

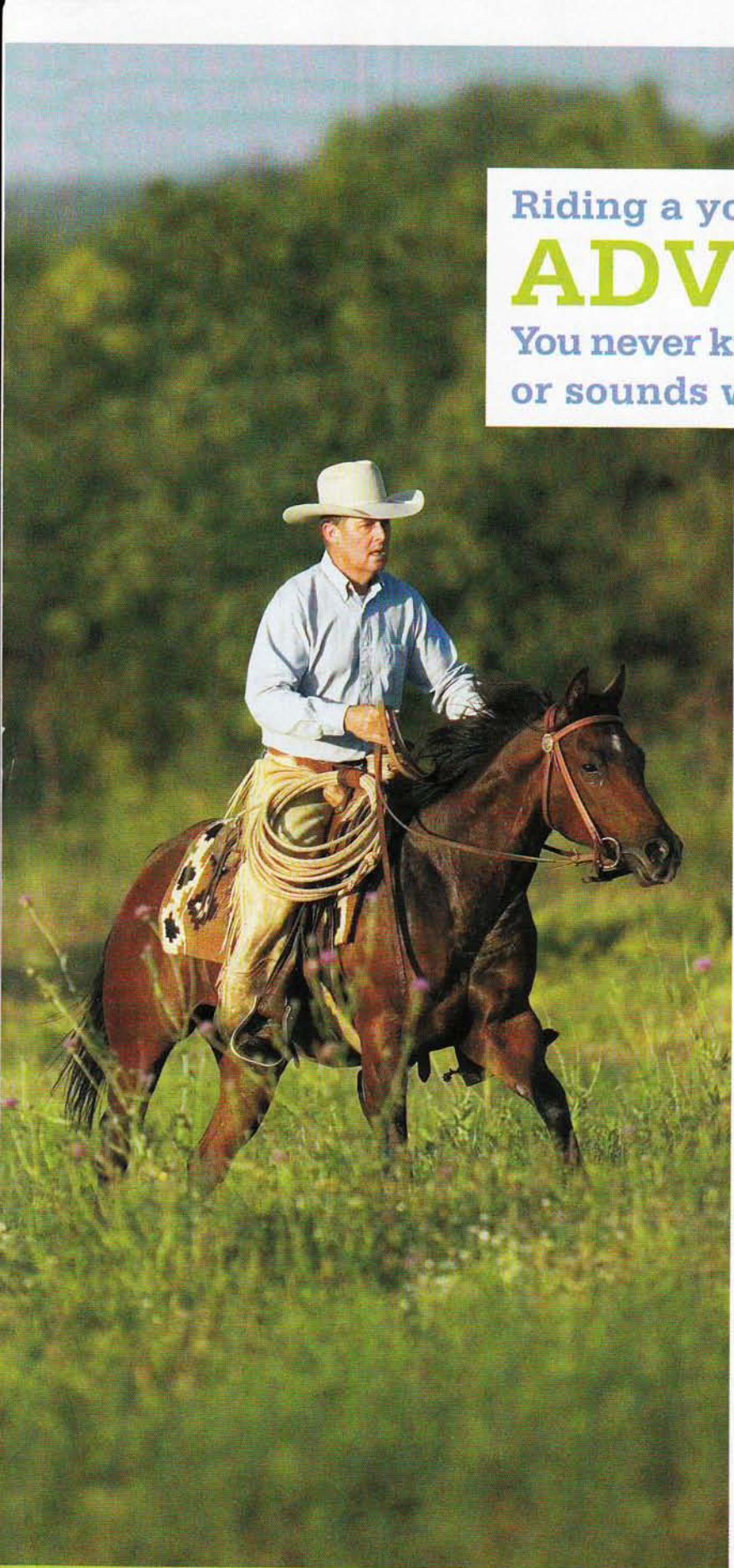
Joe Wolter crosses a small stream aboard one of his 2-year-olds. When a young horse is learning to cross water, Wolter doesn't mind a skittish jump. With time, the horse will learn to step through calmly.



Into the **GREAT,**
WILD
OPEN

The environment outside your arena contains all kinds of challenges for a young horse. Clinician **Joe Wolter** makes a point to ride toward them, using the outdoor elements to promote suppleness, balance, trust and develop common sense.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY ROSS HECOX



Riding a young, green horse is an
ADVENTURE.
You never know what objects, sights
or sounds will cause it to unravel.

However, horseman and clinician Joe Wolter of Aspermont, Texas, views those sticky situations as ideal training opportunities. Rather than avoiding areas where his horse might balk, he pursues them. He says that as long as he's not putting himself or his horse in danger, riding the horse out of its comfort zone has benefits.

"You have to expose them to new things for them to get better," Wolter says. "Sometimes, turmoil isn't all bad. It's how you handle it."

Wolter often takes his young horses outside the arena and rides them up steep hills, into creeks, through barn alleyways, and even around the above-ground swimming pool in his backyard. He finds that putting a horse in unnerving situations causes it to rely more on him, which accelerates the training process.

"I hunt for stuff my horse is scared of," Wolter says. "The best way I can be productive as a trainer is to find a place where my horses are insecure. It builds a relationship. It gets them farther along and ready for the world."

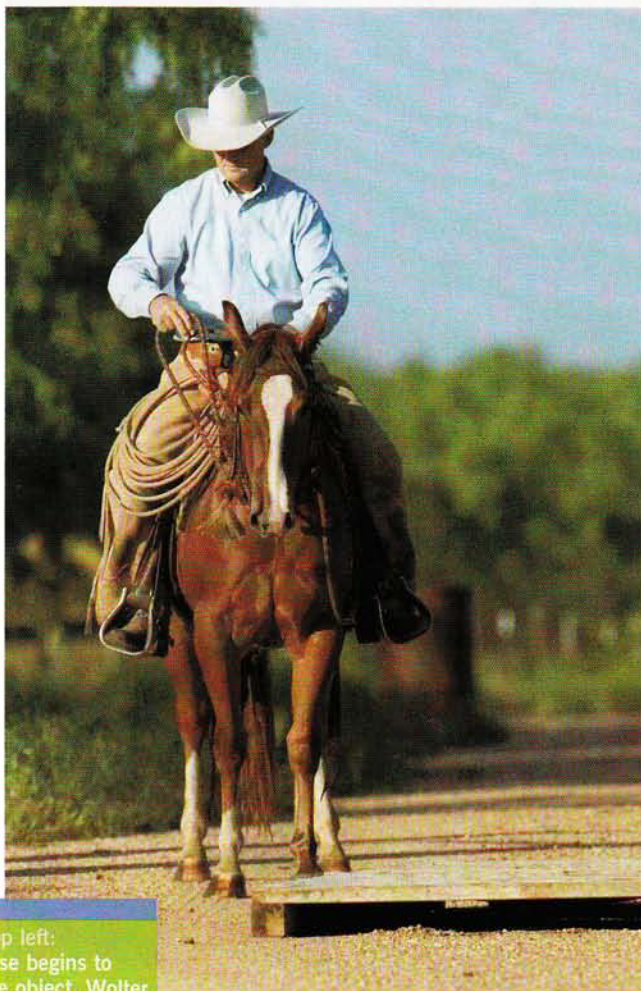
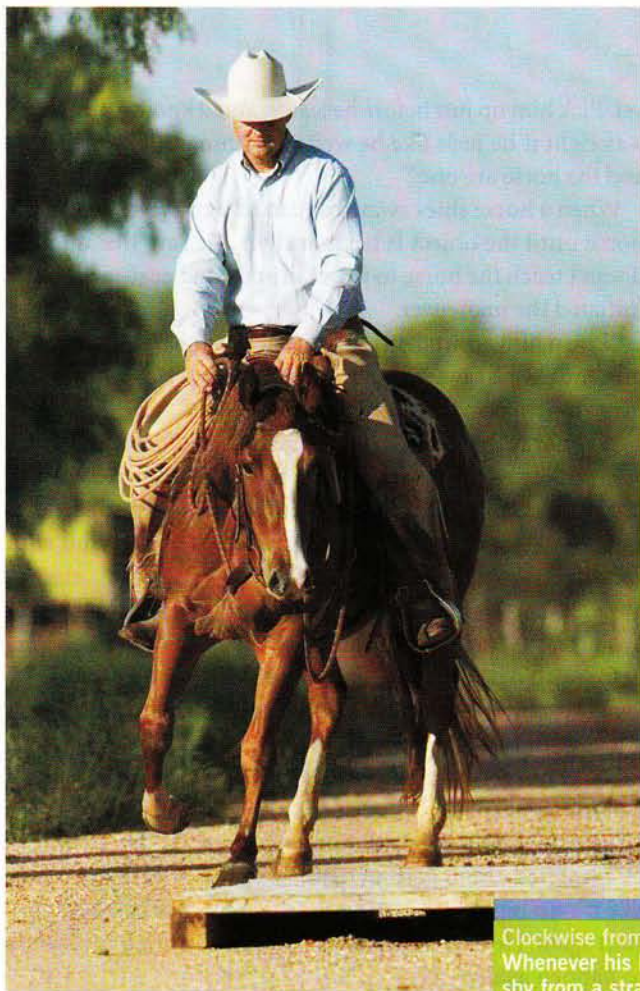
Whenever he rides in a new place, Wolter accepts that his horse might feel a little out-of-control.

"I've seen guys get in that situation, and their horses don't feel like they did at home," he says. "Just acknowledge that it's insecurity. The learning process is sometimes ugly. But that doesn't mean the horses are always going to be that way. That's the pathway to getting them well-trained."

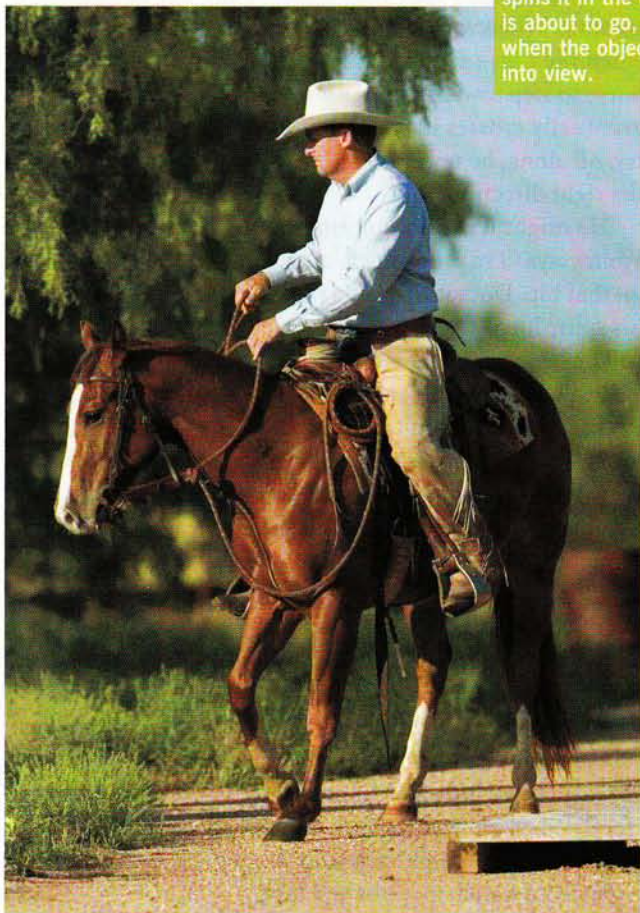
Fear Factor

Make no mistake, Wolter doesn't let unruly behavior rule the day. But when he's riding out in the open, he would rather not dictate every lesson with his hands and feet. He prefers to use objects, such as trees or water, as training aids.

If a young horse is thinking about charging across an open pasture, Wolter might send it in that direction. It's an opportunity for the horse to learn to gallop with a rider aboard.



Clockwise from top left:
Whenever his horse begins to shy from a strange object, Wolter spins it in the direction the horse is about to go, releasing pressure when the object comes back into view.





Horses may feel insecure in a new environment, providing an opportune time to build trust.

For example, it's much easier to stop a horse when a cliff or a thick patch of brush is in your path. All of sudden, a pull on the reins makes more sense to the horse than it did when he was in the middle of an arena.

"They don't even know you're training them," Wolter says.

And Wolter takes this approach much farther than just stopping or turning, especially if the horse is spooked. A scary object can motivate a horse to speed up its feet, move in time with the rider, roll over its hocks, soften through its frame and eventually overcome its fears. The key is asking for the right maneuver at the right time.

For example, if the horse wants to bail out to the right, ask him to turn around in that direction *before* he decides to do it himself.

"I'll ride up to an object and feel if the horse wants to go one way or the other," Wolter says. "There's a point where you know he's going to stop before he turns, so I might ask him to stop. If he feels like he wants to turn right, I'll turn him to the right, in time with his feet.

"It feels really good to him if you ask him to do it at the right time. His thought is to cut out, but he hasn't committed

yet. Pick him up just before he leaves. You'll know your timing was right if he feels like he weighs nothing. Right then, you and the horse are one."

When a horse shies away from an object, Wolter turns the horse until the object is back in sight. He says this method doesn't teach the horse to turn tail and run because the rider initiated the maneuver.

"I turn him around, bring him back to the object and turn him loose," he says. "Just as that object starts to come back into view, that's when you leave him alone."

Whenever the horse looks at the source of its fear, Wolter stops riding and gives the horse a break. If the horse starts to move, he takes it in that direction. The horse either becomes calm when facing the object, or learns to turn around with light cues.

"He'll learn it's easier to just keep both eyes on the object," Wolter says. "You're not punishing him, and it won't be long before you'll have a lightness in his movement."

However, it is important to keep in mind that this approach is effective only if the rider stays one step ahead of the horse.

"A person gets in trouble when his horse jumps and he's left behind," Wolter says. "Then he punishes the horse. That's like pouring gas on a fire. Then the next time the horse jumps, he's worried about getting mauled by the rider. I'd just play like it's no big deal—just jump with him, then go back and start again. He beat me that time. I missed it, but it isn't going to happen again."

Wolter stresses that the release is the key to successful training. Whenever circling the horse, he always stops cueing when the horse sees the object. Later, he begins asking the horse to step toward it. If it's water, he works until the horse eventually crosses it, which might not happen on the first try. All along, he rewards the horse for any effort to move in the right direction.

"He might try to escape and prepare to leave the creek," Wolter says. "I'm preparing to cross the creek. So I might work on that hip. Does it tip to the right or to the left? I try to get his spine lined up [toward the creek]. Whatever I'm doing will be beneficial later for some other task.

"But when the horse thinks, 'I need relief and the creek is it,' that's when I sit quiet. Before he changes his mind, I take him away from the creek and try to get to that spot again. Forget about crossing the creek. Think about when the horse is going to get ready to cross, and settle for that. Reward the thought."

Working in the Open

Young horses can be a handful even if they're not spooked. Rather than trying to keep them pinned down with reins and spurs, Wolter sends them where they're trying to go.

"We want them to go where we ask them to go, but we've got to give in a little bit," he says. "So I say, 'You want to run? Good. Where do you want to run? Let's run there.' But when we get there, we might not stop. We'll get some experience going from a walk to a trot to a lope."

Taking this approach can result in some wild rides. Wolter says it's wise to avoid adventures you think you can't handle.

"Know your own riding ability," he says. "When things go wrong, it scares the horse as much, if not more, as it does the rider."

Wolter understands that some horses have jobs to do, and that means those horses need to handle more pressure. Wolter often takes his young horses to brandings. When his colts realize they're doing a job, they usually advance more quickly in their training.

"I've gone to lots of brandings riding colts," he says. "It's like getting 10 rides at home, and it's fun for me and fun for the colts. Experience tells you that when things are going awry, they're really not. Just get through it and don't make it worse."

When the horse understands there's a purpose behind what you ask, he's more likely to fall in line.

"Say there's a bunch of yearlings coming down the road and they're headed for the highway," Wolter says. "It's a critical situation, and I've got to get down there. That's where the job comes in. The rider tells the horse, 'I'm sorry you feel insecure about it, but let's go over there anyway.'"

In that situation, Wolter urges his horse into a gallop until it maintains the proper speed.

"When he lines out, then I get quiet," he says. "I don't keep after him, so he gets relief. That's how you get a colt comfortable with speed."

Overall, exposing horses to challenging situations builds trust.

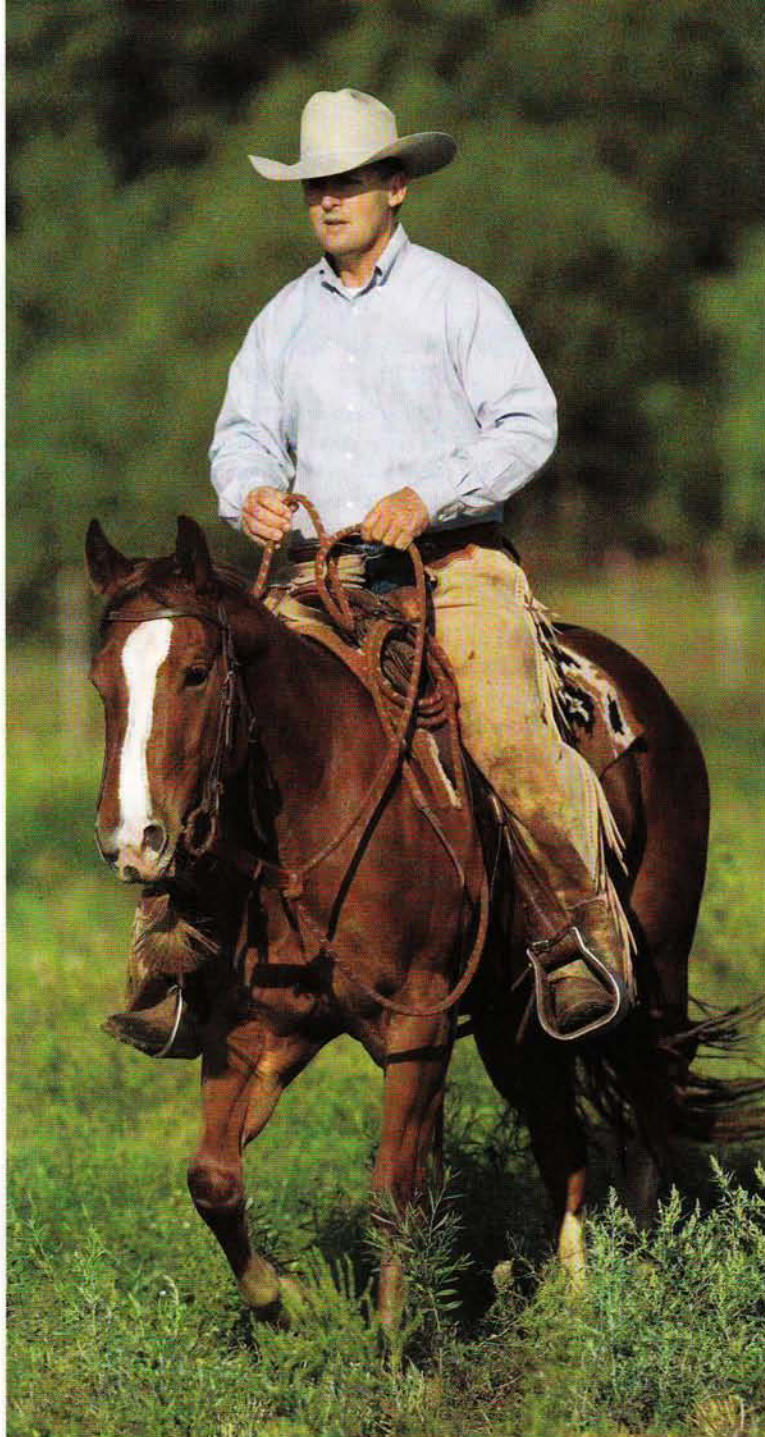
"They get insecure," Wolter says. "And if you have a good relationship, they're going to hook up with you. Most of the time, my horses feel better away from home than at home. That's because they rely on me away from home."

Wolter emphasizes that any training method should take into account the horse's point of view.

"It's not a cookie-cutter deal," Wolter says. "There are many different ways to approach training. But one thing that is the same is that all horses think."

"Get with that thought process." 🐾

Ross Hecox is a Western Horseman senior editor. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.



If your horse does what you ask, sit quietly and stay out of his way.

Joe Wolter

JOE WOLTER WAS RAISED IN GRASS VALLEY, CALIFORNIA. He began cowboying after high school and later worked for horseman Ray Hunt. Influenced greatly by Hunt and also by Bill Dorrance, Wolter became known for his gentle methods in starting colts and redirecting problem horses.

In 1999, he began training horses for the Four Sixes Ranch in Guthrie, Texas. Today he lives in Aspermont, Texas, starting colts, training, and showing in cutting and ranch-versatility events. He also keeps a full schedule of clinics throughout the United States.

Wolter and his wife, Jimmie, have two grown children, Jess and Emily. To learn more about Wolter, visit joewolter.com.

