

# HEAD FOR THE HILLS

By Patti Hudson

**H**aving an indoor arena helps Joe Wolter keep his horses in shape and advancing in their training throughout the year, regardless of the West Texas weather. But many times he finds even better training opportunities by heading to the hills out in the back pasture. “I used to think it was just about exposing the horse to different terrain,” he says. “But there’s so much more to it than that.”

First off, negotiating steep slopes helps physically condition a horse and can get them to thinking about where to place their feet. “They learn how to use their bodies better, to be more careful with their feet and to get their hindquarters under them,” Joe explains.

While it’s great for conditioning and can be a lot more interesting for both horse and rider than loping circles in an arena, Joe finds it even more valuable for the opportunity it gives him to connect with the horse mentally.

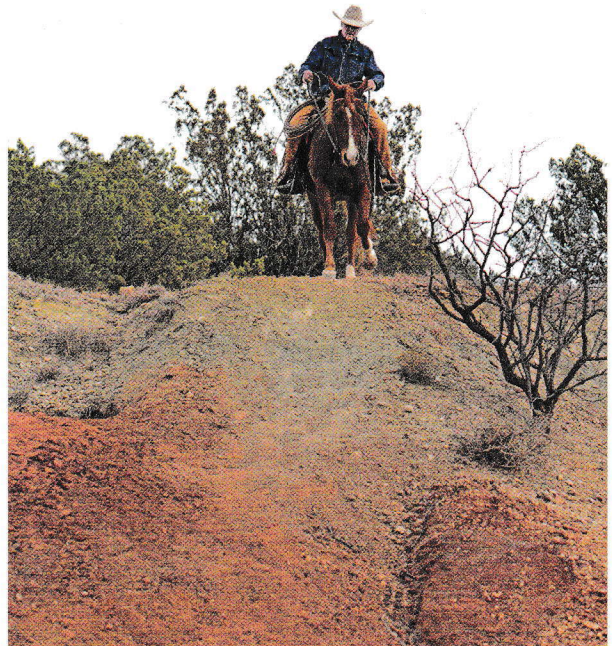
“Horses don’t naturally want to go straight down a steep hill. It’s more work and they feel more secure if they can contour,” Joe says. “A lot of people feel the same way and aren’t that comfortable asking their horses to go straight up or straight down a really steep hillside. So they miss a chance to connect in a way that can have a great deal of meaning to the horse.”

Joe is quick to caution that if the rider is unaccustomed to steep terrain and is worried about trying something new, the horse will also be worried. “Look at yourself first. Figure out where you’re comfortable and what you can do, then build from there. Ask your horse to go where you and the horse think you can go and where you feel secure. But take the lead in asking. That’s something I think a lot of people miss. Taking the horse where he wants to go is very different from just going where he wants.”

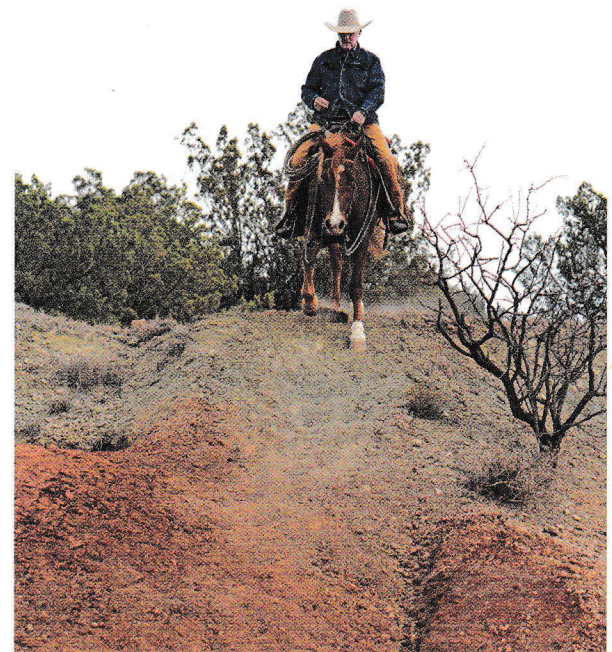
That means becoming aware of when the horse is and isn’t with you mentally. “That’s the value in this,” Joe says. “If the horse wants to go too fast, is hesitant to move, unsure where to place his feet or isn’t traveling straight, then he isn’t with me and I can use the hill to get his attention and get him with me more.”

The hill provides a focal point for both horse and rider. “You want to get him straight first. You can’t start off wrong and expect a good result, so if he’s crooked, fix that. The idea is to get your hands and body in time with the horse’s feet so that he begins to pay more attention to those things. The hill helps it all make more sense to the horse, so you don’t want to do so much that he loses his focus on the hill. You want to be able to leave some of it up to him, so you’ve got to be able to let go, let the hill pull on him and make it his responsibility to stay on track.”

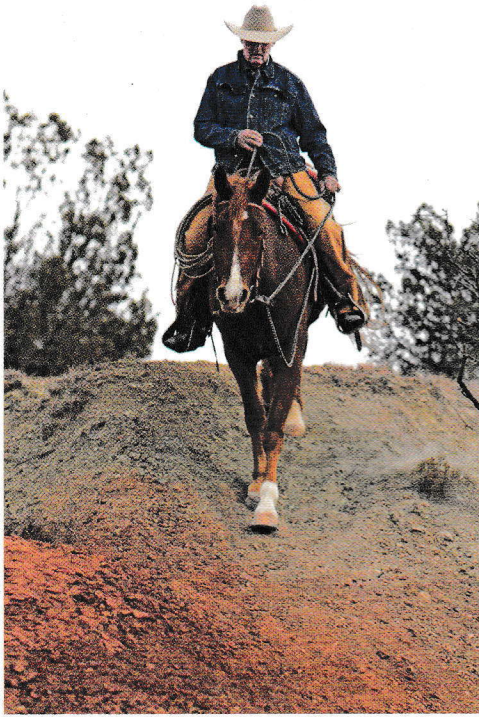
It won’t all come at once. You’ll have to work at slowing him down or speeding him up, getting him straight and on course without doing so much that it becomes about you and not about the hill. You also don’t want to do so little that you have no effect on the horse. “It’s a titter totter and you’re trying to find the balancing point. Each time you try something, it’s just information for what you’ll do the next time. What’s important here is that you and the horse are concentrating on the same thing and working together to find the path of least resistance.”



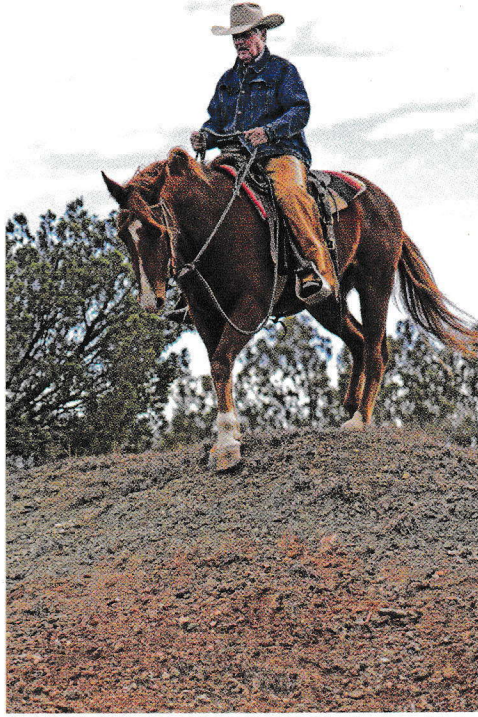
**1** Joe gets the horse lined up to the hill and straight before starting down.



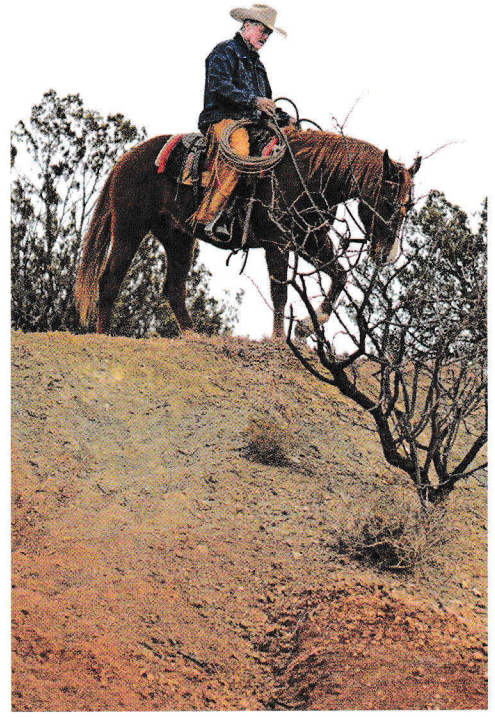
**2** Once the horse is straight, Joe is able to turn him loose and allow him to carry the straightness on down the hill.



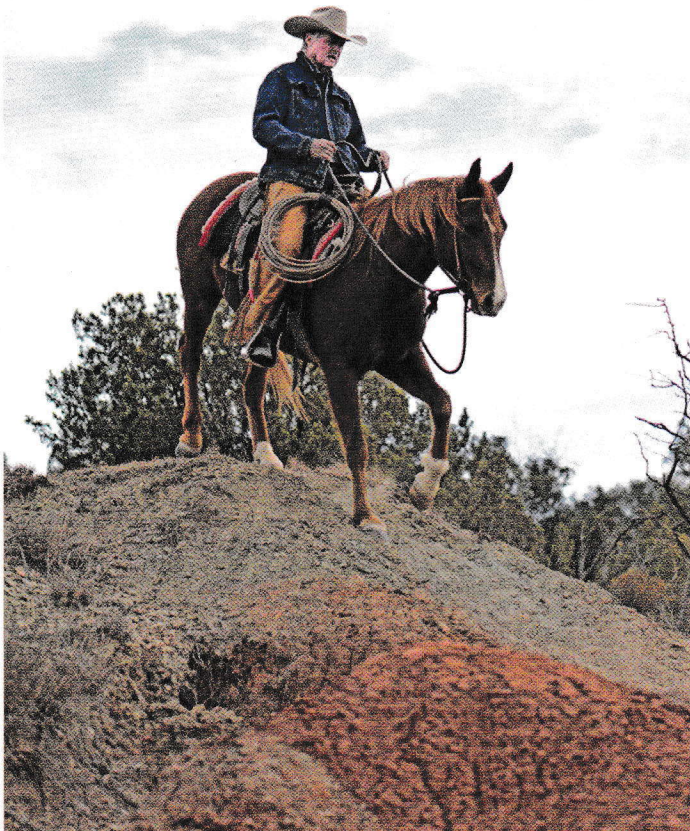
**3.** Here the horse has gotten a little crooked, but his ears are still forward as Joe tries to get with him again, get him straight and back on course.



**4.** Joe influences the horse without distracting him so that the horse's attention is both on Joe and on carefully placing his feet in order to negotiate the hill.



**5.** The horse is straight, soft and prepared to go downhill with his body well organized and his mind on what he is being asked to do.



**6.** By preparing the horse and getting him straight Joe is able to turn responsibility for the hill over to the horse.



**7.** Going up or down, Joe gets the horse straight and prepared first. Here the horse is straight and fully committed to going up the hill. He and Joe are connected and working together.