

The EVOLUTION

If you have ever attempted to break a calf with the intentions of showing it, you have probably, at some point, thought there must be a better way than the traditional method that has been passed down from generation to generation. Fortunately, for the open and progressive minded, there is, in fact, a better way to train calves and prepare them for the show ring.

A few years ago, a great friend of mine from Brazil asked me about our halter-breaking program. He had spent a good deal of time watching the typical, human vs. animal duel at the show barn, and immediately wondered why we were still breaking calves “the old way.”

He told me about a man in Brazil who had developed his own method of breaking calves. Skeptically, I listened as he told me how he could take even the wildest calves and have them obediently leading in a matter of days; all while experiencing no real stress and not losing any weight. This, I decided, I had to see.

As a teenager, I read *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, by Monty Roberts. The book is Monty’s autobiography and it details how, as a young boy, he spent hours on end observing the natural social behavior of wild mustangs. Using what he learned in the wild, Monty developed a technique for encouraging horses to trust

him,
which
in turn

allowed him to accomplish feats with horses, in minutes, that typically took others weeks.

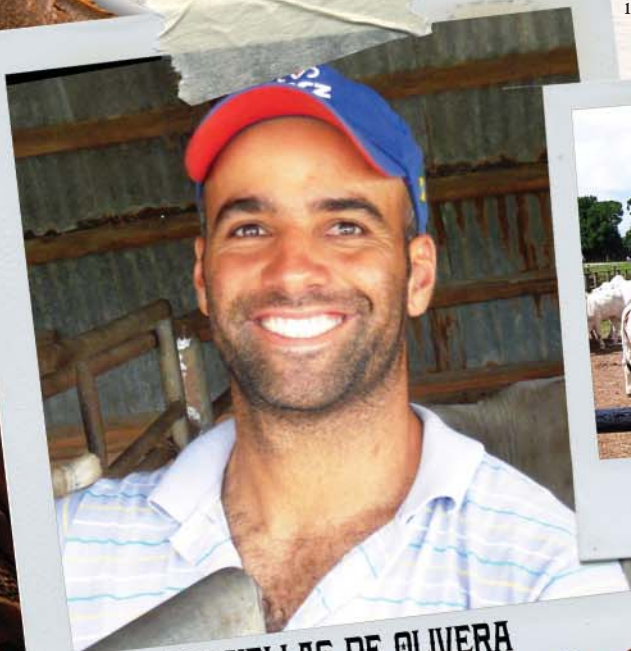
Talking to my friend, even though I was skeptical of the process, I didn’t doubt for a minute that similar things might be possible with cattle, although they do not exhibit the exact same flight pattern as horses. I had prided myself for a long time on my own low-stress cattle handling skills, but I could not begin to imagine how I could take what I already knew and apply it to breaking wild calves. My interest was piqued, to say the least.

Over the year that followed, I often thought about our halter-breaking conversation, and entertained the idea of setting up a clinic here in the United States, so others could learn these new techniques. Honestly, my Brazilian friend asked me at least a hundred times to make arrangements to bring this “cattle whisperer” to the U.S. Fortunately, in December of 2008, I had the privilege of meeting Nilson Dornellas de Olivera, the acclaimed guru of cattle breaking. Much to my surprise, Nilson was not a crippled, grey haired, seasoned ranch hand. At the time we met, he was barely 30 years old and had been dealing with show cattle for only six years.

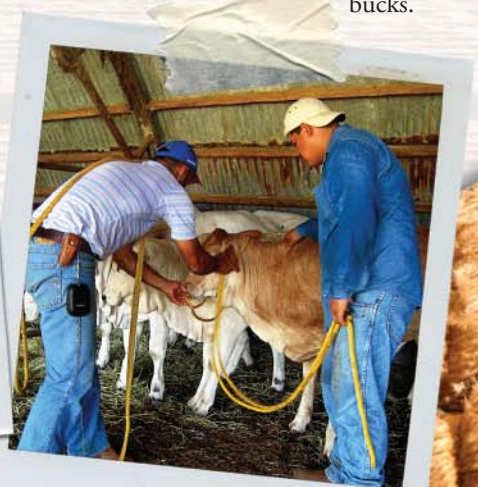
After selecting 10 head for Nilson to demonstrate his skills on — picking a few of the wildest yearling bulls I could find — I left with my Brazilian friend to look at cattle on other parts of the ranch. When we returned that afternoon, all ten head were being scratched with sticks and standing calmly in a large pen. They had set the hook, and I was taking line at high speed.

Four days later, we went back to check the progress of the ten yearling bulls. I was astonished to find all ten haltered, washed, groomed, and standing calmly tied to the fence on loose leads.

They looked like old dollar bills when I originally selected them, now they looked like a million bucks.



NILSON DORNELLAS DE OLIVERA
The Brazilian Cattle Handling Guru



of HALTER TRAINING

by John Coleman Locke
photos by Herman Detering

One by one, they were lead on loose lead ropes from the fence to where we stood. They were stopped and set up with only halter pressure, then lead back and tied to the fence. It really was a sight to see after having the image burned into my mind of those same animals bouncing off the fence just a few days before. Not a single calf was alert, and none resisted leading or offered to run.

You could say I had been reeled in at this point. I was assured that there was no army of special cattle handlers that swooped in as soon as we left and worked 24 hour shifts breaking the calves. Even if that was the case, I still would have been impressed.

It would take one failed attempt at getting Nilson a visa, a lot of sleepless nights wondering how to work out the logistics of putting on a clinic, translating, etc., and one round-trip ticket from Belo Horizonte to Houston and back, with the agreement to pay all of his expenses, to get him here.

He arrived Thursday, May 20, 2010. By 7:00 a.m. Friday morning, the way I looked at handling cattle and halter-breaking would never be the same. I had the great fortune of spending just over three weeks with Nilson, learning all that I possibly could.

He demonstrated how to break down an animal's flight zone, read their body language, when and how to release pressure on an animal when you are trying to get him to follow you, and more. It became apparent very fast that this Brazilian had probably forgotten more about working with cattle than I had ever known.

One thing that was very obvious to me and others attending the clinic is that Nilson's teachings have to be experienced. There are so many unique animal personalities and situations that it would be impossible to cover every possible scenario in writing. While the process he uses is very simple to execute, there simply is no better way to grasp these concepts other than a hands-on approach.

Over the course of the three weeks, Nilson taught 15 people his skills and principles, in three different sessions. If a person has the desire to learn, the patience, and an open mind, they can learn how to break calves and handle cattle the Nilson way.

He has put on dozens of clinics in Brazil for private groups at ranches, and large groups sponsored by the ABCZ - teaching hundreds of people. Nilson proves people with no cattle experience can break calves just as effectively as those with years; just as he proves many times that old dogs can learn new tricks.

I would like to extend a sincere thank you to everyone who recognized and seized the opportunity in attending and supporting one of the clinics. A special thanks to V8 Ranch for hosting a clinic and progressively agreeing to send their show barn staff through the course. So often it is too easy to have an excuse not to try something new.

Attendees of the first clinics were Alex Hermosillo, Ezekiel Hermosillo, Porferio Martinez, Ricardo Torres, and J'Boone Koonce of J.D. Hudgins, Inc.; Matt Karisch, Brandon Cutrer, and David Navarro of V8 Ranch; Richard Chamblee and Mark Chamblee of East Texas Ranch; Carlos Molino Nino of Dubina Rose Ranch; Kevin Deleu; Drew Hubert; and Herman Detering.

For more information, or if you would be interested in hosting or attending a clinic in the future, please go to www.naturalhalterbreaking.com or contact me at johnclocke@hotmail.com.

