



East Goes to West Texas

by Cheryl Kimball

“Get *out of the Snow!”* was the **sell line on the flier for Joe Wolter’s home clinic scheduled for late February at his ranch in Aspermont, Texas. For five of us in the Northeast, that was a no-brainer. We signed up immediately.**

Bill, Mike, and I packed up our horses and drove. And drove. And drove. 2100 miles each way. Fran, who had a horse in training with Joe already, and Nancy, who arranged to borrow a horse, flew down. We stayed in some cute newly renovated cabins three miles from the Wolters’ ranch.

We all were quite familiar with Joe Wolter’s horsemanship style, as he has done a clinic every summer for over ten years at Fran’s place, Piper Ridge Farm, in Maine. But the drive down gave us plenty of time to wonder what we would be doing in this clinic. The answer ended up being “just about everything.” Joe did a great job of giving us diverse experience in many of the aspects of working with horses that he uses on a daily basis.

Arena

The Wolter ranch consists of several round pens—large, small, closed- and open-sided—a makeshift track, some short trails, some longer trails, and a large outdoor arena. We used them all. We started out in the arena, with introductions all around with the 13 participants hailing from Maine, New Hampshire, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas.

As we rode around, Joe took the opportunity to size up where we were with our horses. He forewarned us that he would like to be more direct than he might normally be in a clinic setting, and we all agreed that would be fine. We worked on some general exercises, and he started each of us working on some areas of refinement with our specific horse or our riding in general.

True to the form I have come to appreciate about Joe’s approach, we didn’t stay in the confines of the arena for too long but soon headed out the gate to a wooden bridge and some natural obstacles.

Cow Work

Besides clinics, starting colts, cutting competitions, and training cutting horses have become a large part of how Joe makes his living with horses. To that end, he keeps fresh cattle rotating through the ranch. The first afternoon, Joe coached us through tracking cows in one of the large round pens. I tried it a couple of times over the five days of the clinic; like most everything with my horsemanship, I wasn’t concerned with how “good” we got, I was just happy that my horse and I improved from one time to the next.

Some of the guys (and the participants were in fact mostly men; Fran, Nancy, and I were the only women, which was kind of strange—and I have to admit kinda nice, since that ratio is usually the opposite at clinics in our part of the country) also worked on roping, heading, and heeling in the arena as well as learning about moving cattle in a more open area.

Short Trail Rides

Nolan, a young man who works for Joe, saddled up young horses throughout the day and took them out on short trail rides. Joe encouraged us to join him at any time, so occasionally one or two of us would peel off from the cow



In a very interesting demonstration, Joe helped one participant work with a rope and a cow to help his horse get more hooked on tracking the cow and turn when the cow turned.

work or other activity and go on a short—and usually fast!—trail ride. For us northeasterners, the terrain was so different that these short rides were just great fun. Three of the four in our group were under five and had been started with the help of Joe Wolter, so it was kind of nice that he could see firsthand that his assistance was serving us well.

Individual Attention

Joe managed to fit in plenty of individual help. One young man had brought an unstarted colt. The horse was not an easy one, but with Joe's guidance, Brendan got the colt saddled a few times. Joe ponied the colt on a short fast trail ride the last day and ponied Brendan around on the colt for its first ride. He worked with another fellow in a very interesting demonstration using a roped cow to help his horse get more hooked on the cow and pay more attention to moving when the cow moved. Joe did the same riding Bob-from-Arizona's little mustang—and, being direct like he had promised, Joe also helped Bob see what releasing your horse really looks like.

Demonstrations

If all that wasn't enough, we watched Joe start one of his own horses, a pretty red roan filly. Saddling and the first ride took place in the arena; by the second ride she was out being ridden in open territory. The last morning, Joe gave us a demonstration using the cutting horses he shows with, narrating throughout pointing out where things were right and not so right, what the judges might see, and where points would be taken off or gained. And we were unkind enough to videotape our friend Frannie while she got a taste of riding a competitive cutting horse—Fran stayed on, so we threw the video away (just kidding)!

The Trail Ride

Although the entire clinic was great, we will all talk about “the trail ride” for some time to come. Sunday morning we packed up our horses and drove around thirty miles to a ranch owned by a couple who had generously offered to let us ride there. The weather had conveniently broken from cold and damp to a beautiful sunny warm day with a light breeze.

Mike grinned from ear to ear the whole ride, constantly reminding us that he felt like he was in a John Wayne movie. Bill was grinning because his horse, Fred, was all go, go, go. Joe grinned broadly every time he hauled out the map of the ranch, which made us all wish we'd brought our lunch along instead of leaving it back with our rigs.



Brendan brought an unstarted colt and got some help from Joe getting him saddled.

Late in the ride, in an attempt to get back on track headed toward the house, we went up and down what us Easterners might call a ravine that seemed steep enough to recall the famous scene from “The Man from Snowy River.” I was happy to be on my little mountain goat of a QH/Morgan cross. By the time we got back on flat ground, we were all grinning pretty widely. Even though in the steepest part of the climb a mild curse word (equivalent to “Holy Crap” but not quite as mild) escaped my lips for which I later apologized, the whole ride really was just great fun and I would do it again in a heartbeat, including the ravine.

Lunch

I would be remiss if I did not mention lunch. Midday each day we retired to the Wolters' home where Joe's wife, Jimmie, had a hearty lunch awaiting us. With the first three days being cool, damp, and even rainy, the warm house and a chance to chat with the other participants was welcome. And the food was delicious.

As we drove home, Mike, Bill, and I agreed it was well worth the long drive and we had never laughed so much at a clinic in our lives. Joe's easy, nonintimidating manner makes participants in his clinics—even those like me who know little about ranches or cattle—feel comfortable.

And I am pleased to report that even the cultural divide was conquered. Wrapping up at the end, we all agreed we had truly enjoyed each other's company. In an email exchange of pictures after I got home, one of the participants from Texas said, “You northeasterners have gotten a bad rap down here in Texas—you're alright.”

Back at ya.

Keep tabs on Joe's website (www.joewolter.com) for an updated schedule of his upcoming clinics, both at home and around the country.