

Calendar

Horses That Have Cow Sense

Team-Penning Competition

'Knowing how to work cattle is a big plus on my side," says Pete Loftin of Escondido, who used to run pasture cattle before he got involved in team-penning competition in 1982. "That's kind of my secret. I work the cattle correctly."

Loftin sounds like he also understands the horse's point of view. "A really good penning horse knows how to get on top of the cow you're trying to cut out of the herd," he says. "Quarter horses have a natural ability to read what a cow's doing. With a few cues, a good rider can get a lot out of a horse that has 'cow sense.'"

LOCAL EVENTS

quarter horses back in the 1940s."

Team penning became an organized sport three decades later. But it was already going on informally. "Ever since people first started raising cattle on ranches, it was a ranch sport," says Loftin. "Putting cattle into a pen was work, and they started making a game out of it."

The basic rules are these: teams of three riders try to separate three numbered animals from a herd, then work to get them into a pen on the opposite end of the arena. The event is timed — heats are just over a minute. Efficiency is key, as is precision. If a team pens its own, plus some, it's disqualified.

Loftin gives team-penning lessons and holds weekly practices at his Cloverdale Stables. A few years ago, he taught team penning to jockey Chris McCarron. You could say McCarron knows horses: he's the winner of virtually every major thoroughbred race in North America, including six Triple Crowns (two Kentucky Derbies, two Preaknesses, and two Belmonts). McCarron, who lives in Monrovia, wanted to learn team penning solely to compete once a year in Del Mar, for the Don MacBeth Memorial Jockey Fund. And he'll be there again for the competition on Tuesday.

McCarron says his horseracing experience helped him pick up the new sport, "because in order to be a successful jockey, you need very good balance and strength, and in order to ride the horses that are good at penning, it requires the same types of skills."

The first jockey in history to reach earnings of \$200 million, McCarron was the all-time leader in purse earnings (\$264 million) and sixth in the



Team penning

win category (7141) when he retired in 2002 at age 48. He has made a lot of money for himself as a result, but only a small percentage of jockeys do. "A high percentage really struggle," he says, "and so the fund is for them, when they get hurt."

The injuries of Red Pollard, dramatized by the current book and film about Seabiscuit, have raised public awareness about the risks that jockeys take. McCarron, now vice president and general manager of the Santa Anita Racetrack, where Seabiscuit gained fame in the 1930s, was the race designer for the film. "The main objective was to have the races look authentic," he says. "It was a challenge, because all the horses want to win, and they can be difficult to keep under control." He also plays a cameo role as Charley Kurtsinger, who rode War Admiral, Seabiscuit's rival.

McCarron's occupation has become somewhat safer over time. "Helmets are made better. Safety vests help us to a degree. And I think the racing surfaces themselves are maintained better than they were years ago." Still, the fund continues to pay for wheelchairs, prosthetic devices, and plastic surgery for the unlucky and the uninsured (insurance

companies play the odds, too, and premiums are unaffordably high for many jockeys).

On Tuesday, 10 to 20 other jockeys besides McCarron will participate in the team-penning competition, according to fund administrator Tony DeFranco. Loftin won't be at Del Mar, but he always donates the use of his cattle and makes sure all riders have horses. Loftin also supplies the starters, flag people, clockers, and auctioneer for the Calcutta, at which bidders study the teams and try to "buy" the winner.

Most participants will meet their teammates no sooner than shortly before the competition begins. How, then, does McCarron get his team to work well together? "It's hit or miss," he says. "Sometimes you're teamed with a couple of guys who can ride and know how to pen cattle; other times, you'll get only one person who knows anything about team penning. And if that's the case, it's really hard to have any chance to win."

It's interesting that he cares about winning, since the primary goal of the event is raising money. Loftin comments here on his former student and on the nature of human champions in general. "Professionals

like Chris, when they get into something they're not really sure of, they take instruction real well, because they just want to be good."

— Jeanne Schinto

9th Annual Don MacBeth Jockey Fund Team-Penning Competition

Tuesday, August 26,

Gates open 5:00 p.m.;

races, 6:00-9:00 p.m.

Del Mar Horse Show Arena
Del Mar

Cost: Participants, \$300

(includes two dinner tickets);

dinner and ringside box seat,

\$50; \$350 for eight; general

admission, \$5

Info: 310-550-4542 or

www.macbethfund.org

Team Penning Practice Every Thursday night

7:00-9:00 p.m.

Cloverdale Stables

2460 Cloverdale Road

Escondido

Cost: \$7.50 per run per rider (if

you use your own horse);

practice horses available for \$25

per night

Info: 760-743-2377

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