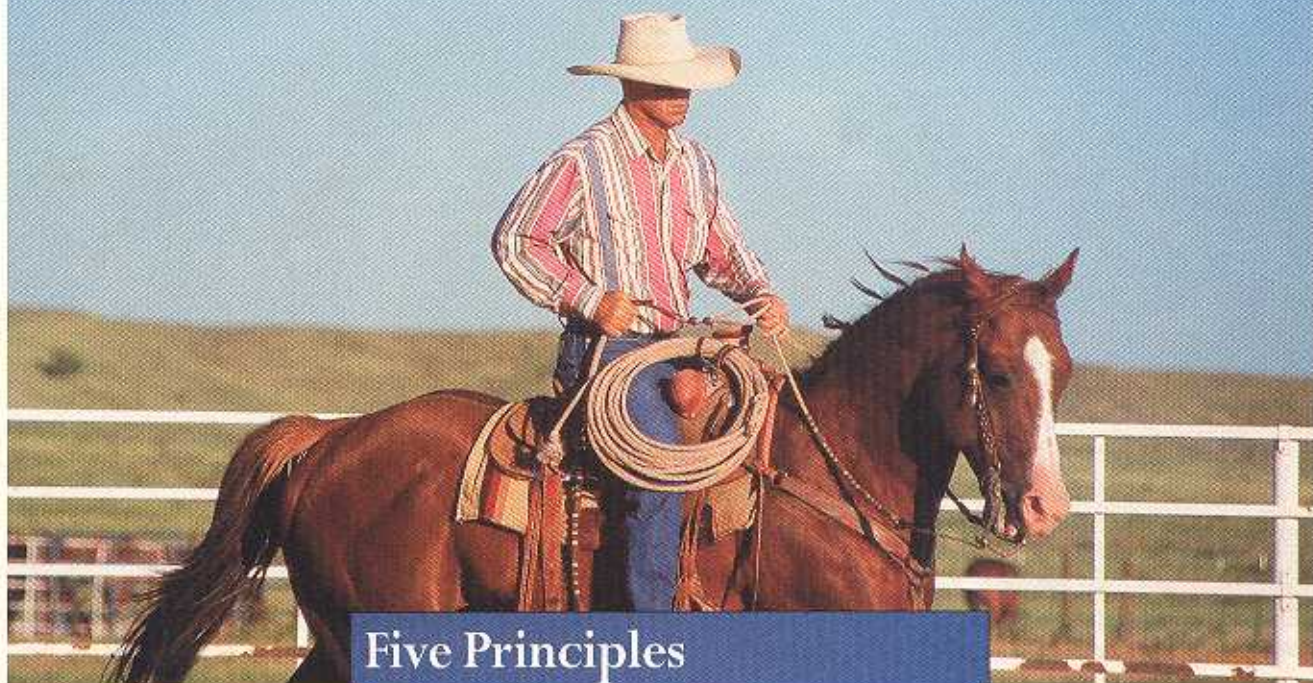
"In the first case, the colt looks for a comfortable place to be, mentally," Martin says. "If the colt is giving to pressure, he's not looking ahead and will look for an escape, or be intimidated or resentful. It takes pressure for relief to be effective, and relief for pressure to be effective, with more emphasis on relief to influence the horse."

Another important concept is gravitational balance.

"The horse learns to compensate for the rider's weight by transferring his own weight to different quarters, and positioning his head and neck," Martin explains. "The rider can enhance or inhibit the horse's ability to balance himself in motion by understanding the effect of his weight in relation to the horse's center of gravity."

Martin spends an average of 10 days at each place he's hired to start colts, but stays longer at racehorse facilities because of the larger number of horses with which he works. It's not uncommon for Martin to work with 75 to 100 racehorses at a time. He also likes to train the people who'll take over after he leaves. When working with racehorses, Martin picks his crew, usually ranch kids from western states. ➔

Martin competes in horse shows and other events to challenge himself and continue learning from new experiences with horses.



Five Principles

Trainer Martin Black uses five principles as the foundation of his colt-starting program.

1. The colt must push with his hindquarters for forward motion.
2. The colt must be able to point his nose to the left, have his body follow in a balanced way and make a round circle.
3. The colt must be able to do the same to the right, so he's balanced on both sides.
4. The colt must pull with his hindquarters to stop and back.
5. The colt must learn to stand still, or "park." It makes him safer to handle on the ground, and for mounting and dismounting.

Most problems, Martin finds, result from at least one of these principles not being in place.

The Horse's Mind

Knowing and understanding the behavioral differences between humans and horses helps Martin communicate to the horse what's expected from him and motivate him.

"Horses' No. 1 motivation is self-preservation," he says. "They look for their immediate needs and don't reason like people do; for the most part they just respond. On the other hand, people have an agenda, think about the future, have an ego and are greedy."

Martin also stresses the importance of working on the cause of a problem, not the problem itself.

"If a horse keeps his head up, a tie-down is a solution, but as long as the cause remains, so will the problem," Martin explains. "If we eliminate the cause, the problem will go away. Quite often a quick or hard pull causes problems that could be avoided with a little more compassion, and waiting and allowing the horse to prepare more. All a horse needs, sometimes, is a soft hand and a kind heart."

Showing horses allows Martin to constantly strive to be better.

"I compete for the challenge, and because I don't want to become stagnant," he says.

Building the horse's confidence is as important to Martin when it comes to showing a horse as it is when starting a ranch colt.

"I want the show to be a good experience for my horse, and I try not to let a mistake overshadow the good things my horse might be trying to do," he says. "Instead, I want to build his confidence in the

positive areas to overshadow the negative areas."

The worst problems Martin has to deal with are a horse's emotional problems and the effects that trauma have on a horse.

"You can't erase trauma," he explains. "You can start building the horse's confidence, but as soon as you expose him to the real world again, he's liable to have a flashback. No matter how much confidence he has, you're not working with the unscarred mind he had before the trauma. When I run across

the result of a brutal training program, that horse will stay limited because he can't forget what's happened to him."

It's important for Martin to be aware of the effects of fear, posttraumatic experiences and other mental pressures, but he stresses how physical pressure also can affect a horse's performance.

"Besides the pressure of our own cues, we must also be aware of other physical pressure we might be causing: neurological or muscle and joint soreness, or a lack of proper dental care," Martin says. "These types of discomfort will affect the horse's response."

Competition

Through the years, Martin has won numerous titles aboard Quarter Horses and Thoroughbreds. This has allowed him to make some observations about the competitive horse world. He credits the cutting-horse industry for developing intel-

ligent and athletic horses with strong herd instincts, a term he refers to as "cow sense."

"The horse is looking for security," Martin explains. "He follows his mother for security and follows the herd for security. Most horses have a lot of experience with rating, stopping, turning, changing leads, maneuvering offensively and defensively, all while moving with the herd, their mother or playmates. If we can expose the horse to experiences after we start riding him that he can relate to these past experiences, we can tap into the confidence the horse gained from those experiences."

"If you can direct that attention to the cow and make the horse feel he's secure following the cow, he'll stay with the cow. And if we can admit we might be in the horse's way and learn to stay out of his way, the horse can perform all these maneuvers without having trouble with head position, dropping shoulders or other balance-related problems the

horse experiences with a rider."

When describing the perfect cow horse, Martin doesn't hesitate: "The Australian Stock Horse, 15.2 hands, very athletic, with a light front end and strong hindquarters, and big enough to rope on and carry a rider on a long day."

Working cow horse remains one of Martin's favorite events because of the versatility it requires from the horse. He also enjoys buckaroo-style ranch roping performed at events such as the Big Loop or the Californios, which he's judged the last 4 years.

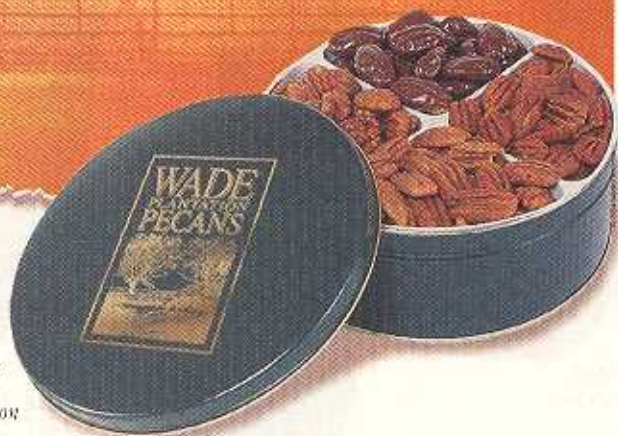
Martin says he's blessed that he can make a living doing what he loves. He's also proud to honor a tradition that's been ingrained in his family for generations.

Guy de Galard is a free-lance writer and photographer based in Buffalo, Wyo. For more information on Martin Black, call 208-337-8438, or visit www.martinblack.net.

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