

The Vaquero Way

Trainer Sheila Varian explains the methodical development of a finely tuned bridle horse.

By Kara L. Stewart

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The Vaquero method of training is a beautiful song," explains Sheila Varian, "sung with the softness and beauty of the rhythm of the horse. It's about the total harmony and togetherness of horse and rider."

Based on centuries-old traditions, the Vaquero method takes a horse from hackamore through the two rein and finally into the spade bit, producing a finely tuned working horse and partner. Its emphasis has always been on the resulting equine athlete's quality rather than on how quickly the goal is reached.

Worth the Time

Today, when there's so much pressure to accomplish things as quickly as possible, why do horse people still invest the time to fully train a bridle horse?

"For me, the end result is like choosing between driving a Model A Ford or a Rolls Royce," says Sheila. She has been training spade bit horses, and a variety of other disciplines, at her Varian Arabians ranch and breeding center in California for more than 50 years.

About the Author

Since she was a child, the Colorado-based author and Arabian owner has considered Sheila Varian one of her idols. "Given the option, I'd prefer to drive to town in a Rolls Royce. That's the difference in riding a typical horse versus a trained spade bit horse," she says. The spade bit is designed for highly trained horses ridden by experts who can communicate nearly imperceptible cues. This level of training takes years to accomplish. "When you have spent the amount of time needed to put the horse in a spade bit, he's really something special. You've also both developed a partnership and mutual respect. It's hard to describe the incredible feeling of riding a horse that's truly one with you."

Besides, she adds, "There's nothing more fun, I mean nothing, than to ride a really responsive horse on cattle through rugged country."

The Spade: Form and Function

"Some people think that the spade is a cruel bit, and it can be—as any bit can be in the wrong hands. However, you won't be able to put a horse in a spade bit if he's afraid of his mouth. He just won't take it," says trainer Sheila Varian.

There are many elements to a well-made spade bit. "Because of the bit's design, it gives a lot of information to the horse. I prefer the spoon to lay over a little and not be straight up, so the horse can keep his head in a natural position and the spade will lay on his tongue and not touch the roof of his mouth," says Sheila. "I also like a loose jaw and shorter shanks, and the mouth and shanks are best made of sweet iron.

"The cricket, which keeps the horse's mouth freshened and the saliva running, needs to make a soothing sound and have a good music to it." She adds, "Many spade bits made today are of stainless steel and they're too heavy. They're too much bit in my opinion."

Spade bits are used with rein chains for a couple of reasons. "Rein chains keep the Vaquero's handmade rawhide romal reins out of the water when the horse is drinking," explains Sheila. "Plus, the rein chains carry just a little weight, so when you pick up the reins, they signal to the horse before there's contact that a change is coming."

According to Linda Paich, curator and owner of The Museum of the Cowboy in Solvang, Calif., each different style of spade bit cheek and mouth was named for the area in which it was first used, such as the Santa Barbara, Santa Ana, Santa Ynez and Las Cruces cheek styles.

Originally from Mexico, the Vaqueros brought their horsemanship traditions to the vast California cattle ranches during the

late 1700s.

With no strict deadline for finishing a horse, the Vaqueros prided themselves on investing the time necessary to train a ranch horse that was light in the bridle, maneuverable with only tiny signals from the reins to the bit, as well as agile, smart and responsible. “The spade bit ranch horses of yesterday and today are expected to do their jobs effectively and get their riders safely across rough country,” says Sheila.

Vaquero Training with a Modern Touch

Sheila Varian, one of the world’s most well-respected and successful Arabian breeders and trainers, learned the traditions and intricacies of training a spade bit horse when she was a child growing up in California.

Over the years, she has refined her approach to fit today’s better-bred horses. “I’ve learned to get softer and softer with my training,” says Sheila. “The Vaquero way is a long-term training approach, but it’s not [traditionally] a soft training approach. With today’s softer horses, the rougher methods they used back then are not necessarily as productive. If I don’t frighten a horse from the beginning, the better and easier the training is. I’ve done those old ways, and in truth, for me it works better to not be so harsh.”

She adds, “I hear people use the phrase ‘taking things slowly.’ Well, I call it taking things easily, meaning being easy on the horse both mentally and physically. The easy way is often the quickest way to train a horse. I still ask a lot of my horses, but I don’t do things that frighten them or make them defensive. I’ve found that this approach to training goes a lot quicker in the long run because I don’t then have to go back and fix something that concerned the horse.

“All good horses, like smart children, need good instruction, but they don’t need harsh instruction.”

Some of the harsh old-style Vaquero methods included “doubling” a horse by pulling his head sharply to turn him, tying his head to his tail so that he would give to the hackamore or sometimes leveraging the hackamore in such a way that the horse’s face was raw and bloody at the end of the day.

“In the old days, they worked horses a lot harder and more harshly than we do now. We don’t colt break any more like we used to, and that’s because of Tom Dorrance,” says Sheila. “Tom is the one who really changed that whole procedure. He’s the one who came in and taught the ranch hands to soften up.”

Renowned natural horseman Tom Dorrance first visited the Varian ranch back in the early 1960s. He traveled to a circuit of working ranches, teaching and trying new things, yet never asked for money. “He loved the horses; that’s what made all the difference.”

The Importance of Riding Out

One key element of Vaquero training is that it must be done outside over varied terrain. “To make one of these horses, you can’t ride in an arena, and you also can’t ride down a trail,” explains Sheila. “I figure God put lots of bushes, trees, ledges and creeks on this earth for me to train my horse around.”

Phases of the Vaquero Method

While these are the basic steps in training a bridle horse up to the spade bit, it’s important to remember that the years it takes and the feel one needs to develop can’t be summed up in a brief article. It’s a lifelong adventure—one that epitomizes the words “feel” and “unity” when it comes to horses.

Meet the Expert

Sheila Varian’s spade bit experience dates back to the 1950s when she trained her first spade bit horse, Farlotta, a purebred Arabian mare, who was unbeaten in western pleasure classes. Next she trained the Arabian mare Ronteza to the spade bit, and they won the Open Stock Horse class at the Cow Palace in 1961. Today, the accomplishment would be akin to winning an open national title in the reining or working cow horse show world. At just 23 years old, Sheila went up against older, seasoned professional men and became the first amateur and first female to win this title—and on a handy Arabian mare amidst a sea of stock breed horses.

Since then, she has continued to breed and train Arabians with great athletic abilities, wonderful dispositions and classic good looks. Her horses have succeeded in all major disciplines. Varian Arabians has about 150 head of horses on its central California ranch, and it celebrated its 50th Golden Jubilee in August.

Sheila was also honored with an induction into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2003.

Visit www.varianarabians.com for more information.

Early Work

Since cattle are an intrinsic part of the ranch horse's life, "the sooner you can start moving cattle around, the better," says Sheila. "Often, I'll put the horses in a corral with cattle so that they can get used to them."

Sheila starts her horses under saddle at age 3. "I don't like starting them any younger because they're truly not physically ready to do hard work yet," she says. "Plus, the more time the youngster has out in large fields and pastures, the better it is for him physically and mentally."

Sheila's horses receive some gentle groundwork and general desensitizing by flopping soft pads and other items on their bodies before they go under saddle.

"I don't ground drive them per se, but I do get them used to turning, bending and stopping. When they are comfortable with this, then I'll get on."

She adds, "Hobble breaking is an important element of the Vaquero method, but I choose to do it a little later so that they aren't frightened by it."

The Snaffle

Traditionally the Vaquero method starts a young horse in a hackamore, but Sheila starts her horses in a snaffle. "I don't want to 'skin a horse's jaw up,' which is what they call it when a horse's face is rubbed with a stiff or rough hackamore, or if you have to exert a lot of pressure or turn them hard," she says.

Sheila also believes that the signals from a snaffle are clearer for an uneducated horse to understand. "A snaffle is a direct pull and a hackamore is an indirect pull. For example, with a hackamore, when you pick up the left rein, the pressure goes on the right side of the jaw. It's confusing to a horse because he's being pulled with your left hand, but the pressure is on the right side."

The Hackamore

After the horse is going well in the snaffle Sheila switches back and forth from a soft Ernie Morris hackamore to the snaffle until the horse is completely comfortable and working well in the hackamore. "It takes some time for the horse to understand the cues of the hackamore. The best way is by riding out around natural obstacles."

She also transitions from a heavier to a lighter hackamore, and will switch back and forth as necessary. "If a horse starts running through a hackamore he's afraid of it, so you go to something lighter. It's the same with a bit. If a horse is running through a bit, it's often because he's afraid of it, and you must go softer. Less is more in that respect."

How much time does it take to get the horse working well in the hackamore? "It depends on how much time you can ride out, and most people can't do that every single day unless they live on a ranch. It can take a year or two, but it just takes whatever amount of time it takes."

The Two Rein

When a horse is consistent in the hackamore and knows his job, it's time to begin the two rein, which consists of a smaller 3/8-inch bosal that is worn under a bridle with a half-breed or low-port bit. Both bosal and bit have a set of reins attached, hence the term "two rein."

However, Sheila starts by using just a single rein attached to the bosal. "I use the mecate (mane hair) reins on the bosal, and I take the reins off the bit. It might take a day, or it might take a week, but I wait for the horse to not be fussing with the bit or bouncing the bit around in his mouth. When he's quiet, I add the rawhide reins to the bit. I then have two reins in my hands—reins to the bosal and reins to the bit.

"With a horse in the two rein, I now go to a smaller bosal," she says. "The difference between a hackamore and a bosal is size. The hackamore is what you ride the horse with, while a bosal is used in the two rein. It's a smaller diameter and fits underneath the bridle."

Because Sheila has helped the horse learn to be soft and supple in the hackamore, when he's started in the bridle he's already prepared to be soft and supple in that as well.

The young horse is ridden another year or more in the two rein. "It's just a very slow, gentle process of at first using more

bosal rein while the horse simply carries the bridle. Then, as the horse begins to balance to the bit, I gradually pick up the bridle rein and slowly transition to it.”

The Spade

When the horse is about 7 or 8 and completely comfortable, working well in the two rein and working only from the bit, it's time to step up to the spade bit as the final stanza of the Vaquero's song. At this stage, the horse could be left in the half-breed or low-port bit, but in the hands of an expert rider the spade will add that extra degree of polish to the finished bridle horse.

Now the process begins again with the two rein using the smaller bosal and the spade bit. This transition continues until the horse is comfortable in the spade.

In the hands of a competent rider and in the mouth of an educated horse, the spade bit is a delicate tool of communication, not an implement of force. “With a spade, the horse has to have the confidence in you that you won't hurt him. You'll never pull the horse around with it or yank on his mouth,” says Sheila. “He's got to be comfortable in the spade, or else he's not a spade bit horse.”

By this time, the horse has been ridden for about four to five years. “He's developed, by your good hands, a natural headset and a good way of going,” says Sheila.

However, the conformation of some horses precludes them from wearing a spade bit, no matter how well trained they have become over the years. “A horse needs a natural curvature of the neck and a neck that's not set too low from the chest. For example, some lines of American Quarter Horses today cannot carry a spade because their necks are too low set.

“When the horse is totally finished, and ‘straight up in the spade’ as we call it, I normally don't go back to a snaffle or hackamore. I may drop back to a half breed if the day's work looks to be more than my horse is ready for. Eventually, though, once he's really comfortable in the spade, that's where he stays.”

The Vaquero Method Carries On

“This method of training takes a lot of time,” says Sheila, “but for me that's the joy of it. I'm not trying to please anyone but me, and I'm not up against an artificial deadline to finish a horse by a certain date. I'm doing it for me and for the partnership with my horse.”

All the steps leading up to the horse carrying the spade bit are essential to reach this stage. “It's not a journey to be taken lightly, but no horse training should be taken lightly.”

Sheila adds, “Usually, when someone has trained a horse up to a spade bit, that horse is one they keep. The bond, mutual trust and commitment they've created together are enormous.”

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